Ethnic differences in transition to first marriage in Iran: the role of marriage market, women's socio-economic status, and the process of development

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1. Introduction

Marriage in Iran is characterised by ethnic differences in women's marriage timing (Abbasi-Shavazi and Sadeghi 2005). Nearly half the population of Iran consist of Persians, Turks and Kurds constitute a third, and a number of smaller ethnic groups (e.g. Gilak, Mazandarani, Lur, Baluch, etc.) make up the rest of the population (Abbasi-Shavazi and Jones 2001). Iranian ethnicities are specific in terms of language, religion, and their geographical distribution. They also have distinguished marriage systems and socio-economic attributes. Ethnic differences in marriage timing can be related to both their culturally-oriented marriage patterns and the process of socio-economic development.

Previous studies have suggested that ethnicity maintains its effectiveness on the marriage timing of Iranian women even after controlling for women's socio-economic characteristics (Abbasi-Shavazi and Sadeghi 2005; Mahmoudian 2005). However, they did not specifically account for temporal changes in the socio-economic context of transition to first marriage. This study will add to the demographic literature in Iran by specifically analysing changes in the social, economic, and demographic context of this transition among different ethnic groups in order to explain ethnic-specific patterns of marriage timing. This analysis will also add to the demographic literature by using time-varying district-level data, accounting for both spatial and temporal changes in the socio-economic context of women's transition to first marriage among different ethnic groups.

Figure 1 provides a graphical representation of the conceptual framework employed in the present study. At the individual level, we control for women's characteristics such as age, birth cohort, and education. At the contextual level, we account for temporal changes in the marriage market, women's status, and the process of socio-economic development. By comparing the impact of these factors on the marriage timing of different ethnic groups, we aim to assess the extent to which ethnic patterns of marriage timing can be explained by their differences in the socio-economic changes and by their different responses to these changes.

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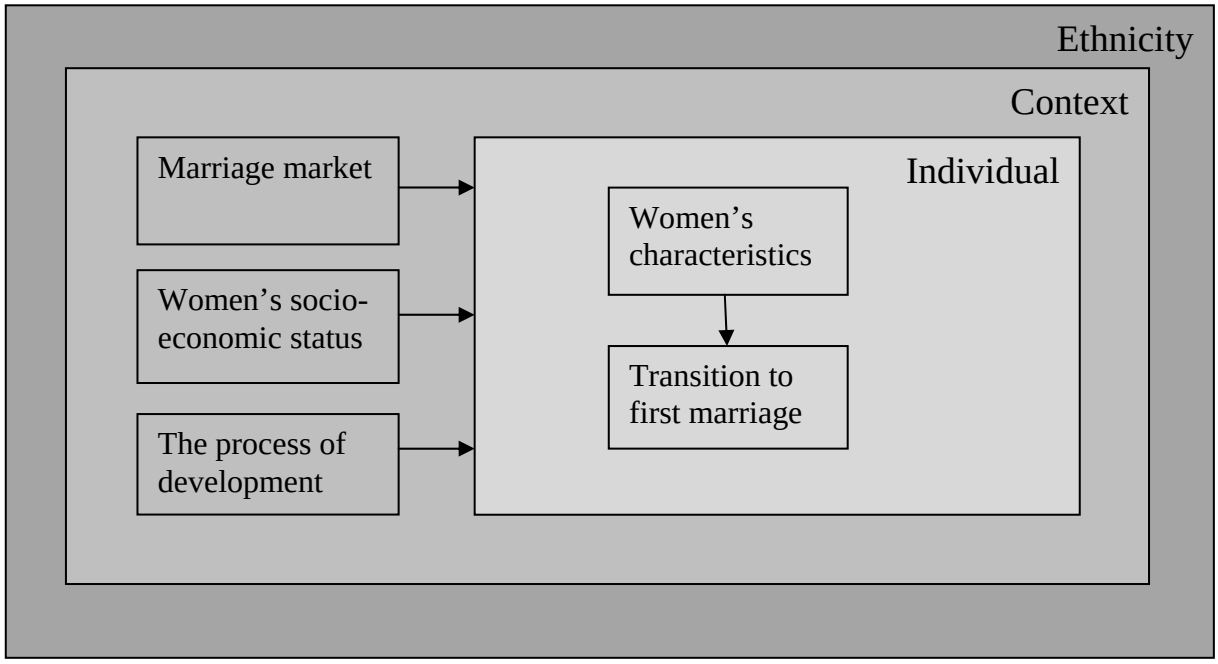
For instance, despite Lurs and Baluchis having more traditional family patterns, Lurs are considered less traditional and more developed than Baluchis and have experienced later marriage. On the other hand, Gilak women have experienced later marriage than Manzadarani women in a less traditional context despite their similar trends in development. Finally, Turks and Kurds have experienced similar changes in women's marriage timing in comparable socio-economic and cultural settings. This analytical approach will help to shed light on the contribution of the dissimilarity of these groups in the individual and contextual factors or their differences in resilience to change.

Figure 1. Ethnic-specific multi-level influences on transition to first marriage



2. Data and Method

Data: We use a range of data sources: the 2000 Iran Demographic and Health Survey (IDHS), the district-level data from 1986 and 1996 Iranian censuses, and the 2001 national survey of Socio-Economic Characteristics of Households in Iran (SECHI).

Method: Transition to first marriage is examined by applying discrete time hazard models of transition to first marriage. The time variable is years since the initial exposure to the risk of first marriage (the age of 10) until first marriage (for ever-married women) or the date of survey (for never-married women). Failing to account for unobserved heterogeneity in modelling of time to event can lead to overestimation of hazard rates at lower durations and an underestimation of it in higher durations (Allison 1984; Jenkins 1997). In other words, individuals who are more likely to experience the event because of their unobservable

characteristics are eliminated from the risk set earlier and vice versa. In the present study the models are estimated with and without accounting for unobserved heterogeneity and the implications are discussed.

Sample: Analysing the Kaplan-Meier survival estimates of transition to first marriage, we highlight that the increase in age at first marriage has been experienced by cohorts of women born after 1966. Therefore, we select all women born after 1966, obtaining a sample of three cohorts born during the three 5-year periods of 1966-70, 1971-75, and 1976-80. According to the K-M estimates, 68.1 per cent of 1966-70 cohort was married by the age of 20 compared with 56.9 and 43.3 per cent of 1971-75 and 1976-80 cohorts, respectively.

Measures: At the individual level, we control for women's ethnicity, age, birth cohort, and educational attainment. At the Contextual level, we account for the marriage market characteristics, women's socio-economic status, and the process of development, each category indicated by a number of variables. In order to account for both spatial and temporal changes in the specific context of transition to first marriage, the contextual variables are constructed as district-level time-varying covariates based on the age of women at the time of decennial Iranian censuses. For any age, the contextual variables are derived from the census (1986 or 1996) which corresponds more closely to that age.

3. Results

We found a clear influence of the ethnic socio-economic settings on their probability of marriage with the pattern of the contribution of the individual and contextual factors varying by ethnicity. In some cases, our findings show comparable responses in the marriage timing of ethnic groups to changes in their socio-economic setting. For instance, the risks of marriage of Turk and Kurd women have been similarly affected by their birth cohort, educational attainment, and women's status in the area in which both groups have been comparable. In addition, different educational attainment and women's status in the area have affected the marriage timings of Baluch and Lur women differently. Different levels of industrialisation among Turks and Kurds and the difference of Gilak and Mazandarani women in their socio-economic status have also resulted in different marriage responses.

In other cases, we found ethnic-specific marriage responses to similar changes in the socio-economic setting, suggesting cultural sensitivity to the individual and contextual influences. For instance, despite being similar in birth cohort, marriage market and the process of development with Lurs, the risk of marriage of Baluch women has been less affected by these factors. These findings can be indicative of less resilience of Baluch women

to changes in the marriage patterns. This assumption is confirmed by the considerable impact of the educational attainment and status of Baluch women on their marriage timing. The results suggest that this greater cultural rigidity can partly be related to their lower access to education. Furthermore, the comparability of Gilak and Mazandarani women in their birth cohort, educational attainment, marriage market, and the process of development has not resulted in their similar marriage responses. Finally, the similarity of Turks and Kurds in marriage market has not led to comparable influences on the risks of marriage of these groups with Kurds being more flexible in their preference for spousal characteristics.

These findings highlight the dynamics of the social, economic, and demographic influences when they are studied in relation to cultural contexts. We emphasise the necessity of ethnic-specific studies of marriage timing in Iran in order to account for ethnic patterns of the contribution of socio-economic factors. Comprehensive demographic-anthropological studies seem to be important in identifying the nature of marriage patterns among ethnic groups and in understanding the attitudes and perceptions guiding ethnic patterns of the contribution of the social, economic, and demographic factors.

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