

New patterns of marriage practices among poor and non-poor women in Latin America

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BACKGROUND

One of the most important transformations in the last century, both at the individual and family level, has been the secularization (understood as a reduction of beliefs attributed to the religion or supernatural respect to marriage and fertility control), and the increased laity expressed as a growing autonomy respect to marriage, fertility and health. These changes have been occurring in most developing countries.

Compare to other regions of the world, research on marriage has been a neglected topic, possible due to the fact that union does not initiate at a very early age (usually above age 20 years). Nevertheless, important changes in the developmental and demographic changes are occurring, with an increased dissociation between the couple, marriage and reproduction, greatly attributed to the availability of modern contraception and the growing secularization of the recent past, and which poses important questions that are still unanswered and which we will be focusing on.

OBJECTIVE

The objective of this study is to explore to what extent and how does the timing of marriage as well as the terms of marriage affect patterns of sexual behavior before marriage, and childbearing; and to examine if these changes are similar among different socio economic groups.

Some hypotheses are considered for the analysis: a) that the specific type of cohabitation (legal or consensual) carries significant weight on the future reproductive behavior of the woman, b) that rapid global changes linked to a secularization process are resulting in a larger proportion of consensual unions characterized by instability, c) that changes on terms of marriage and its patterns of sexual behavior before marriage and childbearing differ by socio-economic group (class). These modifications occurring in time and also vary by socio economic group; we hypothesize that differential within countries between low income groups versus middle or high income groups will be larger than differential among low income groups (or the middle or high income groups) between countries, bringing to light the lack of opportunities for well-being among women in low income groups.

The shifting condition of marriage will be considered examining data of two points in time. Some of the variables considered are type of union, timing of union, proportion of women having sex before marriage (union), probability of premarital births and conceptions, proportion of child mothers, pace of having a first birth and whether the relationship has change over time. As no previous study of this nature has been conducted in the region, and hypothesis to be tested are exploratory, depending on findings a multivariate analysis will be conducted.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Data used for the analysis require comparable surveys for two points in time, the latest data of recent collection. We will mainly be using the Demographic Health Survey (DHS). For Colombia, the DHS 1995 and 2005; for Peru, the DHS 1996 and 2004; for Bolivia, the DHS 1994 and 2003; and for Mexico, similar surveys as those of DHS will be used, the National Survey of Demographic Dynamics (ENADID) 1997 and 2006. The surveys to be analyzed, obtained information on different aspects such as background information, birth histories, marriage history, sexual initiation, contraceptive preferences, women's autonomy, among other.

Countries proposed for the study have demographic and developmental characteristics that make them interesting to compare: Colombia with a fertility transition that began in the early 1960's, Peru followed in that transition, Mexico -one of the more economic development country- had a very delayed transition, and Bolivia -one the poorer countries of LA- is considered resistant to changes in the fertility transition.

CONCLUSIONS

In summary, consensual unions will continue to prevail and increase in LA with the undesired negative aspect of instability and vulnerability. This pattern is not only observed among poor women, but across the whole population. However, this practice possibly affects more poor women because they have already started from a more disadvantage position related to their poverty condition. Single women are the other category that requires a special attention. A larger proportion of women are sexually active, and the use of contraception among them is low. Furthermore, findings suggests the possibly abortion is being use stop unplanned pregnancies.

LA women have benefited from their high level of education achieved, that has been increasing in the latest decade, a greater autonomy, a lower fertility and higher contraceptive use. However, the weakening of traditional norms, more accelerated in the last decades, is also bringing marriage practices that make women more vulnerable, such as the disappearance of the shotgun marriages, i.e. a growing trend of unplanned pregnancies not leading to legal unions but to consensual unions. This pattern can be considered in the context of LA as a negative transformation because the society has not totally adopted equalitarian values and gender equity, and because consensual unions put women in a more disadvantage situation.

These findings points to some specific policy action: to continue the improvements on women's education, to promote gender equity to be able to achieve a stronger women's autonomy, and to provide better contraceptive services for young single women.

We hope that findings will contribute to the discussion of the changing terms and conditions of marriage and its interrelation to economic status of the LA women.

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