From one birth cohort to the next: Changes in marriage timing of Iranian women

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1. Introduction

As part of a general phenomenon in the Middle East and North African (MENA) region (Roudi-Fahimi and Kent 2007), Iranian women experienced notable marriage postponement during the past few decades. In Iran, the female singulate mean age at marriage (FSMAM) increased by 2.5 years in only one decade; from 19.9 years in 1986 to 22.4 in 1996 (Kazemipour 2004). This marriage postponement is also mirrored in changes in the marriage timing of different birth cohorts. 68.1 per cent of women born during 1966-70 were married by the age of 20 compared with 43.3 per cent of those born during 1976-80[2], showing a major postponement in the marriage of women experiencing their pre-marriage years during the 1990s (1976-80 birth cohort) compared with those who were marriageable in the 1980s (1966-70 birth cohort). During this period, both men and women experienced considerable changes in their socio-economic status and in the environment. Table 1 summarises the socio-economic changes occurred during the 1990s with their potential effects on the marriage timing of the younger birth cohort who were marriageable during this period.

The combination and pace of these social and economic changes have conditioned the marriage timing of birth cohorts who were in their pre-marriage years during the 1980s and 1990s. This paper aims to unpack the interaction of these events and processes by analysing the role of changes in the socio-economic environment and in the marriage market. We aim to unravel what has happened and what has caused these unprecedented changes during the period of 1980-90 by analysing the marriage timing of the two birth cohorts of women who experienced their pre-marriage years during the 1980s and 1990s, namely 1966-70 and 1976-80 birth cohorts[3]. We account for both individual- and contextual-level influences, as the differences in the social, economic, and demographic characteristics at the macro and micro levels conditions women's marriage timing by exposing them to different ideational and behavioural patterns.

[2] These figures are based on the Kaplan-Meier survival estimates of transition to first marriage calculated from the 2000 Iran Demographic and Health Survey.
[3] We also analysed the marriage timing of 1970-75 birth cohort who experienced their pre-marriage years during 1985s-1995s but the results were not more informative and therefore, are not presented in this paper.

Table 1. Selected socio-economic changes during the 1990s and their potential contribution to the marriage timing of women marriageable during this period (1976-80 birth cohort)

Socio-economic factor	Change between 1980s and 1990s	Potential contribution to the marriage timing of women marriageable during the 1990s
Women's educational attainment	Increased	*Marriage postponement:* -Higher access to education can modify women's preferences regarding the marriage timing and spouse characteristics; -Acquiring higher educational levels can delay transitions to adulthood roles such as marriage to higher ages; -Acquiring higher educational levels can increase the opportunity costs of marriage.
Women's participation in the labour market	Increased	*Marriage postponement:* -Higher participation in the labour market can increase the opportunity costs of marriage.
Men's educational attainment	Increased	*Marriage postponement:* -Men's higher educational attainment can delay their transition to full time employment and modifies their preferences regarding marriage timing and spouse characteristics.
Economic conditions in the county	Improved	*Earlier marriage:* -Economic recovery improves the economic status of the spouse supply.
Urbanisation	Increased	*Marriage postponement:* - By improving women's status in the society. *Earlier marriage:* -By providing a privileged marriage market.

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). The sample includes women aged between 10 and 20 years as the age of 20 is the maximum age of the cohort of 1976-80 at the time of survey (2000) and including this age range avoids any selection bias resulting from different durations in which the two cohorts have been at the risk of marriage. 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 examined.

Measures: At the individual level, we control for women's age, educational attainment, and ethnicity. At the Contextual level, we account for women's socio-economic status, the marriage market characteristics, and the process of urbanisation, 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

The findings suggest that the marriage postponement of women born during 1976-80 can partly be explained by their educational attainment. Primary school education has exerted the greatest influence in postponing the marriage of the younger birth cohort both by reducing the proportion of women eventually marrying and by increasing the average age at marriage of these women. Acquiring post-primary educational levels have also been responsible in reducing the quantum but not in delaying the timing of marriage.

The predominant role of primary school educational attainment on postponing the marriage of the younger birth cohort means that the greatest change in women's marriage timing has occurred by acquiring only few years of education. The marriage postponement in Iran has mainly been due to the ideational and behavioural changes resulted from access to education, which leads to changes in their preferences regarding both the marriage timing and the spouse characteristics.

Examining the role of women's socio-economic status in the area, we found that the access of local women to education has not influenced the marriage timing of the younger birth cohort. However, the marriage postponement of this birth cohort can partly be explained by living in areas where a higher proportion of women have participated in the labour market.

We also explored the role of the marriage market characteristics. The marriage postponement of the younger birth cohort can partly be explained by the shortage of employed men and the excess of educationally enrolled men in areas where they live. The shortage of

suitable spouses in terms of age was not found to be responsible for the marriage postponement of women born during 1976-80. In fact, the age preference was found as the most flexible characteristic of the spouse supply in both birth cohorts.

The findings suggest that the process of urbanisation does not explain the marriage postponement of the younger birth cohort. After accounting for the marriage market, living in more urbanised and industrialised areas were found to increase the risk of marriage of this cohort. The favourable socio-cultural environment of urban and industrial areas to the marriage postponement appears to have been offset by better economic conditions in these areas which support the marriage formation. The reason can be the diminishing rural-urban gap in access to education, health, and means of communication (Abbasi-Shavazi, Mehryar et al. 2002), despite the existence of better economic conditions in urban and particularly industrial areas.

We also found ethnic-specific patterns of marriage timing between the two birth cohorts with the gap in the marriage timing of some ethnic groups diminishing but the risk of marriage of others growing closer over time. These findings draw our attention to the dynamic role of ethnicity in determining the marriage timing of Iranian women which can be related to changes in the social, economic, and demographic context of ethnic groups over time and to the cultural influences associated with ethnicity.

References

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