

CHAPTER 5 – CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSIONS

This chapter summarizes the salient findings on age at first marriage based on the 1994 Malaysian Population and Family Survey. Major issues and policy implications are discussed in relation to the changing trends and patterns of age at first marriage. The chapter concludes with some recommendations on how the study could be further improved to provide better understanding of the changing patterns and trends in age at first marriage, and strategies to be implemented by policy-makers and programme managers to deal with the changing trends and patterns of marriage, in light of rapid socio-economic development.

5.1 SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

Various studies on age at first marriage indicate a rising trend in age at first marriage among Malaysian women. In this study, the rising age at marriage among Malaysian women was examined using cohort approach. Data from the 1994 Malaysian Population and Family Survey show that the age at marriage has been rising steadily across birth and marriage cohorts.

Education is found to be one of the most important factors in affecting the age at first marriage among Malaysian women. The higher the educational level, the higher the age at first marriage. An average difference of some 5 years exists between a woman who completed tertiary education and one who had not been to school. Marriage

Postponement among the highly educated women may be explained by the fact that higher education exposes the respondents to western culture and ideas, which have some bearing in their attitudes and aspiration towards later marriage. Education also provides a window that opens up vast opportunities to working and urban lives, which perhaps could be perceived more attractive, in terms of financial and psychological reasons and inner self-fulfillment. The transition between those with no education and primary has the least significant effect in delaying age at first marriage. By contrast, the transition between primary to secondary education has the strongest impact in delaying the age at first marriage followed closely by the transition between secondary and tertiary education attainment. By examining the birth cohorts, a fairly stable trend exists between each educational category. When higher education becomes more widespread, the proportion remaining single and age at marriage can be expected to increase further. The probability of a woman marrying before age 21 is significantly lower among the better-educated women as compared to their lesser-educated counterparts. This shows that women would complete their studies first before entering marriage.

Ethnicity also appears to have significant effect on age at first marriage among Malaysian women even though the role of ethnicity was more pronounced in the earlier cohorts. Lately, it was found that the differentials in age at first marriage among the three main ethnic groups have narrowed, probably due to the fact that the assimilation process to create a "Malaysian culture" has taken effect. Cultural differentials are less pronounced in recent years even though the Malays still have the lowest age at marriage followed by the Indians and the Chinese still being the latest to get married. The narrower

gap can be attributed to the rapid rise in age at first marriage among the Malays and Indians, as compared to the Chinese. The privileges given to the “Bumiputras” (sons of the soils), which are made up mostly of the Malays in terms of education and socio-economic activities, have improved their social status immensely. As a result, they are now more urbanized and more educated which have consequent effect in the rapid rise in age at first marriage. Opportunities given to other ethnic groups also have considerable effects particularly on the Indians. The substantial rise in the age at first marriage among the Indian women is even more pronounced among the highly educated group. In fact, among tertiary educated women, the Indians have the highest age at first marriage compared to the Malays and Chinese. The Chinese is the least affected in their age at first marriage, showing more stable patterns by birth cohorts and more gradual increase by marriage cohorts. Perhaps these are more due to the fact that Chinese have always been more educated, more urbanized, and economically more superior to the rest of the ethnic groups. Their cultural and religious background also plays an important role in maintaining a stable pattern in age at first marriage.

By looking at the trend reflected by birth and marriage cohorts, it can be seen that the effects of higher education attainment have narrowed the age at first marriage among the various ethnic groups. This could be due to the fact that the more educated the respondents are, their mindset closely resembles each other in terms of their expectations and aspiration towards marriage regardless of their ethnic and cultural background due to exposure and influence of western ideas and modernization. Controlling for selected background variables; the Malay women would marry 1.3 years earlier than the Chinese

and 0.7 years later than the Indians. Even though ethnic differentials in age at first marriage are still discernible, the gaps have narrowed quite substantially over the years. Again, this could be probably due to the fact that all the ethnic groups in particular the Malays and the Indians are exposed to urbanization, improvement in the education systems, working life and recently globalization which is widespread throughout the world where the opportunities seem borderless. The probability of marrying before age 21 years is highest among the Malays and lowest among the Chinese. Conversely, Chinese women are more likely than their Malay and Indian counterparts to marry between the ages of 21-25 years.

Muslim women still marry earlier than those from the other religions. Christian women marry latest, followed closely by the Buddhist and the Hindu women. This phenomenon could possibly be because of the religious stigma attached to Islam where the women are supposed to be protected and secluded from the forbidden, casual and sexual relationship outside of marriage. This tends to leave the Muslim without much choice but to consummate the starting of a relationship with a marriage; hence the early marriage. On the other hand, Buddhism and Christianity generally give less emphasis on the severity of cohabitations and casual relationship. The influence of modernization has affected the Muslims and Hindus in a major way whereby parents are now less strict and more relaxed in allowing their daughter to mix around first before marrying them off. Due to the changes in their fundamental views of initial social mixing between the opposite sexes, differences in age at first marriage across religious affiliations have narrowed considerably.

Analysis of variance shows that the childhood place of residence was not a significant factor affecting age at first marriage, but current place of residence seems to be a significant factor in differentiating age at first marriage. A woman who is currently living in the urban area, on average would marry some 1.7 years later than her rural counterpart. This could be due to the exposure of modernization and globalization that leads towards greater opportunities in education, jobs, travel and entertainment. A difference of some 0.4 of a year exists between an uneducated urban woman relative to an uneducated rural dweller. The biggest differential of 1.2 years is evident between secondary educated urban and her rural counterpart. By examining the birth cohorts, a consistent difference in the mean age at first marriage can be observed in both urban and rural areas. However, controlling for other variables, the age at first marriage of an urban woman is only 0.4 of a year higher than that of a rural woman. The likelihood of marrying before age 21 years is lower for an urban woman but the probability of marrying between the ages of 21-25 is higher if the woman is currently living in the urban area.

This study shows that pre-marital work status to be a strong and significant factor affecting age at first marriage. Women who worked prior to marriage on the average would marry some 3 years later than those who did not work. A lot of opportunities are now given to women and the financial returns are perceived to be more attractive to be grabbed and enjoyed before committing themselves in a marital union. Controlling other selected variables, the age difference between those who worked and did not work before marriage reduces slightly to 2.3 years only. As expected, the probability of marrying

early is lower if the woman worked before marriage. Interestingly, the probability of marrying between the ages of 21-25 years is higher for women who worked before marriage, possibly due to the fact that they are psychologically and financially ready to enter marriage by that age. Also, if they postpone to a much later age, the possibility of finding suitable and compatible partner will become more limited as they climb up the corporate ladder.

This study reveals that the age difference between the spouses is an important factor in influencing age at first marriage. It is negatively and significantly related to age at first marriage. Women who marry much older men generally tend to marry at younger age. As alluded to earlier, this presumably is due to arranged marriage in particular among the Indians and Malays while for the Chinese it is not so widely practiced as they tend to go for love marriages. Traditionally, it is rather uncommon for women to marry younger men. The likelihood for woman to marry between the ages of 21-25 years is increased with a narrower age gap between the spouses.

Husband's education appears to make a moderate impact in age at first marriage. It is related positively with the wife's age at first marriage. Women who are married to highly educated men tend to enter marriage at later age, as most of them are highly educated as well. When both husband and wife are highly educated, the average age at first marriage is 24 years as compared to 18 years when both have not been to schools. Controlling other variables, a woman would marry some fraction of a year later for each level of education advancement of the husband. The likelihood of a woman marrying

before age 21 years is lower if the husband is highly educated, but the probability of her marrying between the ages of 21-25 years is higher than one whose husband is not so well educated.

5.2 IMPLICATIONS OF THE RISING AGE AT FIRST MARRIAGE

The results of this study have important policy implications. This study shows that age at first marriage among women in this country is still on the rising trend. A continuing rise in age at first marriage will result in dramatic changes in the demographic scenario and social structure of this country because delayed marriage will result in fertility reduction and prolong the mean length of each generation. If the trend persists, a situation will arrive when the country will have low fertility and rate of population growth, as experienced in some developed countries, including Singapore. For the last two decades, the Singaporean Government has to interfere and aggressively promote marriage and family formation to prevent the population from declining, as low fertility growth will lead to shortage of human resource that is critical for national development.

Improving educational level is an important factor influencing age at first marriage. Those who chose to study to higher levels tend to delay or sometimes forego marriage. Education presumably changes the women's attitude and expectations on marriage. Some would opt to be financially and psychologically secure before entering married life. If the trend of delaying marriage to a later age among the better educated persists, they will have to reschedule the birth of their children to much later in their

lives. Delayed marriage slows reproduction and contributes towards a smaller family size. Besides, the risks associated with childbearing increase with age. Delaying marriage because of education also tends to create problems for women to find compatible partners, as traditionally women prefer to “marry up”, that is husband who is more qualified and more educated than themselves. The higher they climb, the more limited their choice of life partners and many may remain unmarried throughout their lives.

Furthermore, the delay in age at first marriage has increased the adolescent time of the females and coupled with weaker parental control has led to other social issues, with rapid rise in the number of cohabitation cases, casual relationships, pre-marital sex, unplanned pregnancies and the lack of moral values. However, the good things about women marrying at a later age is that they are more mature by the time they get married and for some, they are financially, emotionally and mentally ready before settling down. Reports have shown that delayed marriage is associated with a lower rate of divorce as the women are able to handle family matters more professionally and resolve marital problems more maturely.

5.3 RECOMMENDATIONS ON METHODOLOGY AND STRATEGIES

This study analyses the latest changing trends and patterns in the age at first marriage among Malaysian women. Many other relevant factors could not be analyzed due to the lack of information in the 1994/95 MPFS data.

In future survey on nuptiality, it is suggested that several other variables should be included so that their effects on delayed marriage could be further analyzed. These variables include parents' background such as their education levels, occupations, wealth and inheritance, mate selection process, respondent's and husband's occupational categories. The small sample size for some sub-groups precluded more rigorous analysis. Furthermore, the 1994/95 MPFS survey is conducted only in Peninsular Malaysia. To reflect the effect of the background variable on the entire population of Malaysia has to be taken with a pinch of salt in particular for the people in East Malaysia. East Malaysia which is made up of the states of Sabah and Sarawak have a lot of other main tribes that make up the "Bumiputras" (sons of the soils) which have different cultures, believes and family values than the "Bumiputras" in Peninsular Malaysia where the Malays are the majority component in the group. Perhaps future survey carried out by Government bodies should include the people in East Malaysia to provide a better picture of the changing trend in nuptiality of all Malaysian women and men from various ethnic backgrounds.

As for the strategies, the Government should not only take steps to promote marriage as well as family development but also to sustain and maintain marriage institutions. This can and has been done by some government and non-governmental organizations by introducing campaigns and activities to promote a healthy and happy family life in a quality environment. These can be done through the education systems, mass media, seminars, work place and the internet. Counseling and marriage classes prior to marriage should be made compulsory so that the couple know what is in store for them in a married life and to teach them about respect, understanding and tolerance for each other. In addition, financial assistance such as tax rebate for having children should be increased, support systems such as nurseries should be made readily available at most work place, unpaid leaves should be given as and when is needed to new mothers so that women from any walk of life in particular the working and educated ones will not shy away from getting married

Even though in the information technology age or what is now popularly known as the “dot com” age where people only meet in cyber space and therefore physical social mixing will subsequently be even less frequent. In view of that, programmes to promote marriage among the singles should be implemented. Perhaps the “single clubs” could be introduced where many healthy activities can be organized so that the young people are able to meet and share their interests and talents with the opposite sex. Projects like “Rakan Muda” and “Malaysia Boleh” activities in addition to voluntary works should be promoted and implemented. In this way, not only will the singles meet and perhaps lead

to marriage, it is also hoped that the continual rising in age at marriage and prevalence of non-marriage can be addressed.

Introduction of the long-awaited subject on sex education in schools recently is much welcomed to introduce the younger generations especially the teenagers on safe sex, contraceptives and moral issues. Since the increasing age at first marriage resulted indirectly to extended adolescent period, the effectiveness of sex education is much needed to curb social problems relating to ignorance of safe sex and moral values.

Nevertheless, Vision 2020 with the goal to provide quality lives to all Malaysian does not come without a price. Policy-makers must be prepared of the consequences of improved quality of life, which leads to longevity. This means that higher proportion of aging population will result in this country. This coupled with rising age at marriage and the delay in having children makes the problem of aging even worse because their children would be too young to take care of their elderly parents. Furthermore, the trend in having nuclear family instead of extended family is becoming more popular. Issues concerning the elderly must be addressed and tackled so that the matters could be resolved. Solutions must be found in order to find employment and meaningful activities for them, improvement in health care, providing them with the much-needed support system such as social security, financial security, clubs and social assistance.