

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION**

The present study uses the cohort approach to examine the trends and patterns of age at first birth among Malaysian women and factors affecting it, based on the 1994/95 Malaysian Population and Family Survey. This chapter summarizes the salient findings of the analyses and discusses the socioeconomic implications of birth postponement. Some suggestions are made on ways to improve future study on this topic.

#### **5.1 SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS**

Mean age at first birth, like mean age at first marriage, is increasing over time. Rising age at first birth has important policy implications in that it affects directly family formation and family care of the younger and older persons. Birth postponement would increase the mean length of generation and slow down the rate of population growth, even if completed family size remains unchanged.

Age at first marriage is highly correlated with age at first birth and socioeconomic variables. Hence, the effects of socioeconomic variables on age at first birth are largely mediated through age at marriage in the multivariate context.

Education is one of the most significant factors in explaining the variation in age at first birth among Malaysian women. Age at first birth is positively and strongly correlated with the education level of women and that of their husbands. In this sample, women with secondary or higher level of education tend to have their first child two to five years later than women with no schooling or only primary education. Similarly, it was found that the effects of education on mean age at first birth persist within each successive birth cohort. Birth postponement among the highly educated women may be explained by the fact that higher education exposes the respondents to western culture and modern ideas, which have strong bearings in their attitudes and aspiration towards later childbearing. The transition from no schooling to primary education has the smallest effects in delaying age at first birth. By contrast, the transition from primary education to secondary education has the strongest impact in delaying the age at first birth. In multiple classification analyses, the net difference in the mean age at first birth between women with no formal education and those with tertiary education is 5.6 years. The probability of a woman giving birth by age of 25 is significantly lower among the better-educated women as compared to their lesser-educated counterparts.

In general, younger women, those who grew up in urban areas, women with higher level of education and those who worked before marriage tend to give birth later. The significant rural-urban difference in age at first birth is at least partly the result of differences in the education level. The result shows women who grew up in urban areas with secondary or higher education would give birth 1.4 years later

compared to those who grew up in the rural areas if they have the same level of education. The likelihood of a woman giving birth by age 25 years is significantly lower for urban women as compared to rural women.

Comparative analysis of age at first birth among Malays, Chinese and Indians reveals interesting patterns. For all three ethnic groups, the mean age at first birth is towards an increasing trend across the birth cohort. Among the younger cohorts, it was found that the differentials in age at first birth among the three main ethnic groups have narrowed, probably because the educational effects are becoming more important as compared to cultural influences. Be that as it may, the Malays still have the lowest age at first birth, followed by the Indians and the Chinese. Logistic regression shows that the probability of giving birth by age 25 is lowest for the Chinese and highest for the Malays. These could be due to the fact that Chinese women are better educated, more urbanized and are more likely to work in the formal sector as compared to those from the other ethnic groups.

As expected, work before marriage has a very significant effect on postponement of childbearing. On average, women who worked before marriage would give birth some 3.3 years later than those who did not work. Net of other background variables, the difference in age at first birth between those who worked and those who did not work before marriage would have reduced slightly to 2.6 years (refer to Table 4.3 in Chapter 4).

This study also reveals that the age difference between spouses is an important factor in influencing age at first birth. It is negatively and significantly related to age at first birth.

Husband's education appears to make a moderate impact on age at first birth. It is related positively with the wife's age at first birth. When both husband and wife are highly educated, the average age at first birth is 27 years as compared to 20 years when both have not been to schools.

## **5.2 IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS**

The continuing rise in age at first birth consequent upon marriage postponement in the last few decades has changed the demographic and social structure of our country. The delay in family formation would result in lower fertility and changes in family structures.

Age at first birth is an important aspect in the demographic processes. The first birth signals both the decisions to have children and the transition of the woman to the role of mother. Rising age at first birth has important implications related to maternal and child health, pregnancy outcome, the desire and practicality for women to continue schooling, the prospect for marital stability, female labour force participation, geographic mobility, and consumption. The timing of first birth has a direct effect on subsequent fertility and mean length of generation, and hence, the rate

of population growth. Rising age at first birth can reduce the crude birth rate and population growth, even if completed family size is not reduced. If couples were to decide to have a certain number of children, the delay in having the first birth means that subsequent births would have to take place more rapidly.

This survey shows that rising age in first birth has resulted in smaller family size, as shown in Table 5.1. Among women born before 1951, those who gave birth to first child before age 20 would have the largest family size (average of 6.63), but the completed family size gets progressively smaller with increase in age at first birth. This indicates that women who delayed childbearing would have smaller family size compared to those who started childbearing at younger age. While bearing in mind that the younger women may continue to have more children, the data also indicate a trend towards having a smaller family size, regardless of the timing of first birth.

**Table 5.1: Mean Number of Children Born to Women Aged 30 Years and Above with at Least One Live Birth by Age at First Birth and Birth Cohort**

Birth Cohort	Age at First Birth (in years)			
	<20	20 - 23	24 - 27	> 28
Before 1951	6.63(276)	5.39(171)	4.42(161)	3.50(109)
1951 - 1955	6.63(184)	4.92(170)	4.21(135)	3.28(102)
1956 - 1960	5.63(237)	4.64(203)	3.85(217)	2.74(151)
1961 - 1965	4.93(164)	3.97(188)	2.95(200)	1.89(87)
Total	6.03(861)	4.71(713)	3.79(713)	2.88(449)

Note: Sample size shown in parentheses

The shift from arranged marriage to selection of own mate has the effect not just of raising the age at entry into sexual unions, but also of decreasing the

proportion who ever marry. The increasing tendency of newly married couples to move to their own home also discourages early childbearing.

Improving education level is an important factor influencing age at first birth. In pursuing higher education and better paying jobs in a highly competitive environment, the younger generations has put aside marriage to a later stage of their lives. Concomitant with socioeconomic development, women's attitude and expectations on marriage and childbearing will be changing. If the trend of delaying marriage to a later age among the better educated persists, the age at first birth will also continue to increase, resulting in smaller family size.

The direct implication of childbearing postponement would be on the care of the elderly. Delayed family formation will lead to aging population in this country. An important policy implication of such demographic changes would be when children are too young to take care of their elderly parents. Issues concerning the elderly must be addressed and tackled so that the matters could be resolved. The Government and private sectors should find the solutions by creating more job opportunities for them, setting up health care centers and by providing support system such as social security.

In Peninsular Malaysia, many socioeconomic development projects and programs are in various stages of planning and implementation. These are aimed at restructuring and modernizing society. Such transformation may facilitate the couples

to participate actively in socioeconomic transformation, which will eventually delay the family formation process, through higher education, greater participation in a modern economy, and rising level of income.

Malaysia recognizes the family unit as playing a very important role in the overall process of social and economic planning. As such, family planning cannot be approached in isolation but must be part and parcel of a total population and family development programmes. Emphasis has thus been placed on the adoption of several approaches to enlist the active participation of various ministries, agencies and non-governmental organizations whose objectives and aims are promote social and developmental aimed at improving the of quality of life.

As for the strategies, the Government should plan and coordinate the population and family development programs with the view of monitoring the population changes and trends. Family life education can be promoted through the formal and informal education system. The health and social development aspects of women in the reproductive age group must be taken care through 'happy family' campaigns and the setting up more specialist centre on reproductive health.

In addition, financial assistance such as tax rebate for having children should be increased and support systems such as nurseries should be provided at work place.

### 5.3 SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study examines the latest changing trends and patterns in the age at first birth among Malaysian women. Many other relevant factors could not be analyzed due to lack of information in the 1994/95 MPFS. On the basis of this study, the following suggestions for future research may be made:

1. Several other variables should be included so that their effects on delayed first birth could be further analyzed. These variables include parents' background such as their education level, occupations, wealth and inheritance, respondent and husband's occupational categories. Besides, to study the effect of contraception on age at first birth, information on use of contraceptive method before first birth must be included.
2. As the sample used in the present study is limited to only Peninsular Malaysia, studies covering the entire population of Malaysia would be needed to further validate the findings.