

# **ANALYSING THE ANTAGONISM BETWEEN CONTEMPORARY URBAN WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AND THE FAMILY FORMATION: A CASE STUDY IN A PART OF KOLKATA**

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**Abstract:** The present paper is an attempt to analyse the interlinkage between women empowerment and family formation and wellbeing in the context of a selected part of Kolkata. The family as the basic unit of any society is a web of interpersonal relationships mixed with affection and loyalty as well as resentment and incompleteness. With the woman getting increasingly aware and empowered and their role changing from a homemaker to an office manager, there is a question arising that whether women empowerment is antagonistic to the integrity of the family. The rise of nuclear family, break-down of traditional joint family system, increase in separation and divorce, rise of domestic dissension and violence, effects of divorce and nuclear family on children, poor status of women in family are enough indications of danger looming large on the family and ultimately society, as exemplified from the analysis of the selected part of Kolkata. The gender gap is still existent in many matters like getting employed and working at one's own will. Household decision making power and freedom depend considerably on age, education and employment status. The study concludes by an observation that with increasing women empowerment in Kolkata as in any other city, there are closely related family issues that can be resolved largely by transforming attitudes towards gender equality at the grass-root level.

**Keywords:** Gender, Gender Empowerment, Family, Nuclear Family, Joint Family, Separation, Divorce, Family Violence, Integrity.

**Introduction:** The family is the melting pot of gender for several reasons and has the most intimate relation as it is here that people learn, perform, experience gender and gender discrimination. Families from time immemorial have delegated different responsibilities to men and women, bestow upon them the unequal privileges with wide-ranging consequences. With changing times, modernizing societies have questioned the role of families in creating and perpetuating gender discrimination and there has been marked changes with the growing popularity of gender empowerment. In countries like India with a male dominated society, gender discrimination is a customized habit. Women empowerment is profoundly dependent on many variables like urban/rural location, educational status, social status (class and caste), age and of course policy advancements and gap in actual practice at the community level. In contemporary urbanizing India, with changing patterns of family, marriage, childbearing, childrearing, segregated sex based roles, signs of women empowerment are fast disseminating among masses with certain social issues too rising out of it and getting discussed on the light of changing role of women in family and society. The present paper is an attempt to analyse the relation, if any, between the status of women empowerment and family formation in a part of Kolkata.

## **Brief Discussion On The Concepts Of Family And Women Empowerment:**

**Family:** According to Oxford Dictionary 'Family' is a primary social group consisting of parents and their off spring, the principle function of which is provision for its member.

The 'Family' as an integrated and functional unit of society has for a considerable period of time captured the attention and imagination of researchers. While family is a matter of study, equally

important for research is its role as a factor influencing and affecting the development, behavior and well-being of the individual.

The UNESCO Report stated that a family is a kinship unit and that even when its member do not share a common household, the unit may exist as a social reality [Bangkok, Thailand: UNESCO; 1992]. Family is the first line of defense especially for children as the major factor of protection and also a major source of nature, emotional bonding and socialization and link between continuity and change [Desai.M.1995a].

In India, family is the most important part of the social environment and it is an institution that has survived through the ages. The Indian family has been a dominant institution in the life of the individual and in the life of community [Mullatti, 1992]. Historically, the traditional, ideal and desired family in Kolkata is the joint family (Bonedioporibar) characterized primarily by the breadwinner husband and homemaker wife, the daughters and daughter-in-laws doing majority of informal care of the child and the elderly. But globalization, urbanization, industrialization, occupational differentiation, marriage, separation, divorces have changed the structure of families of Kolkata.

**Women Empowerment:** Women empowerment is defined as improving the ability of women to access the facets of development particularly in health, education, work participation and income generation, political authorities and enjoying rights at all levels from the family to society. The major types of empowerment are educational empowerment, social empowerment, economic empowerment and political empowerment and the indicators used to analyse include household decision making power, financial autonomy, freedom of mobility, political participation, acceptance of unequal gender role, exposure to media, access to education, experience of domestic violence etc. Gender gap exists in all parameters along with variations based on age, class, caste, religious factors. Empowering the woman is basic to human rights by the virtue of which the woman in person commands herself and all necessary physical, socio-economic, political, cultural resources with equal access. The male dominated Indian society is showing trends of profound transformation of women into effective human resource, but there is still a long way to go to achieve colossal change.

**Relating Family and Women Empowerment:** Industrialisation, urbanization, globalization and the knowledge growth and exposure to it have transformed family life. Writers such as Anthony Giddens, Zygmunt Bauman, Ulrich Beek addressed the ways in which modern life is becoming more 'Individualized' and the consequences of this on both the individuals concerned and society at large. Individualization or separation theorized that individuals in modern societies are becoming less burdened by the restrictions that influenced their parents or grandparents or in-laws lives. It increases the trend towards nuclear family. Most families are now nuclear, while women are spending lesser of their lives pregnant or nursing and less accepting the predetermined sole role of the homemaker. Marriage is an important part of a family formation. The type of wedding involved i.e., love marriage and arranged marriage, also effects the family formation. With increasing professionalism and job-centric life and increasing disability in married couples and family violence. With prevalent discrepancy in thoughts among all members of the family and rising aspirations that the family should be a place of emotional attachment and intimacy and that marriages should be built in love, respect and mutual self-realisation, the result is increasing relationship instability and an escalation of separation and divorce and thereby endangering the family structure and wellbeing. Family violence is also a complex associated social stigma which encompasses wife abuse, child abuse, elder abuse and also men abuse that is widely impacted by family breakdown, increases the level of divorce. Although the interplay of factors increase gender equality, but there may be also increase in emotional and economic instability. In Kolkata, families have also been mostly male dominating. But presently woman's work participation results in making the female member of the family a part of decision making unit and thus women are playing an important role in the family and often apprehended as the main cause of family disorganization and disintegraton. All social components are also affecting the status of women in the family and often questions the beneficial and detrimental impact of gender empowerment in an urbanized technocentric society.

**Literature Review:** Reeta Sonawat, (2001) presented the article “Understanding Families in India: A Reflection of Societal Changes” which described that family studies in India have grown to a large extent in two decades. Indian family structure is conceptualized as the configuration of role, power and status and relationship in family which depends upon the families’ socio-economic background, family pattern and impact of urbanization. Marriage practices, divorce are also in emphasis. In spite of urbanization and industrialization in the contemporary Indian society, the family institution continues to play a central role in the lives of people.

Himani Bhasin (2016) described that in India, the land of culture and unity, a family is a set of human beings related to each in a non-professional manner, giving rise to a concrete bonding within a family. Typically, a nuclear family may be conceived as a unit consisting of a couple, children, and grandparents and pets. In India however, there exists a special kind of a family structure that really is quite vivid in the way of managing intact human relations. This special kind of family structure is joint family.

Vinit Chandra, 2010 says that the social division of labour set the role of primary bread earner for the man while ascribed the role of home-manager and caregiver to the woman. This arrangement has been questioned for having given rise to gender inequality and having generated stereotype gender role for the man and the woman. The traditionally organized workplace is also predicated on the assumption that families with male bread winners and nonworking housewives constitute the predominant family form. This is no more truer since the last few decades have seen a significant number of women coming out of the domestic life to enter the public domain. The problem of balancing work and family together has given rise to what is called the ‘work-family conflict’ and family violence, which has evoked serious scholarly concern in the last few years. Pegalow (1981) defined family violence as ‘any act of commission or commission by family members and any condition resulting from such acts and in acting which deprive other family members of equal rights opportunities and/or interfaced with their optional development and freedom of choice’.

The questions that have surfaced need a sincere rethinking over. The present paper seeks to study work-family conflict in the context of women entering the workforce. However, this does not imply that work-family conflict is a ‘women’s problem’. Studies in the US and elsewhere have amply borne out those men face as much work-family conflict as women do. However, even this phenomenon stands pronounced with women entering the workforce as in the earlier arrangement, men had to worry little for the household responsibilities. Resultantly, there was less negative spillover from the work to family domain and vice versa. Vijender Kumar evaluates the traumatic experience of the children of divorced parents. Initially, the pain experienced by children is distressing as they see the family disintegrating and sense vulnerability.

**Location of Study Area:** Kolkata is a cosmopolitan city in Eastern India where many religious and language groups live together. The study area covers Wards 71 and 73 (Bhowanipur), 74 (Alipur- Chetla), 77 (Kidderpore), 78 (Ekbalpore-Mominpur), 79 (Kidderpore), 82 (Chetla) and 83 (Kalighat) situated in South Kolkata.

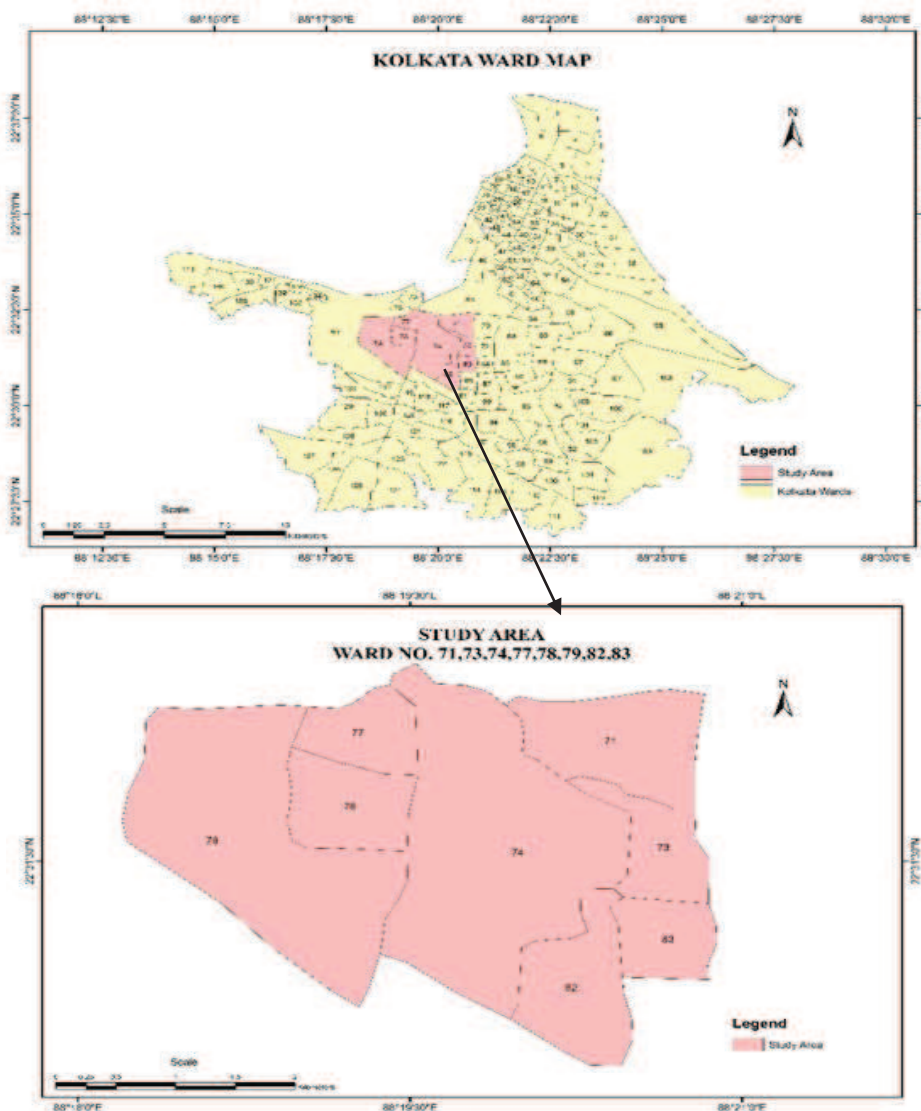


Fig. 1: Location of the Study Area

**Aims and Objectives:** The core aim of this paper is to analyze the changing nature of family organization, the status of women and any relation whatsoever in the urban socio- environmental fabric of Kolkata. The paper shall try to find out:

- the trend and change in the structure of families in selected wards of Kolkata.
- the present status of women in family and her empowerment in the terms of the educational facilities, work participation, economic independence, decision making, selecting life partner, health facilities, and age at marriage.
- the effects of woman's work participation on marriage and family formation.
- the significance and effect of marriage on family formation.
- the nature and causes of disputes and separation.
- the intensity of increasing divorce, family breakups and negative impact on children.
- the family integrity & tribulations especially of single parent families and identify the problems faced by single mothers.
- the increasing trend of family violence, its nature and the role of women in it, if any.

**Methodology:** In order to achieve the objectives, survey was carried out based on questionnaire and following stratified random sampling method covering about 65% of the ward population. Hence primary data was generated on selected parameters. The data was then represented by thematic maps using GIS and analysed.

### Findings and Analysis:

**Family Structure:** Family is a primary group of all forms of human groups. Most striking feature of Indian family system is the existence of the joint family system. But in the urbanized study area of Kolkata ward numbers 71, 73, 74, 77, 78, 79, 82, 83, the nuclear family ( family with 69% nuclear family, 21.57% extended family and only 9.5% joint family. Ward 74 has the highest 76% of nuclear family and the lowest 62% is in ward 73. Joint family is lowest in ward 71 with only 4%. On the other hand, extended family is highest in 83 number ward with 36% and lowest 12% in ward 74. 97% families of the study area are both equal on the basis of successor, 2.25% are patrilineal, but 0% is matrilineal. 78.5% is patrilocal, 0.25% is matrilineal, 6.75% is neo-local, and 15.75% is matri-patrilocal family on the basis of residence of married couple (Fig. 1).

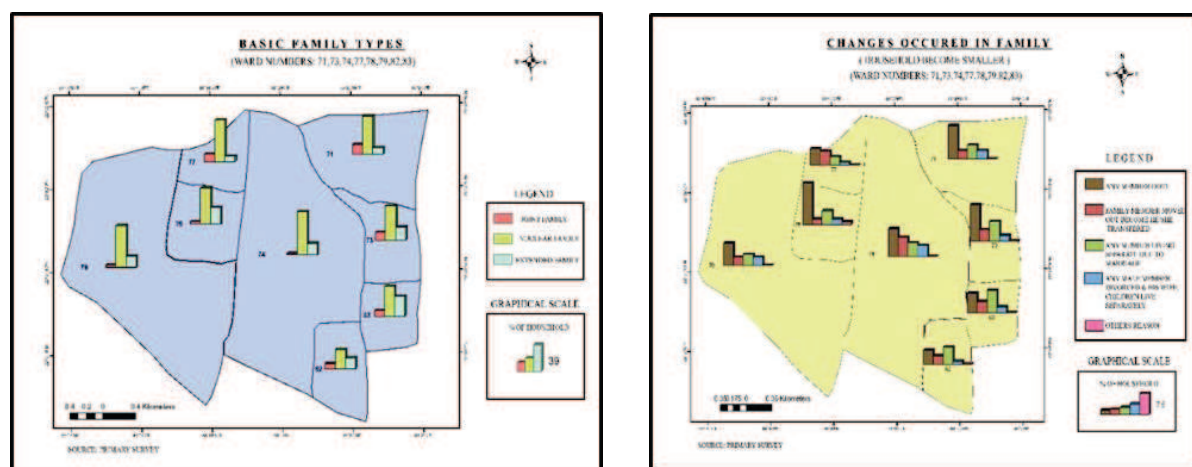


Fig.Nos.1, 2: Basic Family Types; Changes Occurred in Family

Many families of the study area have changed in structure with time. Some families have increased due to birth, parents moving out, staying with other family for financial or other cause; divorced daughter coming back and widow living with her parents. On the other hand, increase in the number of divorced daughters living with parents is striking in 78, 79 wards leading to increase in the number of extended family. Wards 73 and 82 show that due to dependency of widow, the size of the family is increased and extended family created. The main reasons behind reduction of the number of family members are death, migration due to work, separation due to marriage and divorce. The commonest trend observed in contemporary Kolkata is an increase in divorce, separation and nuclear family formations (Figs. 2, 3).

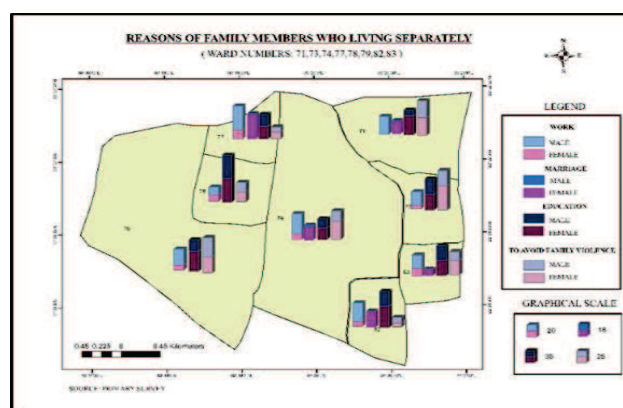


Fig.No.3: Reasons of Family Members Who Living Separately



Breakdown of the joint family and separation from original setup shows that 57.49% males and 42.51% females are living separately from their original unit with which they should have been staying in normal circumstances. The main reasons are work, education, marriage, and to avoid family violence and dissensions. 27.88% male and 9.02% female for work, 10.3% male and 12.29% female for education, 38.18 % male and 47.54% female for marriage, 23.03% male and 30.33% female to avoid family violence, 0.6% male and 0.82% female for others reason are living separately. Family disputes and disagreement is one of the reasons for the increasing rate of separation in Kolkata's society (Figs. 4, 5).

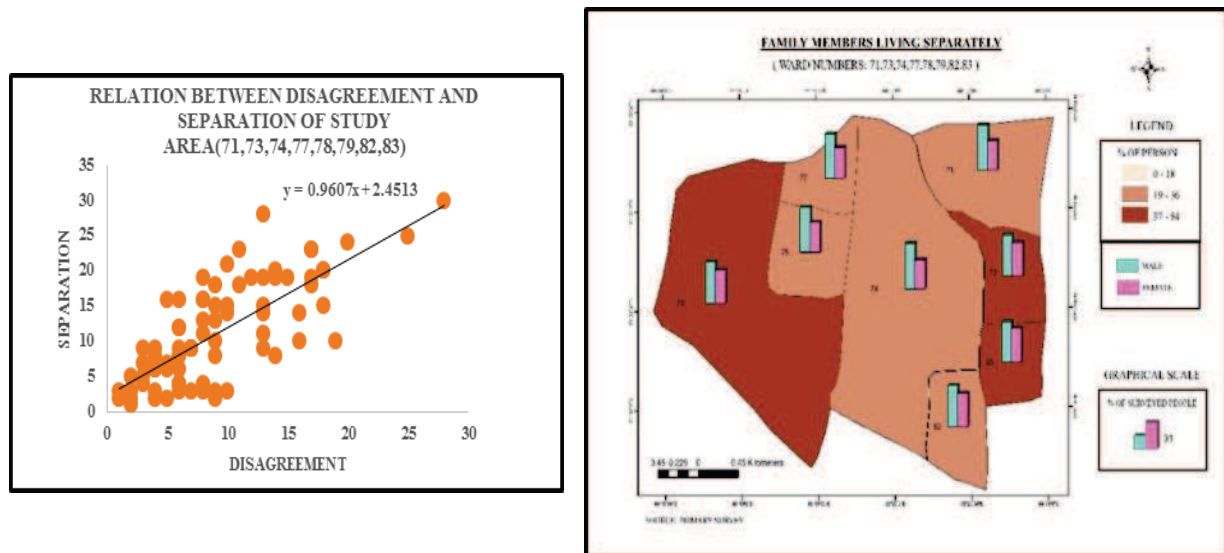


Fig.Nos. 4, 5: Relation Between Disagreement and Separation, Family Members

**Living Separately:** 63% of families are male headed family and 37% female headed and 65.5% family head is accordingly by relationship and 34.5% families have head by virtue of income. Previously the head of the family in the joint family dictated family rules, but the present situation is changed. Presently 36.75% families have been found to depend for decision-making on any member variable as per situation, 15.5% family accepts rules according to individual requirement, family rules still traditionally dictated by the head in 15% families, 8.5% family norms are manipulative, 24.25% families have no rule at all (Fig.6).

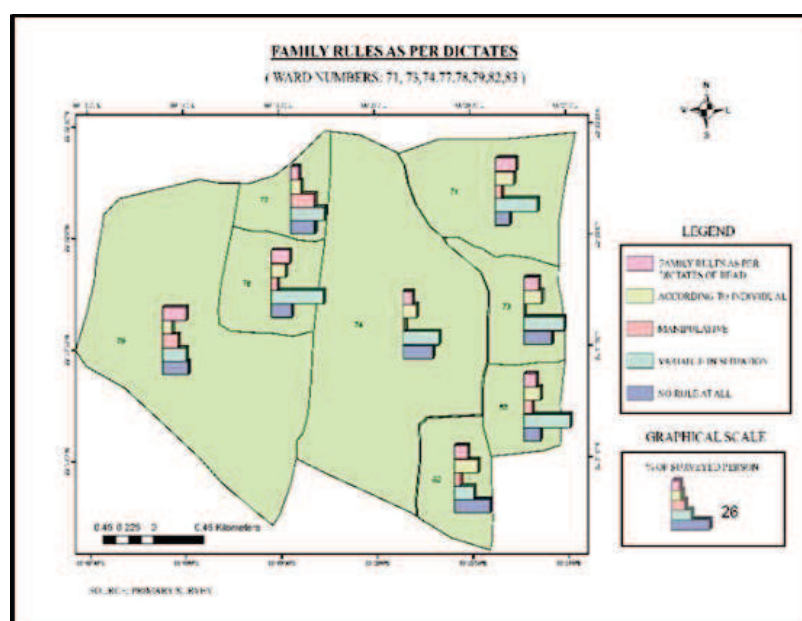


Fig.No. 6: Family Rules as per Dictates

In the study area, 41.75% children do not spend time with their grandparents. Amongst these children, 27.91% claim that they are busy in their study work, 47.67% children says they are living far away from their grandparents and alarmingly as for modern society 20.93% claim that their parents refrain them from being with their grandparents, a sign that is antagonistic to healthy family formation and upbringing of a child and of course, not a positive facet of modernization (Fig.7).

Most of the people say that in present days integrity and good relation in between family members are decreasing. 8.25% people say this is due to fast urban lifestyles, 2.49% say for education, 7.67% say so called enlightenment and empowerment of women, 11.8% impact of western culture, 12.98% say

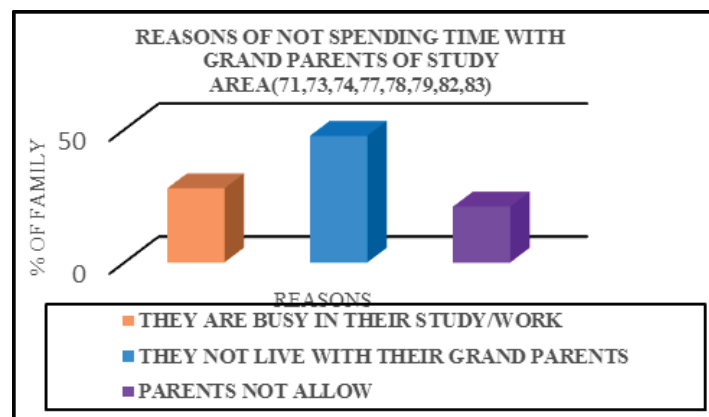


Fig.No. 7: Reasons of Not Spending Time With Grand Parents; Relation Between Disagreement

change in marriage system, 11.8% say for extension of transport, 15.63% think regular family quarrels as cause, 14.74% lack of communication with family member and 21.82% people says that due to existing disagreement in thinking order among family members. The underlying issue remains

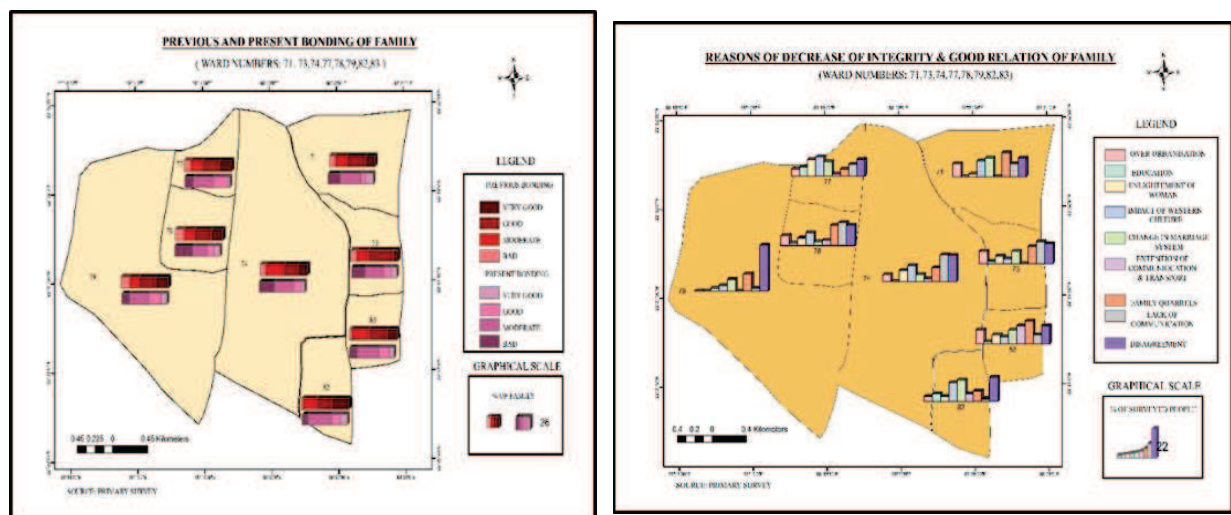


Fig.Nos. 8, 9: Previous and Present Bonding of Family, Reasons of Decrease of Integrity & Good Relation of Family

depreciating family values, loss of integrity and good relations and most significantly, the role of women is always in question and of course not always the cause. While in a fast urbanizing social environment certain cases may be the outcome of today's empowered women faced with non-acceptance from others, some other cases may be necessitating an empowerment of the woman or there is also existence of cases with signs of misappropriation or misuse of the true essence of empowering the women (Figs. 8, 9).

**Marriage:** A family formation and relationships depend on the practice of marriage. Certain aspects of the marriage practice are noticed in the study area. Age at which maximum women (25%) of the study area are getting married is 26-30 years, 9.52% women marry at <18 years age, 15% at 18-22 age, 18% at 22-26 age, 20% in 30-34 age and 9% in 34-38 age (Fig.12). Age at marriage of most men of the study area is between 33 to 36 years. 44.05% marriages are love marriage and 55.95% are arranged marriage, 43.25% are inter-caste and 56.75% is intra-caste marriage (Fig.10). As per survey,

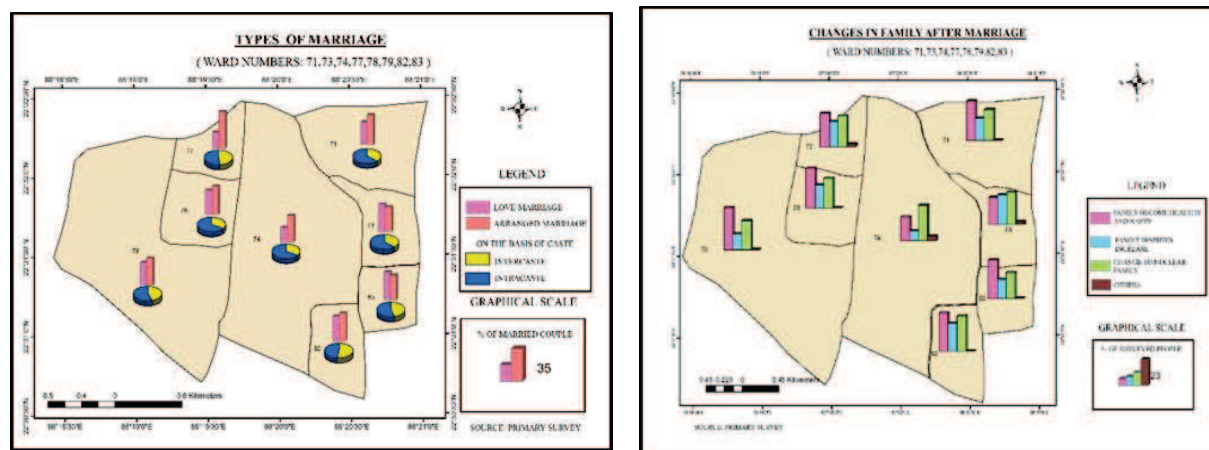


Fig.Nos. 10, 11: Types of Marriage; Changes in Family After Marriage

relation between married couple is for 24% very romantic, for 36.1% compromising, for 23.81% formal, 6.74% have dominating husband, 8.73% have dominating wife, 1.19% are not satisfied and 1.98% couples have very disturbed relationship. 31.56% couples have 1 child, 48.89% couples have 2 children, and 19.56% couple have more than 2 children. In case of gap between marriage and 1<sup>st</sup> child of couples surveyed in study area, 4% depicted <1 year, 16.44% 1 year, 36% 2 years gap and 42.23% more than 2 years.

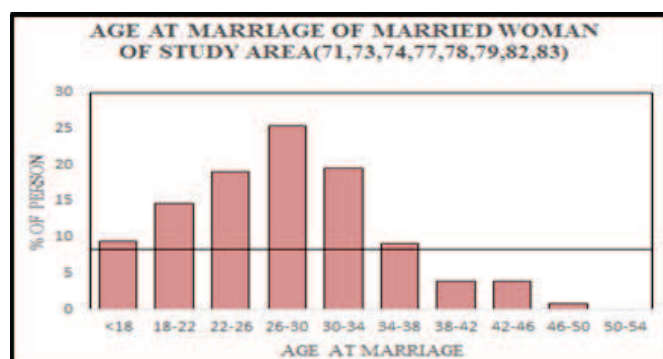


Fig.No.12: Age at Marriage of Married Woman

In the study area, surveys revealed that after marriage 38.88% families became healthy and happy, in 24.06% families disputes increase, and 34.92% families had changed into nuclear family after marriage, 1.58% families had changed due to other reasons after marriage.

**Divorce:** Gaps in understanding between married couple, disputes, violence influence separation and culminate into divorce. In case of divorce scenario, wards 71, 78, 79 have higher level of divorce (14-19%) in the study area, 73, 74, 83 wards depict 9-14% of divorce, and 77, 82 wards have much low value (below 9%). Male divorce rate is found to be 49.5% and female divorce rate is slightly higher at 50.5%. In the study area, 9.37% males and 18.6% females are separated, 28.12% male and 18.6%



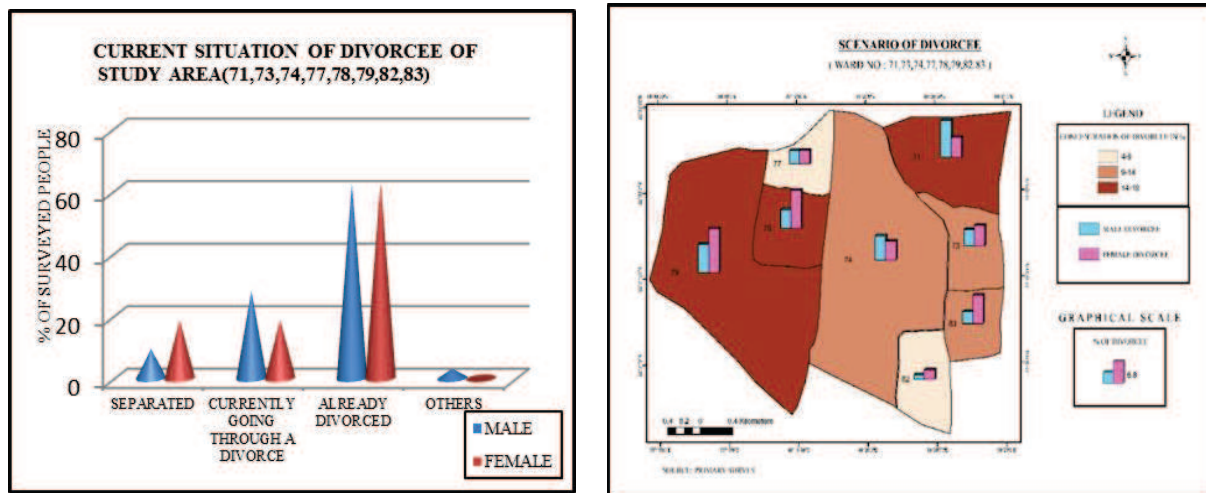


Fig.Nos. 13, 14: Current Situation of Divorce; Scenario of Divorce

female are going through process of divorce, 62.5% male and 62.79% female are already divorced. (Figs. 13, 14).

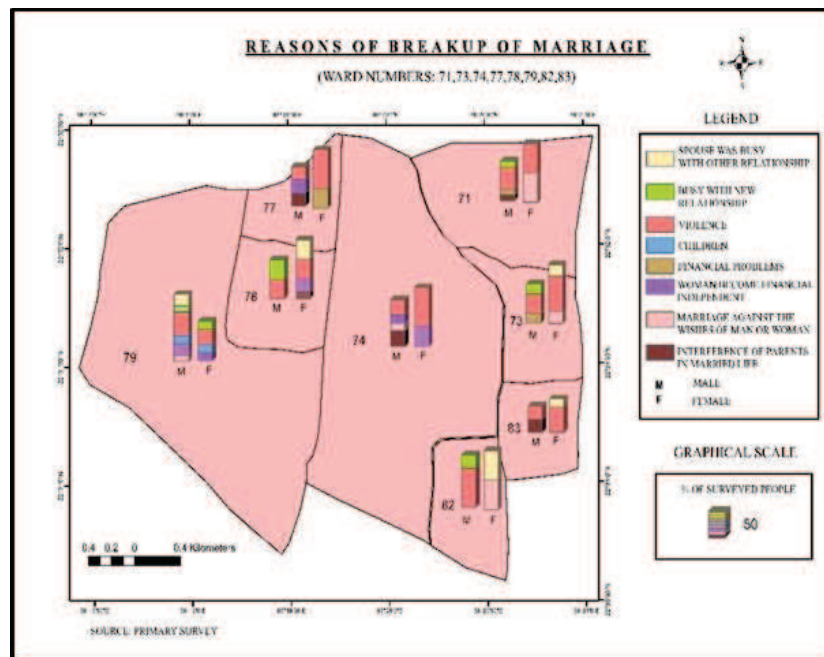


Fig.No. 15: Reasons of Breakup of Marriage

The main reasons for divorce are found to be extramarital affairs, violence, children, financial problem, woman becoming financial independent, marriage against the wish of man or woman and interference of parents into married life. 57.33% husbands and 42.67% wives initiated divorce in this part of Kolkata. Gap between marriage and divorce of the surveyed divorcees are 20% with 0-5 year, 42.67% with 5-10 years, 28% with 10-20 years, 8% with 20-30 years and 1.33% with 30-40 years. This indicates the dominance of a tendency towards trying to compromise and save marriages as more than 70% of divorces take place within 5-20 years of marriage and not instantly after marriage (Figs.15, 16.).

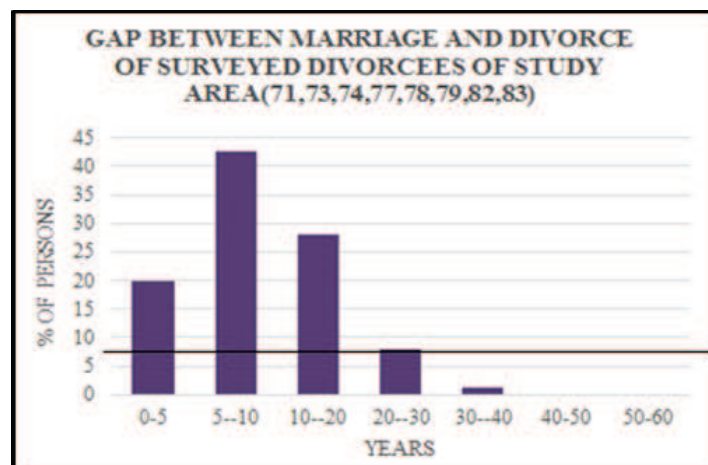


Fig.No. 16: Gap Between Marriage and Divorce of Surveyed Divorcee

58.67% divorcees have child and 41.33% divorcee have been found to be childless. In the study area, 40.9% of children are living with mother after divorce and 13.5% are living with father, 6.81% child live some time with mother and some time with father, 18.18% live with grandparents and 13.64% have been to shifted to hostel.

Survey shows that 78, 79 wards have higher percentage of single mother; 71, 73, 82, 83 has medium percentage and 74, 77 has lowest percentage of single mother. The main reasons for being single mother were found to be death of spouse (60.15%), divorce and separation (18.04%), conflict with in-law's

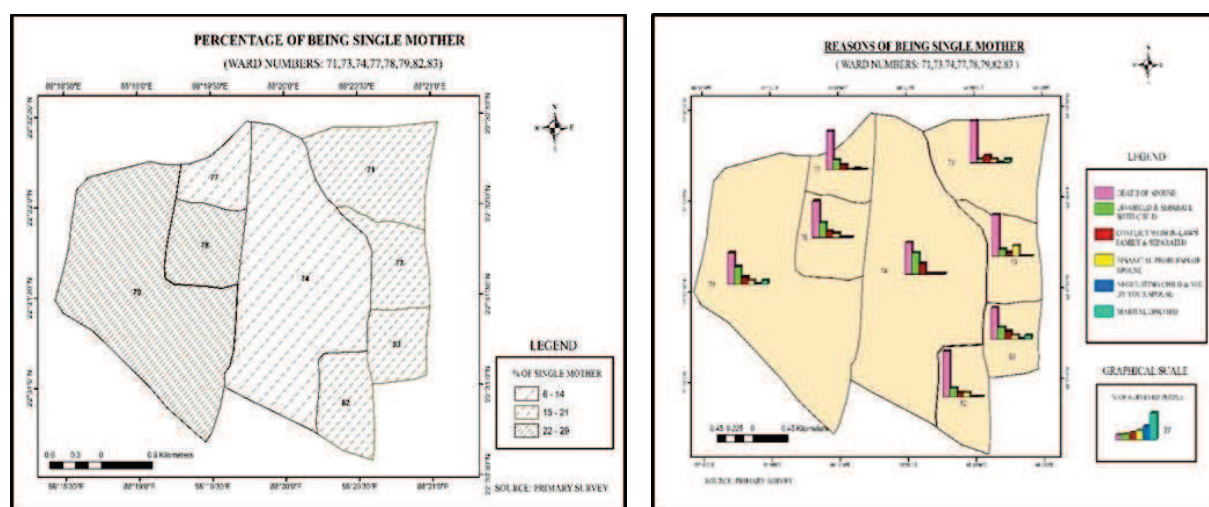
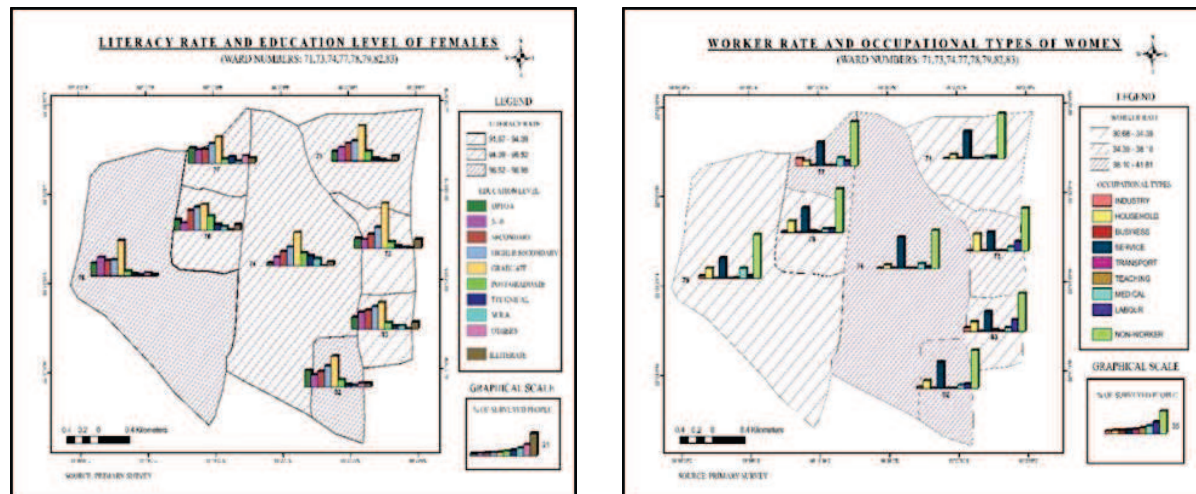


Fig.Nos. 17, 18: Percentage of Single Mother; Reasons of Being Single Mother

family and ultimate separation (9.77%), financial problems of spouse (6.76%), neglect of child and wife by spouse (0.3%) and marital discord (2.25%) (Figs. 17, 18).

The institution of marriage has been traditionally respected forever in Indian culture and practice. It will be wrong to claim that in contemporary urban India marriage is stigmatized. It may be appropriately commented from the study that along with the changing lifestyles, educational and economic empowerment of women and its associated social benefits and contrasting questioning issues in a still basic traditional setup, marriage system is still a prerogative to be saved at the cost of family health and satisfaction of members. Separation from original parent family is increasing, but marriage is kept secure. Marital separation and divorces are on the increase but have not yet become a practice for the Indian urban populace. Urban India still prefers to avoid social stigma however empowered the ladies may be and aware of their rights and responsibilities. On the contrary the family integrity, health and satisfaction is increasingly endangered.

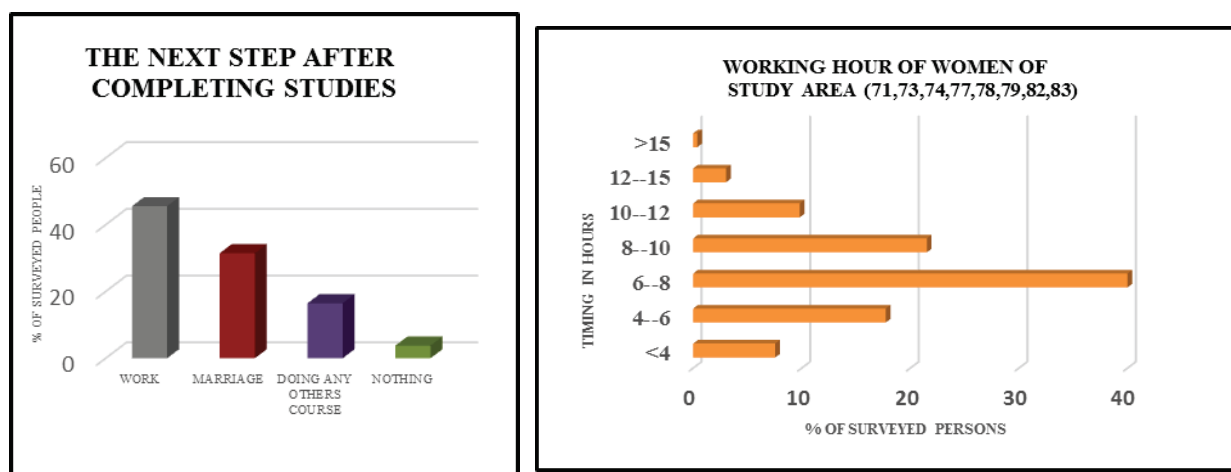
**The Woman in Family:** In the study parts of Kolkata, the status of woman in the family have been analysed by studying the following aspects. Of the surveyed women, 46.82% are engaged in work, 13.95% are students, 32.86% are house wives, and 8.65% are unemployed. Woman literacy rate in 79 and 82 wards is 96.52% - 98.95%, in 71,74,77,78 wards 94.09% -96.52% and in 73 and 83 number wards 91.66% - 94.09%, indicating normally high literacy rates of urban women (Fig.19).



**Fig.Nos.19, 20: Literacy Rate and Education Level of Females; Worker Rate and Occupational Types of Women**

Occupational status of women of study area indicates much lower percentages than educational status. 74, 77, 82 wards have 38.1% - 41.81%, 73 number ward have 34.39% - 38.10% and 71, 78, 79 number wards have 30.68%- 34.39% women engaged in gainful occupation. The women work participation is much lesser in Muslim community that form a larger section of the ward 78, 79 Ekbalpur- Mominpur and Kidderpore areas (Fig.20).

Nevertheless the Bengali women are more educated but they have lesser tendency to be working ladies and having economic independence. In the study area, it has been noticed that single mothers, divorcees are working for financial independence but huge number remain housewives including widow, single mother, other married women due to family restrictions, a fact that contradicts the essence of woman



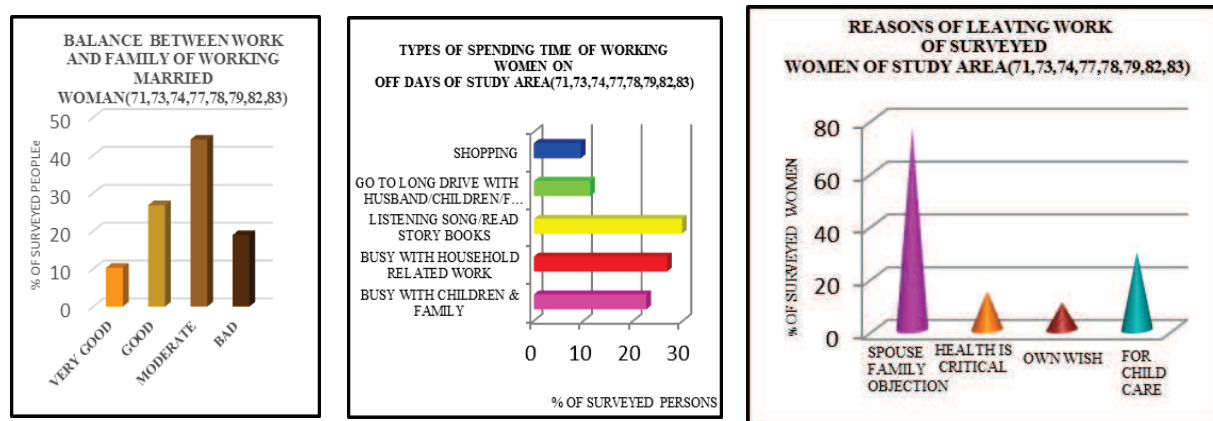
**Fig.Nos. 21, 22: The Next Step After Completing Studies; Working Hour of Women**

empowerment in modern urban women. In this study area, perception survey shows that people think woman work participation badly affects the family formation or marriage. Especially 78, 79, 82 which



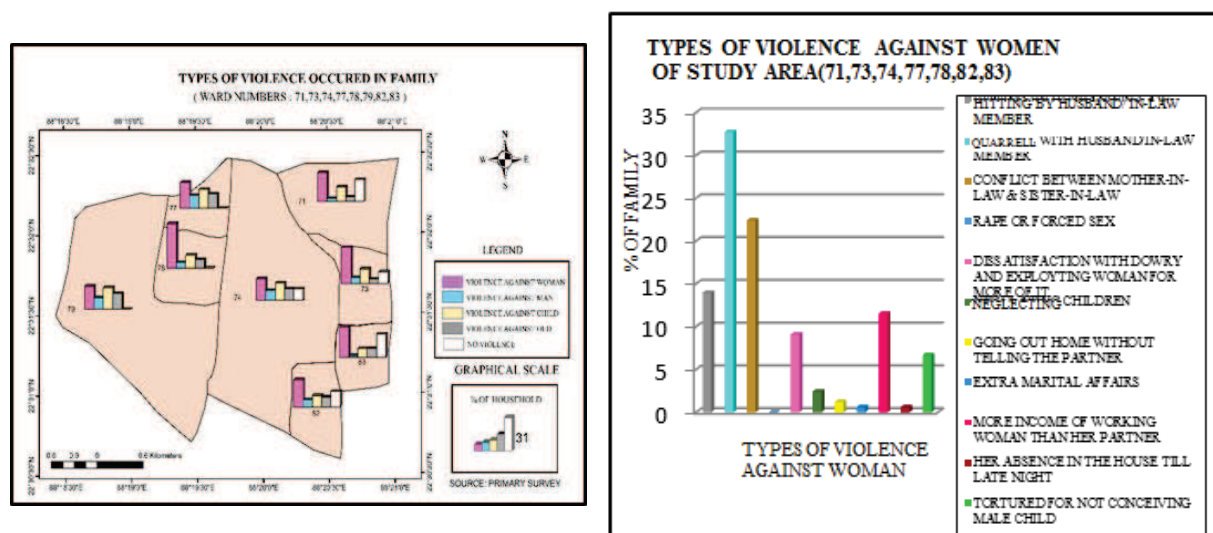
have many Muslim families, girls are not free for higher education. 31.5% girls are get married after graduation and after completing Higher Secondary or graduation, they are forced to marry.

Nearly 43% women have moderate balance between work and family while 18% says that balance is badly maintained (Fig.23). Women leave work due to certain family related reasons like 58.97% leave work after marriage. The main reasons are 76.08% spouse's family do not support the bride's working, 14.56% left for health causes, 10.23% on own wish and 29.48% for child care (Figs.23,24,25).



Women of the study area have opined that they were highly independent in their maternal house and much lesser independent in spouse's house. Women are highly neglected in spouse's family and non-working women are mostly dependent on husband and divorced women on parents.

**Impact:** The breakdown of joint family and increase in the number of nuclear families are the primary trends of family formation of the urban society of Kolkata. Over-urbanization, education, disagreement, lack of communication and mutual understanding in the marriage system, impact of



western culture are regarded as main causes of the decreasing integrity and good relationship in families. The number of self-discretion in marriage and inter-caste marriage are increasing although not all families give acceptance to these entailing family separation. Rate of divorce is increasing. Four types of family violence have been noticed in families, violence against woman, violence against men, violence



against child and violence against the aged. This indicates absence of the moral order and ethical values (Figs. 26, 27, 28).

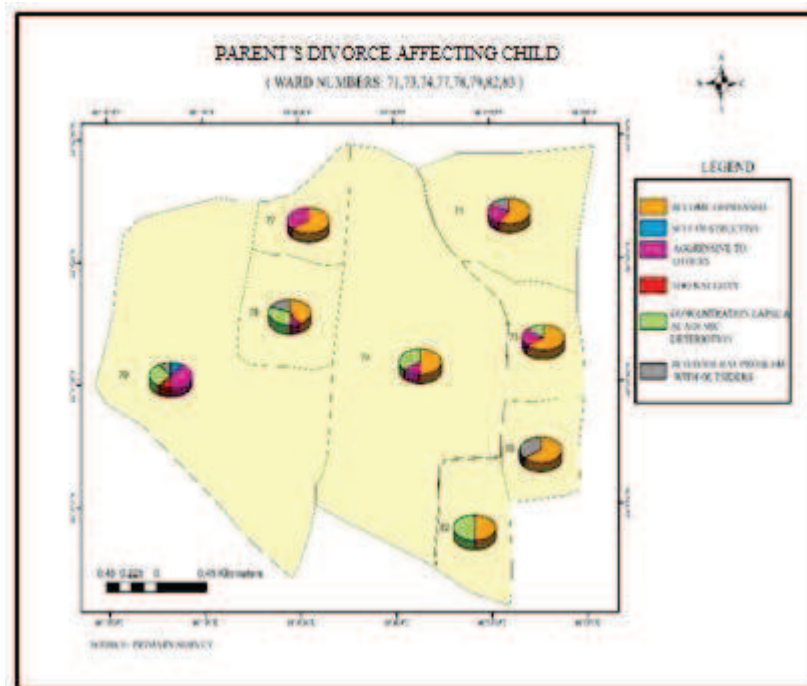


Fig.No.28: Parent's Divorce Affecting Child

In the study area, the level of education of women is more than satisfactory. But women in many ways are behind today, whose main reason is lack of modern thought, religious beliefs, family backwardness etc.

Family breakdown imparts a major impact on the social environment. In contemporary urban society with the rising changing role of the woman from the narrower role of the caring bride and mother to a broader role of diverse responsibilities of the office and family alike, it is observed that in the nuclear

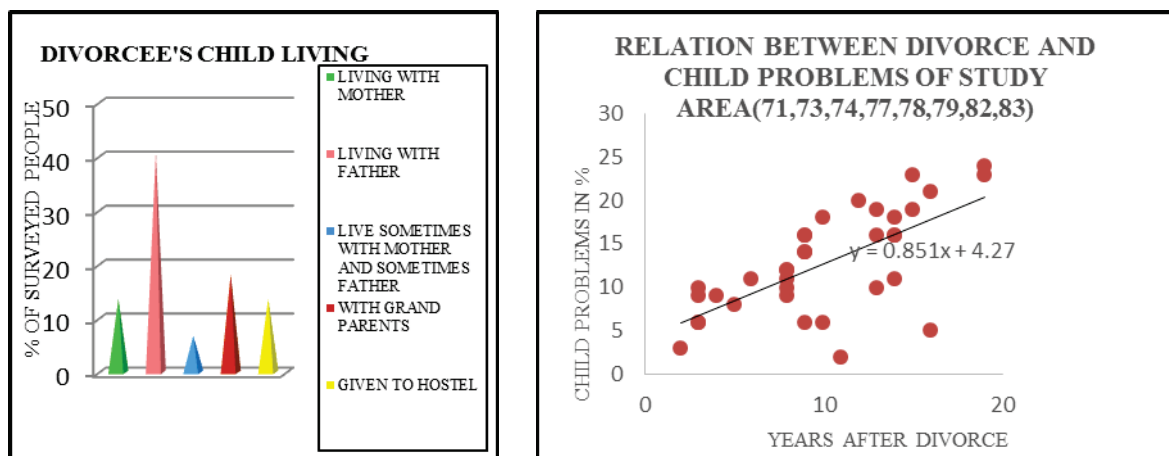


Fig.No.29, 30: Divorcee's Child Living; Relation Between Divorce and Child Problems

families where both husband and wife are engaged in profession outside, the child or the elderly gets neglected. Feeling loneliness is one of the important drawbacks in nuclear family. Insecurity for old is none the less common than the children who are left under the care of servants or the already lonely grandparent. Increasing rate of marriage disputes are increasing the rate of family stress which affects

family integrity and good relation of the study area. In a nuclear family, single parent family and divorced family, the worst effect is on the children who face different types of problems like depression, self-destructive attitude, aggressive attitude to others, less concentration on academic skill and behavioral disorders (Figs. 29, 30).

**Conclusion:** The rise of nuclear family, break-down of traditional joint family system, increase in cases of divorce, rise of discords and domestic violence, poor condition of single mother, effects of divorce and nuclear family on the children, poor status of women in family are enough indications of danger looming large on the family and ultimately society, as exemplified from analysis of the selected part of Kolkata. The gender gap is still existent in many matters like getting employed and working at one's own will. Household decision making power and freedom depend considerably on age, education and employment status. The study concludes by an observation that with increasing women empowerment in Kolkata as in any other city, there are closely related family issues that can be resolved largely by transforming attitudes towards gender equality at the grass-root level.

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