

## Chapter Eight

### YOUTH AND FAMILY FORMATION

#### I. INTRODUCTION

In many countries, youth is the stage of life when most marriages take place - for both men and women. This is particularly true for women. Thus, the singulate age at first marriage for females in North American and European countries varies mostly between 23 and 26 years while it varies between 25 and 28 years for males (United Nations, 1990). This major decision obviously entails great responsibilities and life-time consequences.

Major changes have occurred in the Western world in marriage patterns, fertility rates and household structures in the past quarter century. Marriage rates fell while divorce rates rose. Women had fewer children, later in life. The extended family virtually disappeared in favour of the nuclear family composed of father, mother and children. There has been also a change in the structure of families. Cohabitation outside marriage has increased considerably and so did the proportion of married couples with no children. The rising age at first marriage and a decline in fertility also occurred in most of the developing countries. The present chapter reviews and discusses the above aspects of family formation.

#### II. MARRIAGE

The rise in marriage age is particularly pronounced in the country as the singulate mean age at first marriage (henceforth referred to as the age at first marriage)<sup>1</sup> rose from 29 years for males and 23 years for females in 1970 (Naufal-Rizkallah, 1997) to, respectively, 31 years and 27.5 years in 1996. What this means is that most marriages occur at ages older than those of youth. This is indeed an unusual situation when compared to other countries. Thus, the age at first marriage in the United States, for example, is around 25 years for males and 23 for females (United Nations, 1990). In Arab countries, it varies between 25 and 28 years for males and between 21 and 25 years for females (Table 1).

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<sup>1</sup> The singulate age at first marriage is the result of an indirect method of estimating the mean age at first marriage devised by Hajnal (1953)

**Table 1: Singulate mean age at first marriage in the countries of ESCWA region, latest available year**

Country	Year	Male	Female
Bahrain	1991	28.0	25.0
Egypt	1986	26.4	21.1
Iraq	1987	26.3	22.3
Jordan	1991	27.8	24.6
Kuwait	1985	26.3	22.9
Lebanon *	1996	30.9	<b>27.5</b>
Oman	1993	25.0	21.0
Qatar	1986	26.6	22.7
Saudi Arabia	1987	25.6	21.5
Syria	1981	25.7	21.5
UAE	1987	26.0	23.0
Yemen	1994	25.0	21.0

Sources: United Nations (1993); PAPCHILD (Unpublished Data).

The age at first marriage differs significantly among the different regions of the country. In Beirut the age of first marriage for men is almost 32 years. It is around 29 years in the Mohafazats of Nabatieh and South Lebanon. Similarly, regional differences are observed with women, where the age at first marriage is less than 26 years in North Lebanon and almost 29 years in Beirut (Table 2). These regional differences could be due to the education level of both men and women; they could also be linked to traditions and customs.

**Table 2: Singulate mean age at first marriage by region, 1996**

Region	Male	Female
Beirut	31.8	28.6
Mount Lebanon	31.8	27.8
North Lebanon	29.6	25.9
Bekaa	31.2	28.5
South Lebanon	29.4	26.3
Nabatieh	29.3	28.3
<b>Total Lebanon</b>	<b>30.9</b>	<b>27.5</b>

Source: PAPCHILD (Unpublished Data)

These regional differences notwithstanding, the marriage rate among young persons is declining and has reached a low level when compared with countries in the region as well as with many of the more developed countries. Thus, in 1996 the crude marriage rate of youth (i.e. married persons per 1000 population) was found to be 5 per thousand population compared to 7 per thousand in Jordan (1994) and 8.6 per thousand in Syria (1993). In the United States, the crude marriage rate is 9.1 per thousand (1994) while in the United Kingdom (1993) and Greece (1995) it is 5.9 per thousand. Only in few West European countries (e.g. France and Switzerland) is the crude marriage rate (4.4 per thousand in 1995) lower than in Lebanon (United Nations, 1997c).

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Many reasons account for this peculiar situation: *First*, adverse economic conditions are an important cause in this respect. Survey results have shown that a large proportion of

youth maintains that expensive housing is a major reason for the delay in marriage. Difficulty in finding employment among youth is given as the second major reason for delaying marriage.

*Second*, foreign-style education and the choice of full-time careers by women tend to have a similar effect. A number of educated women are choosing not to marry in order to pursue a career. However, much of the celibacy of women seems not to be a matter of choice. One recent survey (Notre Dame Louaizeh, 1997) has shown that the ideal age of first marriage among a group of 400 individuals was stated to be 30-33 years for males and 22-25 for females. While the actual age at first marriage for males is not too distant from the ideal stated in the survey, it is at least five years higher for the female population.

*Third*, the tremendous increase in education, particularly of women, causes delay in marriage. As was explained in the Chapter on Youth and Education, enrollment ratios have increased greatly at all levels of education and for both sexes. Looking for a marriage partner, therefore, starts generally at a later age, that is after the end of schooling. As a result, the percentage married in the population decreases sharply with the level of education for both sexes. While for the illiterates among the male population 79 percent were married, only 45 percent were married among the male university graduates. Similarly for females, 84 percent of illiterate females and only 35 percent of female university graduates were married (Table 3). The same pattern is evident for the youth age group, as was already mentioned, with few marriages in the country overall. For example, in the age group 15-24 years, 22 percent of illiterate female were married while less than 5 percent of female university graduates were married (Table 4) (Chart 1).

**Table 3: Distribution of married by educational level and sex, 1996**  
(Percent)

Education Status	Male	Female
Illiterate	79.1	83.5
Read and Write	74.2	74.0
Elementary	43.9	51.6
Intermediate	33.9	42.9
Secondary	39.6	47.3
Tertiary	44.5	35.0

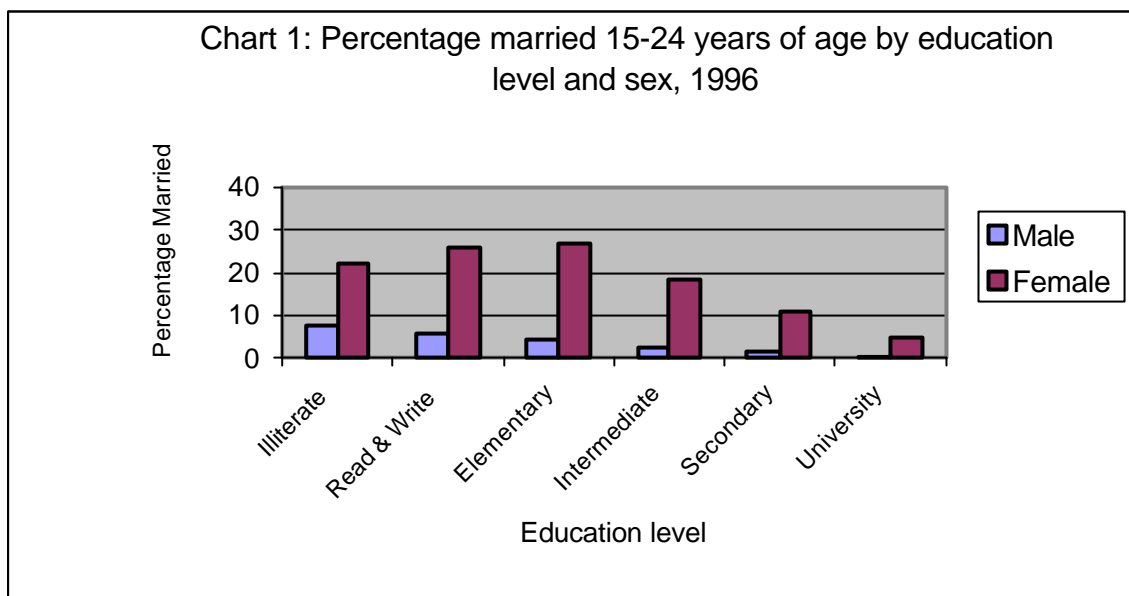
Source: Lebanon: Ministry of Social Affairs and UNFPA (1996).

*Fourth* and perhaps most important, is the deficit in male partners, particularly for females having completed higher education. International migration affects young males more than females, as evident from the sex ratio of males to females for the age group 25-29 years, 0.95, that is there are 9.5 males in the age group for every 10 females. Furthermore, since in the Lebanese culture females tend to look for mates who are at least five years older, the "availability-of-mate ratio" is better represented by the sex ratio of males 30-34 years of age to females 25-29 years of age. This ratio shows a larger male deficit: 8.4 males to every 10 females. A still closer approximation of the availability-of-mate ratio is the one comparing the *single* males 30-34 years of age to the *single* females 25-29 years. This ratio is stunningly low; it is below 0.7, that is less than 7 single males to every 10 females.

**Table 4: Married youth by educational level and sex, 1996**  
(Percent of total)

	Illiterate	Read and Write	Elementary	Intermediate	Secondary	University
Males	7.8	6.0	4.5	2.3	1.4	0.4
Females	22.2	25.7	26.9	18.4	11.1	4.8

Source: Lebanon: Ministry of Social Affairs and UNFPA (1996).



In other words, for the single female 25-29 years of age (generally with higher education) looking for a single mate five years older, the probability of finding one is less than 70 percent. A number of other factors play a role in this situation. On the one hand, a number of emigrants return to the country to find a spouse and this increases the chances of marriage for these women. On the other hand, educated women only rarely accept to marry a man with a lower level of education, which reduces the chances of marriage. These other factors, however, are not likely to affect much the outcome - the deficit (shortage) of marriageable mates, particularly for highly educated women, remains problematic.

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There is a considerable increase in the percentage of single women among women of all ages, particularly the prime marriage ages 20-34 years, see Table 5. This factor and the steady rise in the mean age at marriage explain the phenomenon of delayed marriage. These changes will have a significant impact on completed fertility. The reasons will be that many of present single women may stay permanently single; that the reproductive period of those who marry later is shortened; and, that the fecundity of women decreases with age (late age at marriage, 35 years and above, is associated with lower fecundity).

**Table 5: Percentage never married females by age, 1970 and 1996**  
(Number)

Age	Year	
	1970	1996
15-19	86.8	95.0
20-24	50.9	72.0
25-29	25.1	46.6
30-34	14.2	30.4
35-39	10.1	20.9
40-44	7.6	15.2
45-49	6.9	11.5

Source: Courbages, Y. et P. Fargues (1974); Ministry of Social Affairs and UNFPA (1996).

### III. FERTILITY

The fact that marriage takes place less and at later ages is probably one of the main reasons for the sharp decline in overall fertility that has taken place during the past 25 years. The crude birth rate (i.e., the number of live births per 1000 population) declined from 35 per thousand in 1970 (Courbage and Fargues, 1974) to 25 per thousand in 1996. The total fertility rate (i.e., the number of live births per woman) fell from 5 in 1970 (ECWA, 1980) to 3 in 1996. Among the reasons for the decline in fertility rate – in addition to postponement of marriage, there could be the improvement in education level, increased knowledge and access to various methods of birth control and increased economic difficulties.

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Although total fertility has declined considerably, marital fertility, that is the fertility within marriage, remains high at a level of six live births. Accurate historical data on marital fertility are not available, but indications are that it was higher than that thirty years ago (between 7 and 8), (Courbage and Fargues, 1974, p.32). In other words, both men and women are marrying later and more are remaining single, but those who marry seem, on average, to still have high fertility although less than their parents (Table 6).

#### **In their own words**

In Lebanon, the attitudes of youth on marriage tend to run the gamut. After interviewing a cross-section of youth on the subject, it became apparent that their views on marriage ranged from it being a *necessity and not an option*, to it being *not necessary at all*. A common denominator emerged, however: *the importance of the concept of family*. The majority of those interviewed strongly believed in starting a family of their own, and that marriage was an important part of their future lives.

“ I would like to get married someday and have my own family, but if that does not happen, it does not mean that I won’t still be a productive member of society” says Raghida a sociology major at the Lebanese University. “There are definite pressures on women in our society to get married, if a girl is not married by a certain age, people tend to feel sorry for her, or make her feel like there is something wrong. I think that this is changing a little bit, because women are now working and becoming financially independent; we do not need a man to take care of us anymore”.

“I do think about getting married someday, but in the far future. I need to become financially secure first, and I also want to have fun in my life before settling down and having the responsibility of a family” commented Nadim, an engineering student at the American University of Beirut. “It is also a matter of finding the right person,” he added.

When university students were asked about what the ideal age for marriage is, almost all answered that there is no ideal age, but it was a matter of finding the right person, and having the means to set up a home. When the same question was put to youth with education below the university level, the answers given were dramatically different. “I think a man should be in his late twenties or early thirties, and a woman should be between eighteen and twenty five,” said Sawsan a twenty year old housewife and mother of two. “I got married when I was seventeen, and I think it is good to start a family when you are still young.”

Fertility within marriage differs significantly between Mohafazats. In Beirut, the most urbanized governorate, where education levels are also highest, marital fertility is 5.3. In the governorate of North Lebanon where a large proportion of the population is rural and less educated, it is 7. With the increase of urbanization, education and involvement of women in economic activity in the latter type Mohafazats, overall marital fertility is expected to continue to decline.

**Table 6: Marital fertility by governorate, 1996**  
(Number)

Beirut	Mount Lebanon	North Lebanon	South Lebanon	Bekaa	Nabatiyeh	Total
5.3	5.5	7.0	6.5	6.3	5.8	6.0

Source: Lebanon: Ministry of Social Affairs and UNFPA (1996).

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As with the age at first marriage, there are significant differences in fertility levels among the different regions of the country. The total fertility rate in the Mohafazat of Beirut is 2.07 and more than twice that level (4.25) in the Mohafazat of North Lebanon (Table 7).

**Table 7: Total fertility rate by governorate, 1996.**

Mohafazat	Rate
Beirut	2.07
Mount Lebanon	2.44
North Lebanon	4.25
Bekaa	3.42
South Lebanon	3.41
Nabatieh	3.29
Total	3.02

Source: Lebanon: Ministry of Social Affairs and UNFPA (1996).

#### IV. DIVORCE

Although civil status questions are regulated by religious institutions and courts, which in general do not encourage or facilitate divorce, the incidence of divorce has been on the rise since 1970. The divorced population as a percentage of the total population over fifteen years

of age increased between 1970 and 1996, from 0.64 percent to 0.76 percent. Despite this slight increase in the occurrence of divorce, the situation is still far from the high rates of divorce observed in North America and Europe. For example, in 1992 the heads of 12.8 percent of all American households were divorced, as were the heads of 7.4 percent of all French households in 1990 (United Nations, 1997c).

## V. FAMILY STRUCTURE

The fact that persons are generally getting married at ages beyond those of youth is inevitably reflected in the structure of the households. Thus, while youth constitute 19 percent of the population, the percentage of households headed by young persons 15-24 years is insignificant. Practically no households were found to be headed by a person 15-19 years of age and only 1.3 percent were headed by persons 20-24 years. As a result, most youth still live with their parents. Of the males 15-24 years of age, 92 and 93 percent were found in 1996 to be children of a head of household in urban and rural areas, respectively. For the females, this proportion was significantly lower (80 percent and 79 percent, respectively) since more females in this age group are already married and are spouses of the head of household (Table 8).

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**Table 8: Living arrangements of youth by sex and region, 1996**  
(Percent of total)

Living arrangements	Urban		Rural		Total
	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Child of householder	91.9	80.0	93.1	79.0	86.1
Family householder	2.7	0.3	3.2	0.2	1.6
Spouse of householder	0.0	11.2	0.0	13.4	6.7
Non-family householder	5.4	8.4	3.7	7.2	6.6

Source: Lebanon: Ministry of Social Affairs (Unpublished Data).

The type of family is also changing in the country. The extensive emigration of young persons has eroded, to some extent, the family support for the aged in the family. It is of course true that many emigrants still send money to their parents, as witnessed by the high remittances reaching the country from workers abroad, but the affection arising from proximity is lost for many of the elderly. The extended family, in the sense of parents, children and relatives living in the same house or neighborhood, is slowly giving way to the western type nuclear family. This change is not only affecting parents' support but also the support that young couples had in looking after the children when they are both absent from the home. Since more married women are now working, this change is creating an additional burden for young couples with children and undoubtedly acting as a further restraint on the desire to have large families. This process of change is still in its earlier stages, but the trend towards a western type family structure has obviously begun.

## **VI. SOME POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

The very high age at first marriage prevailing today is partly due to voluntary postponement of marriage, resulting mainly from the pursuit of higher education. But it is largely due to involuntary causes such as the lack of affordable housing, economic insufficiency for young persons beginning their working life and a low availability-of-mate ratio, particularly for women seeking higher education, given the cultural preference for males five to ten years older. As a result, the celibacy rate of women is increasing and often reflects a personally and socially undesirable situation.

Policies that remove barriers to marriage of young people need to be formulated, particularly that fertility has already reached very low levels. Projections indicate that it will continue to decline in the next twenty years (i.e. to 2.1 by the year 2015). Such policies must begin with the reduction of the high unemployment of youth, which, as indicated in the chapter on Youth and Employment, has reached unacceptably high levels. They should include making available affordable housing for young couples beginning their married life. A fresh look should be taken at working conditions for young working mothers with a view to compensating for the traditional support that extended families have given in this respect, including the provision of day-care facilities where needed. Preparing youth for this stage of life entails special education at the secondary and tertiary levels that includes not only reproductive health aspects (see chapter on Youth and Health), but also knowledge of the responsibilities attendant on marriage and raising children.

There is no substitute for family support at all stages of life. The family has been the major stabilizing institution of society. The changing structure of the family, although still at its beginning, should be a matter of concern to policy makers. All aspects of development should take this into consideration: the location of economic activities, the provision of affordable housing, and the availability and accessibility of training appropriate to market demand. Other policies should aim at reducing emigration of young men and at the preservation of the traditional family. This is, indeed, the essence of human development and what the concept is all about.