# *Tradition and Change in Marriage and Family Life*

Throughout Asia, marriage behavior and family life are changing. Young people are waiting later to marry, couples are having fewer children, and more married women are working outside the home (Leete 1994; Retherford, Ogawa, and Matsukura 2001; Tsuya and Bumpass forthcoming a). Within the region, such trends were observed first in Japan and more recently in South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore. Similar patterns are starting to emerge in other Asian countries.

Trends such as later marriage, lower marital fertility, and greater participation of married women in the labor force are similar to changes that took place earlier in the industrialized societies of Europe and North America. Yet other aspects of family life in Asia are still quite different from the way family institutions have developed in the West. Fewer Asian couples live together outside marriage, and childbearing outside marriage is extremely rare. Marriage is generally viewed as a permanent arrangement, and divorce rates, although rising, are still quite low in most Asian societies.

*Couples in Asia's wealthiest countries are waiting until their late 20s and 30s to marry, sparking concern that some may not marry at all (Singapore) © Jack Hollingsworth/ Corbis*

## *Marriage traditions*

Asia's three subregions all have distinct traditional family structures. In East Asia, including China, North and South Korea, Japan, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, traditional families are strongly male-dominated. A woman leaves her parents at marriage and often lives with her husband's parents if he is a first son. Women traditionally have little independence within the family, at least until they are past their childbearing years. With economic development and modernization, however, women in most East Asian countries now enjoy a great deal more autonomy than they did in the past. China stands out as having experienced a series of radically differing social and political systems during the 20th century that have greatly changed family life and the position of women in society.

The traditional family structures of Southeast Asia are more varied. Among the large lowland populations of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam, young couples typically establish their own independent households, or a man may move in with his wife's parents, at least for a while. At marriage, the husband's family often makes a gift to the family of the wife. Although most young couples establish a home of their own, a youngest daughter and her husband may stay with her parents to look after them in their old age and eventually inherit their property. Family patterns of ethnic Chinese populations in Singapore and other Southeast Asian countries offer a contrast, resembling the traditional family structures of East Asia.

In South Asian countries, such as Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Pakistan, a strong male-dominated family system prevails. Families in Sri Lanka tend to be somewhat less patriarchal. As in East Asia, young women in most South Asian countries have little independence. Traditionally, when a woman marries, she leaves her parents and goes to live with her husband's family. In many parts of South Asia, the bride's parents pay a dowry to her husband's family, which may be substantial. The burden of dowry payments often puts considerable economic pressure on the parents of daughters and contributes in many families to a preference for sons.

### *Changes in marriage patterns*

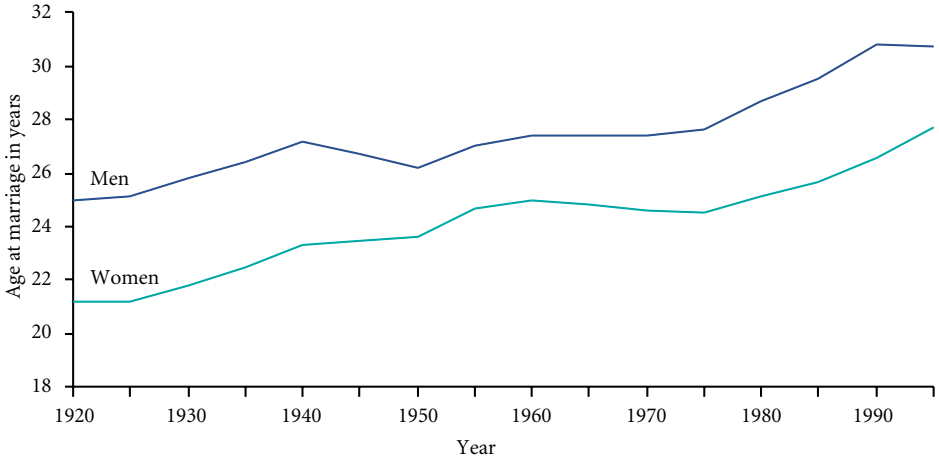
In every country of Asia, both men and women are marrying later than they did in the past. Where records are available, as in India and Japan, a consistent trend can be traced back nearly 100 years. Between 1975 and 1995, the average age at first marriage in Japan increased from 24 to 28 years for women and from 28 to 31 years for men, making Japan one of the latest-marrying populations in the world. The average age at first marriage is higher for men in South Korea than in the United States (at 30 compared with 28 years) and the same for women (at 26 years in both countries).

This trend toward late marriage tends to occur in two phases tied in with levels of economic development. At early stages of development, rural populations tend to expand until all suitable land is brought under cultivation. Once this happens, families that have many surviving children are faced with a dilemma: Either they must subdivide their landholdings into smaller and smaller parcels or they must leave their land to one sibling (often the eldest son) and leave the other children landless. Either option potentially lowers the standard of living of future generations. In the Philippines, one response to this dilemma has been to leave land to sons but to provide education—and thus enhanced employment opportunities—to daughters. The result has been high levels of educational attainment for young women.

Other responses to reduced landholdings include delayed marriage, nonmarriage (i.e., a higher proportion never marrying), reduced fertility within marriage, and migration to urban areas or overseas. In Asia's rural areas, age at marriage has been gradually increasing, and there has been some outmigration—to the Middle East, for example. Marriage patterns may not be affected to the same extent if landless siblings can readily find jobs in urban areas so that they, too, can afford to marry. In Japan, the average age at marriage for women actually went down slightly between 1960 and 1975 when the country was urbanizing at a very rapid rate and the economy was booming (Figure 1).

At later stages of economic development, longer schooling tends to delay marriage for both men and women. For young women, paid employment also provides a measure of financial independence that reduces the pressure to

Figure 1. Average age (in years) at first marriage for men and women in Japan: 1920–95




*Source:* National census data.

marry early. Education and employment tend to expand women's horizons and provide them with previously unavailable opportunities and lifestyles that compete with marriage.

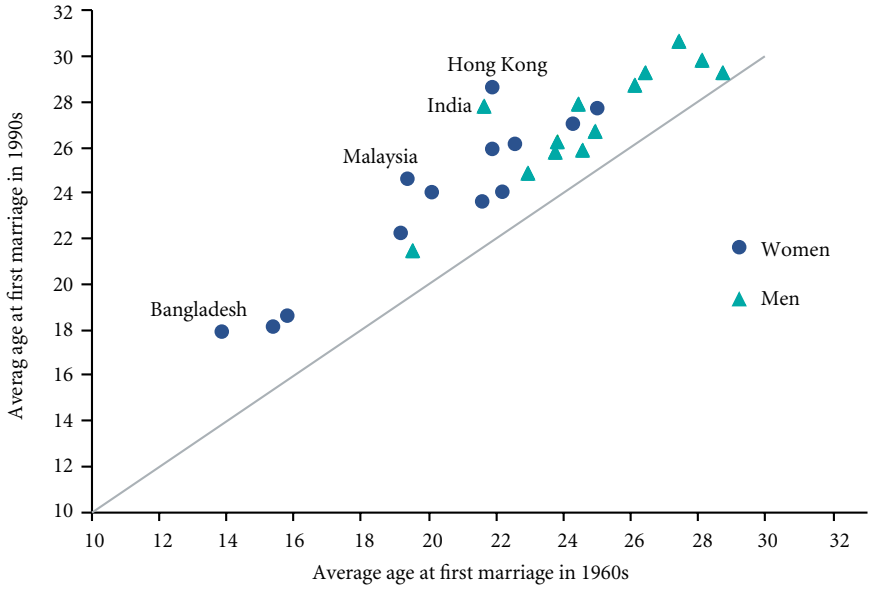
With further modernization, a major expansion of the service sector brings structural changes in the labor market, creating large numbers of jobs that are compatible with traditional female roles. The result is a massive shift of women into paid employment outside the home. Young unmarried women usually predominate during the initial stages of this shift, followed later by married women. These changes have already taken place in Western Europe and North America. They are occurring now in many Asian countries, especially in East and Southeast Asia, generally at a faster pace than occurred in the West.

The narrowing education gap between women and men also brings a gradual narrowing of the wage gap between the sexes. This may lead women who work before marriage to attach more value to their careers and less value to their roles as housewives and mothers. Even delayed marriage itself may cause further marriage delay because, as the average age at marriage rises, single men and women have less reason to be concerned that their marriage chances will be reduced if they wait even longer to marry.

A comparison of data from the 1960s and the 1990s reveals a broad pattern of increasing age at first marriage for both men and women, as shown in Figure 2 for 13 Asian countries. The average age at marriage is increasing in countries where it was already high in the 1960s (right side of figure) as well as in countries where it was low (on the left). The rise in age at marriage tends to be larger for women than for men. It is particularly striking for women in Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Hong Kong and for men in India.

By the 1990s, most women in Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore were marrying at age 26 or older. Most women in China, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Thailand were

Figure 2. Comparison of average age at first marriage in the 1960s and 1990s for women and men in 13 Asian countries




*Source:* National census data, various countries.

marrying at age 20 to 25. In Bangladesh, India, and Nepal, most were still marrying before age 20, but even in these countries the average age at marriage had risen substantially over what it was a few decades earlier.

The decision to marry and the choice of whom to marry are likely to be quite different for young adults with education and work experience than for teenagers who are still dependent on their families. Thus, an important aspect of the shift toward later marriage in many countries has been a sharp decline in arranged marriages. In Japan, the proportion of marriages that are arranged fell from 63 percent in 1955 to 7 percent in 1998.

The collapse of arranged marriages has not been fully balanced, however, by an emergence of social networks where single men and women can meet prospective marriage partners. In Singapore, where the government has been concerned about low marriage and fertility rates since the early 1980s, a Social Development Unit organizes dances, workshops, and holiday trips for single university graduates and runs a computerized matchmaking service.

These programs in Singapore reflect a concern that men and women in Asia may increasingly choose not to marry at all. In Japan, for example, it is already possible to predict that by 2010 at least 10 percent of women and about 20 percent of men age 50 will never have married. The proportions never marrying, although low, are rising in other Asian countries as well, particularly in the region's major cities. In 1990, for example, the proportion of women age 45 to 49 who had never married was 5 percent in Thailand as a whole, but 11 percent in Bangkok.

In Asia's most modern societies, young people may find marriage less important because premarital sex is becoming increasingly acceptable. In Japan, about

half of single women age 18 to 34 report that they are currently using contraception. Japan is quite different from late-marrying societies in Europe and North America, however, in that there is much less "living together" than in the West and almost no childbearing outside of marriage. In 1997, only 5 percent of single women age 25 to 29 and 8 percent of single women age 30 to 34 had ever cohabited with a sexual partner. As of 1999, only 2 percent of births occurred outside of marriage, compared with about one-third of births in the United States (Tsuya and Bumpass forthcoming a). Indeed, Japan has the lowest proportion of births outside of marriage of any industrial nation (Figure 3).

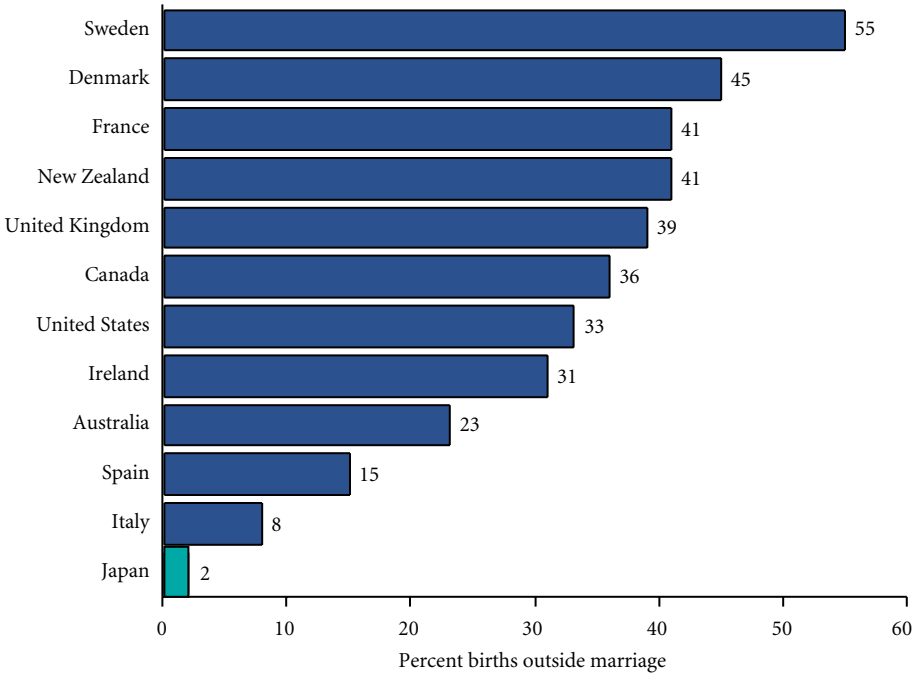
Rising divorce rates may also reduce the attractiveness of marriage. In the traditional societies of South Asia, divorce is still rare, but in East Asia, divorce rates—while lower than in the United States or most countries of Western Europe—are rising. Although comprehensive information on divorce is difficult to obtain, it is estimated that one in five marriages in Japan, South Korea, and China will end in divorce. In these societies, awareness of the risk of divorce may strengthen the motivation of unmarried women to obtain good educations and good jobs.

### *East Asia: Women balance marriage and work*

Despite economic and social modernization, women's roles in East Asian societies continue to be defined primarily within the household. When women marry, their lives are expected to change drastically in terms of employment opportunities, housework, the obligation to bear and raise children, and eventually a duty to care for their parents and parents-in-law.

Most young women in East Asia work before marriage. Until very recently,

Figure 3. Percentage of births outside marriage in selected industrial countries: mid- to late-1990s




*Sources:* For Japan and the United States, Tsuya and Bumpass (forthcoming a); for other countries, Doyle (2002).

however, most of these women dropped out of the labor market when they had their first child and remained out of the labor force during their prime childbearing and childrearing years. Recently, more Asian women have continued to hold down full- or part-time jobs while looking after a household and raising children. In 1994, 57 percent of married women in Japan and 27 percent of married women in South Korea worked full- or part-time outside the home, compared with 66 percent of married women in the United States.

Although expanded opportunities to pursue a career may be viewed as a favorable development, balancing work and family obligations may be an even greater strain for women in East Asia than in Europe or the United States. This is because housework patterns are quite different in East Asia than in the West. Married men in the United States spend more time on such household chores as cleaning, cooking, doing laundry, and grocery shopping than married men in Japan or South Korea. Asian wives who work full-time outside the home reduce their housework hours somewhat, but elderly parents tend to fill in the missing hours of housework, rather than husbands (Tsuya and Bumpass forthcoming b). In 1994, married women in Japan who worked 35 or more hours per week outside the home spent another 30 hours on housework, compared with three hours contributed by their husbands. In 1987–88, the equivalent figures in the United States were 26 hours of housework for wives working full-time and nine hours for their husbands.

Household obligations may come as a particular shock to young married women in East Asia because very few live on their own before marriage. Most live with their parents well into adulthood (87 percent of single Japanese women age 20 to 27 in 1994) and contribute little to housework or to household expenses.

One important aspect of the marriage burden for women in Japan and South Korea is the system of highly competitive school entrance examinations. Gaining entrance to a good university or secondary school depends on performance in an entry examination of a do-or-die nature, and the competitive admission process is reaching down to primary school and even kindergarten. In families where fathers rarely come home in time to see their children before bedtime, mothers must spend hours every week helping their children with schoolwork.

This situation has led to an explosion of expensive private cram schools (called *juku* in Japan and *kwa-woe* in South Korea) and private tutoring, which take place after normal school hours, on weekends, and during vacations. In 1991, 48 percent of Japanese sixth-graders and 58 percent of ninth-graders attended *juku*. Among pupils in government high schools in Japan, spending on private education now exceeds normal school expenses. Many married women go back to work primarily to pay for cram schools and other private education expenses.

Not surprisingly, a study comparing views on marriage among young adults in Japan and the United States (Mason and Tsuya forthcoming) found that single Japanese women hold more negative views on marriage than do single

Japanese men or single American women (see box). Married women in Japan and South Korea are also much less likely than married women in the United States to have a positive attitude about their marriages. These negative attitudes are probably an important reason why women in Japan are postponing marriage or even choosing not to marry at all.

***Policy issues.*** In any society, traditional roles within marriage are likely to change more slowly than other aspects of women's lives such as schooling or employment opportunities. As long as women who are educated and have worked outside the home are expected to shoulder all the traditional housewifely duties when they become wives, it should come as no surprise that many are reluctant to marry.

Women's changing views and behavior have profound implications for government policy in areas such as health, family planning, labor, and support systems for the elderly. For one thing, postponement of marriage has been an important factor bringing birth rates to unprecedented low levels in countries such as Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore. These low birth rates raise serious concerns about population aging and the size of the future workforce.

Policymakers in Asian countries faced with low marriage and birth rates need to make it less burdensome for women to marry, raise a family, and continue their careers. For instance, employers can be encouraged to provide part-time positions with employee benefits, and governments and employers can initiate or expand high-quality childcare programs for working mothers. Policymakers also need to help families provide financial support and care for the elderly. The Japanese government has initiated a number of policies in these areas, but their effects may not be consistent (see box).

### *Southeast Asia: Traditional meets modern*

Traditional marriage in Southeast Asia often occurs in phases, with a young couple living with the bride's parents for a period and then establishing a home of their own. The 1994 Young Adult Fertility and Sexuality Study (YAFS-II) shows how these traditions are evolving in the Philippines. YAFS-II found that young couples tend to pass through a continuum of increasing commitment, starting with dating and usually leading to some form of traditional or formally sanctioned marriage.

Among women who described themselves as married, 73 percent were married in a church or civil ceremony. More than half of these women mentioned that they had passed through other stages in their relationship with their husbands before formal marriage. The other 27 percent of women who described themselves as married reported that they were currently living with a partner (in Tagalog, *kasalukuyang may kinakasama*). Although not sanctioned by a formal ceremony, "living with a partner" usually describes a traditional Filipino

## EAST ASIANS EXPRESS NEGATIVE ATTITUDES TOWARD MARRIAGE

Percentages of husbands and wives in Japan, South Korea, and the United States with a positive attitude about their marriages

| | Husbands | Wives |
|---|---|---|
| Japan | 44 | 43 |
| South Korea | 69 | 58 |
| U.S. | 86 | 86 |

Is the increasing age at marriage observed everywhere in Asia strictly a function of rising educational attainment and women's participation in the workforce? Or, in some countries at least, could negative attitudes or ambivalence about marriage also play a role? Collaborative studies at the East-West Center (Mason and Tsuya forthcoming) have found more negative and ambivalent attitudes toward marriage among young single people in Japan than in the United States. In Japan, 20 percent of never-married women and men age 20 to 27 said that they were uncertain whether they ever wanted to marry. Among never-married young Americans who were not living with a partner, 5 percent said they never wanted to marry, and another 5 percent were undecided.

Surveys also asked married respondents about the quality of their marriages (Bumpass and Choe 1996). Both husbands and wives are more likely to have a positive attitude about their marriages in the United States than in Japan or South Korea (see table), possibly because Americans who become unhappy with their marriages are more likely to divorce. In Japan and the United States, men and women are equally satisfied (or dissatisfied) with their marriages, but South Korean women tend to be much less satisfied than men. Overall, marital satisfaction is lowest in Japan, which may help explain why young people in Japan express such a high degree of uncertainty about marriage.

## JAPANESE POLICYMAKERS STRUGGLE TO REVERSE MARRIAGE TRENDS

The Japanese government has been increasingly concerned about the trends toward late marriage and less marriage, especially because these trends are a major cause contributing to Japan's very low fertility. But the government's actions have been inconsistent. On the one hand, policymakers have tried to reduce strains on families by expanding day-care facilities, establishing parental leave with job-return rights after a birth, and reducing working hours in large companies. On the other hand, they have sought to reduce strains on the social security system—caused by rapid population aging—by trying to shift some of the costs of caring for the elderly back to families. They have also done little to mitigate the "examination hell" that childrearing currently entails. On balance, the government's actions so far appear to have resulted in little alleviation of the strains on mothers (especially working mothers) that contribute to the rising trend in the age at marriage and proportions never marrying.

marriage form in which commitment is public and life-long, rather than delimited or conceived as a trial arrangement.

Elopement (*tanan*) is another widely recognized marriage institution in the Philippines, most common among low-income families but recognized and practiced across all social classes. A couple typically elopes because their parents are opposed to their marriage. They disappear for a short time, perhaps a few days, and then return to seek their parents' approval. Under the threat of public embarrassment, the parents are likely to accept the situation. After a couple elopes, they may live together for a period of time or indefinitely. In some cases the elopement is followed immediately by formal marriage in a church or civil ceremony.

Survey questions on dating and sex show a pattern of sexual activity beginning at some point on this continuum of commitment leading to marriage. Most of the sexual activity reported by young men and virtually all of the activity reported by young women occur within such a committed relationship. "Casual" sex in the Philippines is rare among women, and far from universal among men. Ethnographic studies have shown similar patterns in Indonesia and Thailand.

***Policy issues.*** When marriage occurs more as a process than as a specific event, "marital status" becomes a rather poor basis for deciding whether to provide or withhold family planning and reproductive health services. Today, governments in many Asian countries are increasingly questioning policies that restrict services to clients who are married. The Philippine government's current family planning strategy, for example, promises reproductive health information and services for all, regardless of marital status.

By reducing the likelihood of accidental pregnancy, broadening access to reproductive health services will allow young people to move through the process toward formal marriage more thoughtfully and with greater volition. The resulting increase in personal control will be especially important for young women.

The risk of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) raises another policy concern. By making condoms and counseling on disease risk available without restriction, government programs will provide life-saving benefits to young people who are sexually active and to their current and future partners.

### *South Asia: Persistence of traditional marriage patterns*

In South Asia, even today, nearly every woman marries. Surveys conducted in the 1990s found that 99 percent of women marry in India and Bangladesh, and 98 percent marry in Pakistan (IIPS and ORC Macro 2000; Islam, Mamun, and Bairagi 1996; Ahmed and Ali 1992). Men tend to marry at somewhat older ages than women, but marriage is also virtually universal for men.

Although the average age at marriage is rising, many women in South Asia still marry while in their teens. In India, the average age at marriage for women rose from 16 years in 1961 to 19 years in 1991. In Bangladesh, the rise was from 14 to 18 years over the same 30-year period. In Nepal, the average age at marriage rose from 15 to 18 years, and in Pakistan, it rose from 18 to 22 years.

Most women in South Asia have their first child shortly after marriage. In India, among women age 25 to 49, the median age at first birth is 19 years (IIPS and ORC Macro 2000). This means that half of all women have their first child at age 19 or earlier. In rural Nepal, 41 percent of women have a child by age 20, and 17 percent have a child by age 18 (Choe, Thapa, and Achmad 2001).

Early childbirth is a serious health concern. In Nepal, infant mortality is 50 percent higher for children whose mothers are in their teens than for children of mothers in their 20s. In India, it is 60 percent higher.

Research on family decision-making in South Asia's strongly patriarchal societies has also revealed patterns that are seriously detrimental to women's and children's health. One study in two communities of rural Bangladesh found that women were extremely restricted in terms of decision-making on health issues and associated physical mobility (Balk 1997). Three-fourths of married women had little or no say in deciding whether to see a doctor when they became ill or whether to buy medicine for a sick child. Nearly two-thirds could take a sick child to a hospital outside their village "only in an emergency" or "almost never."

Women in these communities who were educated had greater decision-making authority within their families than uneducated women but less freedom to move outside the household. Wealthy women had both less authority and less freedom than poor women. Clearly, in a patriarchal society, wealthy households can afford to keep women in seclusion, while poverty forces women into contact with the outside world. Thus an individual woman's education and economic status may not necessarily improve her position in a male-dominated society—such factors may even diminish a woman's position if social expectations remain unchanged.

Patterns of household decision-making that are detrimental to women's health and well-being are not confined to rural Bangladesh. Only 28 percent of married women in India report that they decide on their own whether to seek healthcare for themselves (IIPS and ORC Macro 2000). Another 23 percent participate in such decisions, but nearly half have no say at all in whether they should seek healthcare. Even among women with high school education or above, 39 percent have no say in decisions concerning their own healthcare.

A comparative study of women's roles in family economic decision-making further highlights restrictions on women's independence and authority in the patriarchal families of South Asia. Among five Asian countries, women in Pakistan report the lowest levels of economic power, with Indian women a close second. Women in Thailand and the Philippines report the highest levels, and

Malaysian women are in an intermediate position (Mason 1996). Women who are educated, who own land, or who participate in paid work outside the family tend to have more authority within the home, but community and national-level differences—reflecting traditional attitudes and expectations—are also extremely important.

***Policy issues.*** Several governments in South Asia have raised the minimum legal marriage age for women, but experience suggests that it is difficult for lawmakers to influence age at marriage and childbearing directly. In Nepal, the legal age at marriage for women is 16, but one in four rural women marries below this age. What types of policies and programs might be effective? Survey results from South Asia show women's education is the only factor consistently associated with an increase in the age of marriage and childbearing.

Although the effects of primary education are small, early marriage and childbearing drop steeply among women with junior high or higher education. Clearly, providing all women with education at this level is a long-term goal for most South Asian governments, but one benefit of such a strategy would be to reduce the number of women marrying and giving birth while still in their teens.

Information programs that emphasize the health advantages of delayed marriage and childbirth could also be beneficial. The special challenge is to reach young women with low levels of education and little access to mass media. Community-level programs might usefully target the parents, husbands, and parents-in-law of such young women as well as the women themselves.

School curricula might also place more emphasis on reproductive-health topics, including the benefits of postponing marriage and childbearing. Reproductive-health education needs to be introduced in the last years of primary school because—for now—few women go on to higher education, particularly in rural areas.

Finally, service-delivery programs could place greater emphasis on the needs of young married women. In India and Nepal, where family planning services emphasize sterilization, programs that offer temporary contraceptive methods could help young women delay and space births. For women who still go on to give birth in their teens, targeted maternal and child health programs could help address the special risks to mothers and their children.

Research showing that wealth and education may not necessarily improve the position of women within the family also has practical policy implications. The importance of community attitudes suggests that policies targeting village-level institutions and influential community members might be an effective avenue for improving the status of women in patriarchal societies. Recent legislation in India, for example, requires that one-third of the positions on local councils (*panchayat*) be filled by women. Programs aimed only at individual women—such as providing schooling or jobs—are likely to fall short of their goals in the absence of efforts to change broader institutions and attitudes.