

WOMEN'S ROLES AND RECENT MARRIAGE TRENDS IN IRAN

Akbar Aghajanian
*Fayetteville State University,
Fayetteville, North Carolina, U.S.A.*

Résumé — Cette étude examine la tendance nuptiale récente en Iran. Les données disponibles suggèrent une importante tendance croissante en ce qui concerne le nombre de mariages et le taux de nuptialité depuis 1979. Cette tendance est compatible avec la philosophie de l'Islam, soutenue dans la République Islamique. Les facteurs qui ont favorisé cette tendance croissante en nuptialité sont analysés dans le contexte de cette philosophie et par rapport aux changements sociaux et légaux qui ont été introduits dans la société iranienne. Outre cette promotion religieuse du mariage et de la procréation, la longue guerre continuelle, la structure d'âge plus bas, le ralentissement dans l'augmentation de l'âge au mariage en ce qui concerne les femmes et le déclin important dans l'âge au mariage des hommes, le remariage et la polygamie semblent contribuer à cette tendance en nuptialité.

Abstract — This paper examines recent marriage trends in Iran. The available data suggest a significant up-trend in the number and rate of marriage since 1979. This trend is consistent with the social philosophy of Islam, advocated in the Islamic Republic. The factors behind this up-trend in marriage are analyzed in the context of this philosophy and in relation to social and legal changes which have been introduced in Iranian society. In addition to religious promotion of marriage and procreation, the long continued war with Iraq, younger age structure, slowdown in increasing pattern of age of marriage for women and significant decline in age of marriage for men, remarriage and polygyny seem to be contributing to this up-trend in marriage.

Key Words — marriage, women's roles, revolution

Introduction

Marriage occurs relatively early in life and is a universal phenomenon for women and men in Iran. The value system influenced by the social philosophy of Islam has always encouraged early marriage. The establishment of the Islamic government has intensified the influence of Islam on the individual and social life of Iranians during the last decade. In fact, the Islamic government has advocated the spread of the Islamic lifestyle — a way of life strictly complying with the rules of Islam. Hence, along with Islamization of various social institutions such as the judicial, legal and economic systems, there has been an attempt toward revitalization of the Islamic family system, which had been disrupted by the modernization of the monarchy regime, as suggested by the leaders of the Islamic republic. The ideology and values prescribed by Islam have stimulated social and legal changes regarding various aspects of marriage and family in postrevolutionary Iran. This paper attempts to analyze the available data on marriage within this context.

Prerevolutionary Setting

Along with other social reforms of the 1960s by the monarchy regime, social and legal changes were introduced to modernize and westernize the Iranian family. Prerevolutionary policies aimed for later marriage and family formation, smaller family size and the creation of non-familial roles for women. Legal and social policies were implemented toward these goals in the context of modernization. In this regard, the status of women was promoted symbolically and practically. For the first time, women were allowed to vote; there were women in the House of Representatives; and women were selected as cabinet ministers. Female literacy corps and women's organizations were established to mobilize women to play roles in the modernization process. There were special quotas for employing women, and new jobs were created for absorbing women in non-agricultural employment. Hence, the number of employed women in the non-agricultural sector increased from 700,000 in 1966 to 1,000,000 in 1976 (Iran Statistical Center, 1969, 1980). This was an increase of 40 per cent in the number of working women.

Many new schools — especially high schools for females — were established, and the rate of literacy for women increased from 17.4 per cent to 35 per

cent during the 1966-76 period. The secondary education rate for females increased significantly, so that in 1976, approximately 25 per cent of the female population aged 15-19 were attending school in comparison to 13.5 per cent in 1966.

Among legal changes introduced during the same period was the Family Protection Law of 1967. This law not only prevented men from having the absolute right to divorce, but also allowed polygyny only with the permission and consent of the first wife. It also set the minimum age of marriage for females at 16 and for males at 18 (Bagley, 1971). The minimum legal age of marriage was later changed to 18 for females and 20 for males (Iran, Ministry of Justice, 1975).

There is no doubt that these social and legal changes introduced from mid-1960s have influenced various aspects of marriage and family in Iran. It is against this background that the recent trends in marriage should be observed.

Recent Trends in Marriage

Due to the legal significance of marriage registration, the enrollment is high in Iran and there is no reason to doubt the accuracy of the registration. Marriages are registered in the offices of notaries public. At the end of each month, the notary public sends a complete report of the marriages to the office of vital statistics. These data are collected and reported in the statistical year book. From these data, the crude marriage rate is calculated and reported in Table 1. The crude marriage rate is the number of marriages per 1,000 population per year. To avoid yearly fluctuations, three-year moving averages are calculated instead of single-year rates. The rate is reported from 1976, three years before the revolution, to 1986, eight years after the revolution.

During the three-year period (1976-78) before the Islamic revolution, the crude marriage rate was 5.1 per year. In the first year after the revolution (1979), the absolute number of marriages jumped to 302,000 — an increase of 54 per cent over the previous year. This increasing trend continued in 1980, registering 337,000 marriages. With the start of the Iraqi war in September 1980 and its continuation, the number of marriages dropped slightly in 1981. However, the average annual marriage rate during the first three years of the revolution increased to 8.1 compared to the rate of 5.1 during the prerevolutionary period (Table 1).

As the Iran-Iraq war continued, the numbers and the rate of marriage increased from 1982. The average annual number of marriages increased to 382,000 during the second three years after the revolution, compared to 311,000

TABLE 1. NUMBER OF MARRIAGES AND CRUDE RATE OF MARRIAGE IN IRAN, 1976-86

TIME PERIOD	NUMBER* (000)	CHANGE (%)	CRUDE RATE*
1976-78	177	-	5.1
1979-81	311	75.7	8.4
1982-84	382	22.8	8.6
1985-86	374	-2.1	7.7

*Three year moving annual average rate and number.
Source: Iran Statistical Center, 1986, 1987.

for the first three years after the revolution. This is an increase of 29 per cent over the previous period. Similarly, the crude marriage rate increased from 8.4 to 8.6. The most recent data available, for 1985-86 period, show a decline of 2.1 per cent in the average annual number of marriages and a decline of the crude marriage rate to 7.7.

Given the relatively constant prerevolutionary marriage rate of about 5.1, an important question is how to explain the up-trend in marriage in recent years. It is plausible to suggest that the social and ideological climate and demographic changes were favourable toward marriage since the establishment of the Islamic republic. These social and demographic factors are examined below.

Postrevolutionary Optimistic Atmosphere

The Islamic revolution was a turning point in the history of Iran. The success of the revolution in February 1979 was a significant accomplishment for the people of Iran who were involved in serious revolutionary protest and an intensive two-year struggle. This success was not only associated with happiness and pride, but it brought hope for economic prosperity and improvement for a large number of poor, especially the urban poor who were mobilized in the revolutionary process (Kazemi, 1983). The prospect for economic improvement provided a favourable condition for marriage. Hence, many young men and

women rushed into marriage and soon began their family formation in the first year after the revolution.

Religious Promotion of Marriage

After the establishment of the Islamic republic, there was strong encouragement for marriage and childbearing in accordance with the Islamic principles of family and procreation. This emphasis was partly a reaction against the previous regime's policies of later family formation and limitation of family size to decrease the rate of population growth. Early marriage was promoted as part of revitalization of Islamic society and as a barrier to vices related to the sexual needs of men and women. It was often preached that in a society where men and women marry early, there will be less moral problems as desires and passions will be met in the context of family and marriage. The emphasis on family formation was repeatedly mentioned in the Friday prayers and by the leading religious leaders such as Ayatollah Montazeri.

In accordance with this prescription, financial and social incentives for early marriage were provided. These included interest-free marriage loans and discount prices to newlyweds for household goods. The salary of men employed in the public sector was supplemented after they were married. In most situations, being married was an advantage in obtaining jobs, housing, land for housing and, particularly, rations on most of the items which had been on the black market since 1980.

The Iran-Iraq War

Historically, temporal factors such as war or economic cycles (expansion and depression) have influenced and tempered marriage (Bogue, 1969). The sudden attack of Iraqi troops took the Iranians by surprise and dashed their optimistic expectations. After the invasion and takeover of Khorma-Shar port in October 1980, the religious and secular communities turned their attention to the important issues of war and defense. This resulted in a slight drop in the marriage rate in 1981, the first year of the war. The war was perceived as a temporary phenomenon, hence marriages were postponed until after the war.

As the war continued and there was no prospect for its end, people started to accept it as part of their daily life. As with other important things, it no longer seemed meaningful to postpone marriage until after the war, since there was no prospect of its end. Furthermore, the religious community and its leaders shifted their attention to the importance of family formation and marriage as the war

continued and expanded. The argument put forward was that fighting for Islam should not mean postponement of marriage. After all, Islam needs Muslim soldiers for furthering its cause. This can only be accomplished by marriage and procreation.

Age-Structure of the Population

The age structure of a population can influence trends in marriage. If a population is getting younger, the size of marriageable cohorts increases each year. Hence, there will be more marriages in subsequent years. Table 2 shows the age structure of the Iranian population in 1976 and 1986. Although the 1986 population is slightly younger according to census data, the percentage of the population of marriageable age — those 15-24 years old — is not significantly different from the figures for 1976. Hence, the recent trend has not been caused by a change in the age structure. However, as the younger cohorts born after the revolution reach marriageable age, their number will be significantly high. This is due to the increasing shift in the fertility pattern during the postrevolutionary era. As a result, future trends in the number of marriages will be influenced by the younger age structure of the Iranian population.

Age of Marriage

The minimum legal age of marriage of 18 for females and 20 for males was abandoned after the revolution. Since then, there has not been any clear policy of minimum legal age of marriage. According to the Shi'a code of action, a female may marry at age 9 and a male at age 14. These ages have not been legalized, perhaps because of reservations concerning physical ability. However, they have been preached as appropriate religious behaviour.

Vital statistics data concerning actual age of marriage in Iran are not available to allow an examination of changes in age at marriage. However, the data from the 1976 and 1986 censuses suggest some clues of a decline in the female age of marriage. According to the 1986 census, there were 31,577 women aged 10-14 who were reported as ever-married. That is approximately four per cent of that cohort. Comparatively, the number of ever-married women in this age group was 500 less according to the 1976 census.

There are indications that the age of marriage for women declined in urban areas of Iran during the 1976-86 period. The proportion of ever-married women aged 15-19 increased from 30.5 per cent in 1976 to 32.5 per cent in 1986 in urban areas. Similarly, for urban women aged 20-24, the proportion ever-

TABLE 2. PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF POPULATION
BY AGE IN IRAN, 1976, 1986

Age Group	1976	1986
0-4	16.1	18.3
5-9	15.7	15.2
10-14	12.8	11.9
15-19	10.7	10.5
20-24	8.3	8.5
25-29	6.3	7.4
30-34	5.1	5.9
35-39	4.8	4.3
40+	20.3	18.0
ALL	100.0	100.0

SOURCE: IRAN STATISTICAL CENTER, 1980, 1987.

married increased by approximately two percentage points. This change in the proportion of ever-married women is reflected in a slight change in the singulate mean age of marriage (SMAM), as reported in Table 3. The SMAM — introduced by Hajnal in 1953 — measures the mean number of years spent single among women who ultimately marry and provides a good summary measure of age at marriage.

In the rural areas, the proportion ever-married among the female population aged 15-24 did not increase. In fact, the proportion ever-married among the rural female population declined. Hence, the SMAM increased from 19.1 to 20.4

TABLE 3. PROPORTION EVER-MARRIED AND SINGULATE MEAN AGE OF MARRIAGE
FOR WOMEN IN IRAN, 1976-86

Measures	Iran		Urban		Rural	
	1976	1986	1976	1986	1976	1986
% Ever-Married						
15-19	34.2	33.5	30.5	32.5	38.1	34.1
19-24	78.6	73.6	73.9	75.4	83.6	75.6
Singulate Mean Age Of Marriage	19.7	19.8	20.2	19.9	19.1	20.4

Source: Iran Statistical Center, 1980, 1987.

years. The most likely explanation for this increase in age of marriage for rural women is a marriage squeeze related to rural/urban migration of young males. As rural/urban migration increased after revolution, many young men aged 15-29 years old moved to cities to find a better life. This presumably resulted in a marriage squeeze.

The data reported in Table 4 show that age of marriage has declined for men in urban areas. This decline is reflected in the proportion ever-married in the urban male population aged 15-29, and also in the SMAM. In rural areas, on the other hand, the SMAM did not change between 1976 and 1986. The changes in the proportion of young men ever-married were small. As such, most of the changes in the age of marriage happened in the urban population. Note that it was also the urban population that was exposed to changes during the prerevolutionary modernization era. This reversal of changes in the pattern of age at marriage for both the female and male populations in urban areas is another factor behind the recent up-trend in marriage.

Remarriage

As the war continued and economic problems increased in the emerging society of postrevolutionary Iran, the number of divorces increased significantly. In addition, with the increasing number of casualties among soldiers, the number of young widows increased. There are no accurate data on the number of war widows, but speculations are in the range of 100,000. Such a large number of young divorced and widowed women was a discredit to Islamic society. Hence, religious leaders put a strong emphasis on remarriage for widows in order to avoid the social problems related to such a reservoir of young widows.

Traditionally, remarriage of divorced and widowed women has been difficult and unsuccessful in Iran. During the postrevolutionary era and particularly as the war continued, the social support of the religious leaders made the remarriage of widows easier. While there are no data available, it is plausible to assume that a large number of the marriages since 1983 are the second and third marriages of the young war widows and also the second marriages of divorced women. Hence, remarriage is another factor behind the up-trend in the marriage rates in postrevolutionary Iran.

Polygyny

According to the rule of Islam, a man can be married to more than one wife at the same time if he is able to treat them equally and with justice. This condition

TABLE 4. PROPORTION EVER-MARRIED AND SINGULATE MEAN AGE OF MARRIAGE
FOR MEN IN IRAN, 1976-86

Measures	Iran		Urban		Rural	
	1976	1986	1976	1986	1976	1986
%Ever-Married						
15-19	6.5	6.3	3.6	4.4	10.2	9.16
19-24	39.4	42.1	30.2	34.9	52.7	48.6
25-29	77.5	82.1	71.3	76.9	85.8	86.6
Singulate Mean Age Of Marriage	24.1	23.7	25.1	24.3	22.7	22.7

Source: Iran Statistical Center, 1980, 1987.

is very subjective, and it is very difficult to prove injustice for a Muslim man who wants to marry a second wife. Hence, polygyny exists in Muslim societies at different rates. In Iran, polygyny has not been extensive in the past, and the 1967 Family Protection Law made its practice difficult by requiring the permission of the first wife. As part of the legal changes in the Islamic republic, this law was deemed contrary to the principles of Islam and it was abolished. It was replaced by the original Shi'a code of action which does not require that a man who wants to marry a second wife must receive permission from his first wife. Hence, it is very likely that polygyny has increased during the last 10 years.

There are no data directly measuring polygyny. To examine the validity of the above argument, we rely on a crude measure available from census data. Utilizing census data on marital status, we can compare the number of men and women who have spouses at the time of census. If the number of women with spouses is equal to the number of men with spouses, then there is no sign of polygyny. On the other hand, if the number of women with spouses is greater than the number of men with spouses at one point in time, this is a sign of polygyny. According to the 1976 census, the ratio of married females to married males was 1.011. This ratio increased to 1.024 in the 1986 census. That is, there were 11 men per 1,000 with more than one spouse in 1976. This figure increased to 24 per 1,000 married men according to the 1986 census. Thus the rate of polygyny has increased during the last 10 years, and this has contributed to the increase in the rate of marriage.

Summary and Discussion

Islamic revitalization in Iran has been significantly noted for its cause and particularly noted for its violent aspects while being established and consolidated as a clerical state. Less attention has been paid to the social consequences of this phenomenon and to the extent to which it has been able to reverse the ongoing processes of modernization and change. This paper has focused on some consequences and changes in marriage trends as part of a changing system of marriage and family. These changes are consistent with the intentions of the Islamic regime to respect Islamic rule in family and marital affairs. This means early marriage for men and women, as long as there is no physical limitation, and early family formation and motherhood. Further, strong emphasis is put on women's roles as wives and mothers and limitations of their roles outside the household. Men are given a better position in the family power structure, with a unilateral right of divorce and the right to marry more than one woman at the same time. Hence, there is an increase in both the level of polygyny and the rate

of divorce. As the population is getting younger, the larger cohorts of marriageable population will result in higher number of marriages. However, future trends in the marriage rate depend also on the direction of government policies on issues related to family and status of women. The postrevolutionary policy has been toward domestication of women and limitation of women to household roles. It is not yet clear to what extent these policies will continue in future.

Acknowledgment

This research is part of a larger research project, "Gender Inequality and Fertility in Iran," funded by the Rockefeller Foundation.

References

- Bagley, F.R.C. 1971. The Iranian family protection law. In C.E. Bosworth (ed.), *Iran and Islam*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Bogue, D. 1969. *Principles of Demography*. New York: John Wiley.
- Hajnal, J. 1953. Age at marriage and proportions marrying. *Population Studies* 7:115-128.
- Iran, Ministry of Justice. 1975. Supplement to the official newspaper of the government of Iran: Family protection law.
- Iran Statistical Center. 1969. *Census of Population and Housing of Iran, 1966*. Tehran: Iran Statistical Center.
- _____. 1978. *Statistical Yearbook of Iran, 1977*. Tehran: Iran Statistical Center.
- _____. 1980. *Census of Population and Housing of Iran, 1976*. Tehran: Iran Statistical Center.
- _____. 1986. *Statistical Yearbook of Iran, 1985*. Tehran: Iran Statistical Center.
- _____. 1987. *Census of Population and Housing of Iran, 1986*. Tehran: Iran Statistical Center.
- Kazemi, F. 1983. *Poverty and Revolution in Iran*. New York: New York University Press.

Received August, 1989; revised February, 1991