Age at Marriage Is Rising for Asian Women and Men, According to New Data

Asia is in the midst of social transformations that are dramatic in pace and effect. Families, schools, and labor markets are all changing, generally in ways that broaden opportunities for young people and may ultimately alter relationships between the sexes. An important element of these changes is the pattern of delayed marriage that has emerged throughout much of the region.

The age at which women are first married has been rising throughout Asia. In countries where women have traditionally married very young (15 years or earlier), moderately young age at marriage (17-18 years) is becoming the norm, whereas in countries where women traditionally married at around age 18, the movement is toward late marriage (24 years and older). The age at which men first marry has also risen, but to a lesser degree.

The trend toward later marriage is associated with changes that have important social and economic implications for the countries of Asia, such as:

- Declining fertility, which will result in smaller family size and lower rates of population growth
- Changing roles for women, with increased opportunities for education and labor force participation
- Emerging youth subcultures and increased prevalence of premarital sex

Growing proportions of young people are remaining single much longer than in the past. This change will affect societies throughout the region, with implications for individuals, families, and nations.
A recent paper written by Peter Xenos of the East-West Center and Socorro A. Guiltiao of the Office of Population Research, Cebu City, Philippines, provides evidence that the long-term trend toward delayed marriage is showing no signs of abatement. The researchers document the continued trend toward later marriage of women through the 1980s and, for the first time in many instances, present age-at-marriage data for men. The data are derived from census and national survey reports for 18 Asian countries spanning the twentieth century through the mid-1980s.

Trends in Age at Marriage for Women

The data show a continuing shift to later marriage for women in almost every Asian country through the early 1980s (Figure). In South Asia, the age at marriage for women increased from levels under age 15 in the early part of the century to well over 15 or even approaching age 20 by the 1980s. The female marriage age in India increased by nearly five years over this period, from 13.2 to 18.1; Pakistan experienced an even greater jump (from 13.3 to 19.7 during 1921-81). Increases in Nepal and Bangladesh, although steady, have been less dramatic. Sri Lanka, the exception among South Asian countries, started out with a much later age at marriage (18.1 years in 1901) than elsewhere in the region, but it nevertheless increased to 24.2 by 1981.

In Southeast Asia (excluding Brunei) the mean age at marriage for women rose from under 20 in the 1950s to well over 20 or even near 25 by the 1980s. The pace has varied, with the most rapid change occurring in Malaysia.

East Asia is also characterized by a very rapid rise in the female age at marriage, from levels below or near 20 before World War II to levels near or even above age 25 by the 1980s. All of the East Asian countries except the People's Republic of China experienced upward shifts in the female marriage age of four or more years, with South Korea's level rising remarkably from 16 to 24 over only six decades.

For most countries, the authors note, the magnitude of these shifts is of considerable social and demographic significance. One consequence is the dramatic increase in the percentage of women single in the 15-19 and 20-24 year age groups. In South Asia, for example (excluding Sri Lanka), from one- to two-thirds of women 15-19 years of age have been reported as single, compared with negligible percentages single at mid-century or earlier. In some instances, there are even sizable proportions of women at ages 20-24 who are unmarried, reaching 21 percent in 1981 in Pakistan.

The trend is less dramatic in the Southeast Asian countries, where, except in Indonesia, single status at ages 15-19 has long been common. The greatest changes have occurred in the 20-24 year age group, where from 30 to 74 percent of women have been reported as single in recent years.

In East Asia the percentage single at ages 15-19 has long been high as well, although the increase in South Korea, from 27.8 in 1925 to 99.1 percent in the early 1980s, is remarkable. Changes in the 20-24 age range are also noteworthy. In Hong Kong the increase was from 26.1 to 78.7 percent over less than six decades; a similar shift occurred in Japan over seven decades. In South Korea and Taiwan single women 20-24 years of age have gone from being a rarity to comprising the large majority of the age group.
Marriage has over time been spread across a greater range of the lifecycle. For men, however, marriage timing is less closely linked with underlying social and cultural factors, with the result that variability in age of marriage for men is decreasing.

At the same time, though, trends in age of marriage for men are far less regular than those for women and are characterized in particular by substantially more downturns. These are most often associated with momentous, but temporary, disruptions in the demographic structure such as occur during wars or periods of migration. In South Asia, for example, downturns occurred for men in India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka in the 1920s and in Sri Lanka since the mid-1960s. In East Asia downturns occurred at a number of points: Japan in the 1940s; Hong Kong in the 1970s; and Taiwan in the decades preceding 1940, and again between 1966 and 1975.

The authors observe that the male marriage pattern is far more responsive to disruptions of this kind than is the female pattern. The data suggest a process of underlying structural change in female marriage patterns, of a kind not much affected by short-run influences. Male marriage patterns, on the other hand, are characterized by smaller increments of change with most significant changes being short-term responses to unusual conditions. This important gender difference, the authors note, "has been concealed by the tendency of demographers to focus heavily or exclusively on female trends, even when the topic is an obviously 'two-sex' issue such as marriage."

**Trends in the Proportions Never Marrying**

Xenos and Gultiano also present new data on the growing percentage of persons in Asia who never marry. Until recently, it was rare for Asians not to marry at some point in their lives. Nonetheless, the study suggests the possibility that the proportions of people who will never marry is increasing in a number of Asian countries. This trend is particularly striking for men in Japan, where the percentage never married by age 50 has risen from 1.1 percent in the early 1920s to 6.6 percent in the late 1960s and then to 18 percent in the first half of the 1980s. The pattern in Thailand, Bangladesh, and Hong Kong is characterized by increasing proportions of women who will never marry, although this is not the case with men.

There is substantial evidence from other studies that permanent celibacy (never marrying) is common in segments of urban or educated populations in, for example, Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines. But the results reported here suggest that a more extensive pattern may be emerging. Although the percentages are not of any demographic significance at present, the researchers see this as a revealing indicator for the future.

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**Figure. Trends in the mean age at marriage of women and men: Asia, 1920s to 1980s**

![Graph showing trends in mean age at marriage for women and men in South Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Asia from 1920s to 1980s.](image)
Policy Implications

IN DEVELOPING countries, delayed marriage can increase possibilities for further education and employment. The age at marriage also has important implications for policies to reduce fertility. As noted in an article by James Palmore (East-West Center) and Masri Singarimbun (Gadjah Mada University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia) on marriage patterns and cumulative fertility in Indonesia, delayed marriage means a longer gap between successive generations and a shorter period of exposure to the risk of conception. Palmore and Singarimbun found that, with eight socioeconomic variables statistically controlled, a one-year delay in age at first marriage reduced fertility by an average of one-fifth of a child.

A rich body of literature documents the factors leading to late marriage. Key among these is the spread and extended duration of formal schooling. Over the past 20 years most countries in Asia have mandated universal education at least through elementary school, and sometimes beyond. Increased enrollment and length of schooling are powerful forces in delaying marriage. Urbanization has a role as well. Throughout Asia, age at marriage is later on average in urban than in rural areas. The share of Asia's population living in urban areas has increased rapidly over the past 20 years, resulting in later average ages at marriage overall.

Most countries in Asia also have marriage laws that specify legal ages at marriage. Xenos and Gultiano contend, however, that these laws tend to codify existing practices and do not really affect marriage trends very much. They argue that the trend toward later age at marriage seems to be the result not of specific policy changes but rather of deeper structural changes in society (particularly shifting relationships between the sexes) and economic changes (such as in industrial structure and labor markets). These changes are affected, however, by policies that enhance the status of women and offer them alternatives to marrying young, such as employment or educational opportunities.

Knowing about trends in the age at marriage is critical to an understanding of fertility trends and differentials. Emerging trends in delayed marriage and patterns of celibacy reflect the socioeconomic upheavals that Asia is experiencing and also herald changes in the traditional roles of young people in Asian societies. If these trends continue, rising age at marriage will surely lead to lower fertility for the region. Ongoing research into how the differences among countries and between the sexes reflect the disparate trends in economic growth that have been experienced will provide invaluable knowledge for policymakers.

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