Some Consequences of Rising Age
at Marriage in Pakistan

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INTRODUCTION

Nuptiality changes have been at the core of demographic transitions in Europe and in several Asian societies [Caldwell (1993)]. Delayed marriages have been seen as precursors of fertility change in most societies. They underlie changes in family formation patterns and living arrangements, which ultimately are the bases of demographic transition. The concomitants of profound changes in marriage behaviour are worth studying because of their impact on demographic outcomes such as the population growth rate and fertility. Moreover, they are also strongly connected to the role and status of women, family living arrangements and power structures.

The most prominent outcome of the rise in proportions single is that most young men and particularly young women begin experiencing profound changes in their lives. They essentially have several years of their lives "freed" from the responsibilities and changes associated with marriage, and in the case of girls from reproduction. The delay in marriage for females in particular has direct impact on delaying the age of sexual initiation and the age at first birth (since almost all childbearing occurs within marriage). But most importantly, it has direct influences on raising the potential for a larger amount of time between childhood and "adult" responsibilities allowing young people to develop their capabilities in terms of education and work. A higher age at marriage is expected to be associated with a rise in the status of women as they enter their reproductive lives with greater maturity and capabilities. The spousal age difference also narrows and is reflective of a lesser power imbalance between wives with their husbands who were traditionally much older.

Pakistan has been undergoing a nuptiality transition since the 1960s [Sathar and Kiani (1986)]. The singulate mean age at marriage of females in 1961 was 16 and is above 22 years today. For males the corresponding rise is slighter from 22.3 to 26.4 [NIPS (1998)]. While age at marriage has been rising since the 1950s or 60s, fertility has only begun to decline in the 90s. However, the recently conducted 1998 Census shows that the population growth rate has averaged 2.6 percent in the 1981–98 inter censal period. This indicates a slowing down of the rapid population growth rate seen in the late 80s and early 90s. Some of the decline in the growth rates is due to the beginning of the fertility transition with the total fertility rate declining from 6.5 in the late 70s to 5.3 in 1998 [Sathar and Casterline (1998)]. However, it is quite likely that changes in nuptiality by lengthening the gap between generations has been a major contributing factor towards the slowing of the population growth rate in Pakistan. Such contributory factors have found to weigh in heavily on fertility transitions in other South Asian countries [Bongaarts and Amin (1996)].

AIMS AND DATA

The purpose of this paper is to initiate discussion on the consequences of nuptiality changes on Pakistan's demographic and social and economic situation. We begin by documenting the change in proportions single, followed by a discussion of some of the important concomitants of the rises in the age at marriage such as education, employment and residence. The main purpose is to see whether changes in marriage patterns have implications for young persons' lives. In particular, we explore whether the gender differentials in marriage behaviour are likely to have different impacts on men and women in terms of enhancing their opportunities and altering the potential for power relationships within the family. While the focus of attention is at the individual level, we also point out the potential impact of nuptiality changes at the macro level.

Data for this paper have been drawn from a multiplicity of sources. To document changes in nuptiality and in sex ratios we draw on various Censuses and surveys across the 60s until the 90s. To document the relationships between age at marriage and social, demographic and other changes we utilise the Pakistan Integrated Household Surveys of 1990-91 and 1995-96 and the Pakistan Contraceptive Prevalence Survey of 1994-95. All three surveys are nationally representative with large sample sizes.

Findings

Nuptiality patterns in Pakistan have been undergoing rapid change since the 60s with the proportions of young adults marrying at later ages for both males and females and across the country. The change has been documented in almost all data sources since the 60s and appears to be a continuing and consistent trend. As can be seen in Table 1 the proportions single at ages 15–19 and 20–24 have risen notably

Table 1

Percentage Never-Married, By Age and Sex, Censuses 1951–98

Age Group	Male						Female					
	1951	1961	1972	1981	1998		1951	1961	1972	1981	1998
15–19	68.06	83.67	92.61	92.36	93.87		45.51	46.59	65.55	70.56	79.37
20–24	42.02	52.92	67.76	64.40	69.95		17.66	12.03	21.32	28.22	38.63
25–29	22.82	27.86	36.05	31.15	37.13		6.43	5.11	7.24	8.71	14.77
30–34	13.24	14.17	17.45	13.80	16.09		3.86	2.98	3.56	3.89	7.24
35–39	7.76	8.85	9.17	6.19	8.07		3.39	2.65	2.11	1.72	4.35
40–44	6.30	6.40	6.41	4.39	5.37		2.39	2.17	1.95	1.60	3.65
45–49	4.50	5.14	4.32	2.48	3.76		2.26	1.96	1.49	0.99	2.47

Source: Census of Pakistan 1951, 1961, 1972, 1981. Census Organisation, Government of Pakistan.

particularly for Pakistani females from 45 percent to 79 percent and 18 percent to 39 percent, respectively, between 1951 and 1998. The corresponding changes are from 68 percent to 94 percent and 42 percent to 79 percent for men. This change can also be seen through the various surveys dating across the last three decades (Table 2). More clearly visible in Figure 1 are the difference in trends for males and females. The proportions single have been rising most notably for all groups except males aged 15–19. The sharper rises are for females aged 15–19 and 20–24 followed by the gentler rises for males aged 20–24 and 25–29. It is important to emphasise that females are experiencing changes in nuptiality patterns more than males and their average age at marriage has experienced the greater rise.
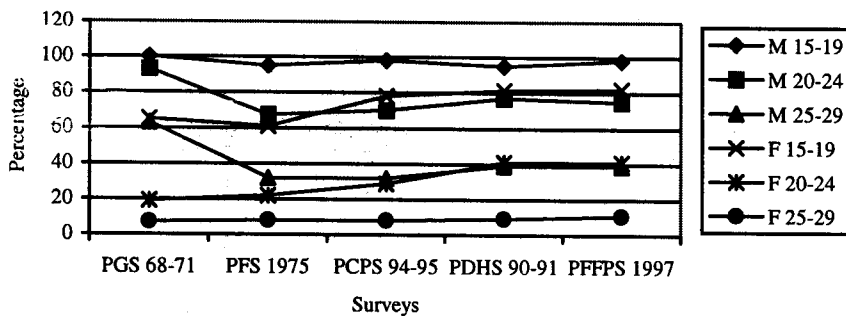

Fig. 1. Percentage Never-Married by Age Group and Gender.

Socio-economic Concomitants of Delayed Marriage

Changes in age at marriage have been associated closely with rises in educational attainment in the rest of South Asia [Caldwell *et al.* (1982)]. In fact a large part of the effects of education on reproductive behaviour is through delays in marriage. Here we are taking the position that a later age at marriage once underway also fuels the demand for greater education and itself brings about rises in educational attainment. Thus education acts as a cause and a consequence of nuptiality change. It can be seen using any data that the delayed pattern of marriage has a strong association with educational attainment. Table 3 demonstrates that those with higher levels of education were much more likely to remain single. This is generally true for males and females. However, the effect is stronger for females whereby those with nine or more years of schooling are much more likely to be single whereas the effect is more diluted in the case of males. It is hard to conclude using cross sectional data that the rise in the age at marriage is caused by pursuit of educational opportunities particularly because it is occurring even among uneducated

Table2

Percentage Never-Married, By Age and Sex 1968–71 to 1997 (Various Surveys)

Age Group	Male						Female					
	PGS	PFS	PCPS	PDHS	PIHS	PFFPS	PGS	PFS	PCPS	PDHS	PIHS	PFFPS
	1968–71	1975	1984–85	1990–91	1995–96	1996–97	1968–71	1975	1984–85	1990–91	1995–96	1996–97
15–19	99.4	94.0	95.7	93.8	95.8	96.2	66.8	62.1	74.3	78.1	82.2	82.9
20–24	93.9	67.0	68.7	75.3	73.4	75.5	18.3	22.0	28.5	39.4	39.5	41.0
25–29	65.2	32.0	31.2	38.7	34.8	38.7	5.6	8.0	8.8	11.8	12.7	13.6
30–34	31.5	15.0	13.4	15.1	11.6	14.7	2.2	3.0	3.0	3.8	5.2	3.2
35–39	14.3	6.0	6.2	7.6	5.4	7.4	1.1	2.0	2.6	2.0	2.4	1.8
40–44	6.6	4.0	3.2	2.8	2.8	3.1	1.3	1.0	1.8	2.3	1.9	2.1
45–49	4.6	3.0	1.9	2.0	1.4	1.6	.9	1.0	1.0	2.0	2.1	1.8

Sources: PGS: Population Growth Survey 1968–71.
PFS: Pakistan Fertility Survey 1975.
PDHS: Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey 1990–91.
PIHS: Pakistan Integrated Household Survey 1995–96.
PCPS: Pakistan Contraceptive Prevalence Survey 1984–85.
PFFPS: Pakistan Fertility and Family Planning Survey 1996–97.

Note: PGS 1968–71 males and females with no information are excluded.

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Table 3

Percentage of Males and Females Never-Married, By Age and Years of Schooling, PIHS 1995-96

Age Group	Males				Females			
	Years of School				Years of School			
	0	1–4	5–8	9+	0	1–4	5–8	9+
10–14	99.9	99.6	100	92.1	99.9	100	99.5	96.3
15–19	96.5	95.6	94.3	95.3	79.4	88.2	86.8	91.4
20–24	73.7	61.3	71.3	77.9	31.2	43.9	44.8	64.6
25–29	28.7	23.4	34.0	46.3	9.3	16.0	14.6	29.0
30–34	9.3	11.3	6.7	18.8	4.5	4.8	4.6	11.7
35–39	5.5	6.2	4.3	5.7	1.9	3.1	2.5	7.6
40–44	3.5	1.4	3.0	2.0	1.8	6.0	1.6	1.6
45–49	2.5	0.9	0.3	0.5	1.8	–	1.6	5.0
50–54	2.4	3.4	–	0.9	101	–	3.8	6.7

Source: Pakistan Integrated Household Survey 1995-96.

people. It is likely that both transitions, that of greater educational opportunities and nuptiality, are occurring concurrently and perhaps reinforcing each other.

Residential differences are also important and to quite a large extent related to educational differentials by residence. Young people in urban areas are more likely to be unmarried and therefore in search of other opportunities such as schooling, leisure and gainful employment. At the same time they also have the advantage of greater access to both education and employment opportunities other than farm work. In Table 4 we can see the dramatic differentials in proportions married in urban and rural areas. While 78 percent of women are single at ages 15–19 in rural Pakistan the corresponding proportion in urban areas is 91 percent. More than half of urban women are single at ages 20–24 while only 34 percent are single at those ages in rural areas. Given that 32 percent of the population lives in urban areas in 1998, and this proportion has been rising substantially in recent decades, these differentials acquire greater importance, nationally. Once more the differentials by residence in nuptiality patterns are more striking for females and much weaker for males.

Defining productive employment is difficult and to avoid definitional problems we use a categorisation of work based on whether a persons was doing paid or unpaid productive work for ten hours or more in the Pakistan Integrated Household Survey 1990-91. We find in Table 5 that the gender effects are in opposite directions with males much more dramatically likely to remain single if not working. Work seems to be a strong requisite for marriage for men and delays may be based on extended education, or the search for suitable employment. This is seen in the greater proportions single at 85 percent in ages 20–24 and 47 percent at ages 25–29 among non-working men compared to the corresponding proportions of 68 and 34 percent among working men.

Table 4

Percentage Never-Married, By Age, Sex and Residence, 1995-96

Age Groups (in Years)	Residence			
	Urban		Rural	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
15–19	98.6	91.1	94.3	77.7
20–24	84.4	51.4	67.2	34.0
25–29	43.6	16.1	30.5	11.1
30–34	14.2	5.8	10.3	5.0
35–39	6.1	3.4	4.9	1.9
40–44	2.4	1.2	3.1	2.2
45–49	1.5	2.4	1.4	2.0

Source: Pakistan Integrated Household Survey 1995-96.

Table 5

Percentage Never-Married, By Age, Sex and Work Status: Pakistan, 1995-96

Age Groups (in Years)	Male		Female	
	Working	Non-Working	Working	Non-Working
15–19	93.2	97.1	72.7	80.5
20–24	68.3	84.8	38.9	33.7
25–29	34.2	46.7	14.4	8.5
30–34	11.2	24.0	6.4	3.4
35–39	4.8	11.9	4.3	1.3
40–44	1.8	3.8	2.6	1.9
45–49	1.5	4.4	0.7	0.6

Source: Pakistan Integrated Household Survey 1995-96.
          Calculations Courtesy of Valerie Durrant.

In the case of females the differentials are muted with slightly greater proportions single at ages 20 or older ages among working women. The proportions of working women who are single in the 15–19 age group are 81 percent and 39 percent single in the 20–24 year age groups compared to 73 percent and 34 percent among non-working women. Clearly the mechanism by which work, even defined in its crudest form, influences marriage is different for men and women. Not finding work is a deterrent of marriage for men and working leads to some postponement of marriage of women.

It is expected that the rise in age at marriage is partially due to economic trends and aspirations towards securing a stronger financial base for the newly weds before entering matrimony. Along with higher dowry demands we expect the rise to be more exaggerated at higher income levels for both genders. In Table 6 we use the PIHS 1995-96 data to look at differentials in proportions married by income quintiles. We find that there is a strong income effect with those girls particularly those who belong to the wealthiest families delaying their marriages the longest. Look at differences in proportions married of 15–19 year old women of 84 and 91 percent between the lowest and highest quintile and corresponding differences of 27 and 46 percent for 20–24 year old women. The effect holds for males also but to a much less pronounced degree as seen in the difference of 27 and 46 percent between the lowest and highest quintile of 24–29 year old males.

The Marriage Squeeze

Ultimately the marriage market and availability of marriage partners of the two genders affects nuptiality patterns. The availability of spouses has been raised as an important cause of changes in marriage markets and marriage patterns [Goldman and Pebley (1989) and Goldman (1984)]. Two demographic factors are likely to have

Table 6

Percentage Never-Married, By Age, Sex, and Consumption Quintiles, PIHS 1995-96

	Males					Females				
	Consumption Quintiles					Consumption Quintiles				
Age Group	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
15–19	94.82	93.91	95.73	97.53	98.69	83.82	80.94	84.42	87.44	91.39
20–24	70.72	75.56	79.13	78.44	84.33	26.72	31.77	34.88	40.86	45.93
25–29	22.20	25.20	33.60	35.13	43.68	9.96	9.09	11.06	13.65	25.61
30–34	11.71	6.49	11.15	10.06	23.10	2.71	4.79	4.19	7.33	6.53
35–39	7.54	4.65	2.76	4.61	9.97	7.48	5.73	3.73	4.92	1.50
40–44	4.74	1.97	3.55	5.03	2.87	1.60	4.23	1.54	2.83	2.35
45–49	4.30	5.29	4.02	2.72	3.45	7.04	2.74	0	0	0

Source: Pakistan Integrated Household Survey 1995-96.
  Calculations Courtesy of Valerie Durrant.

contributed to a change in the marriage market in Pakistan: these are falls in mortality particularly adult mortality and reduced availability of spouses. Declines in mortality have been noted in the 50s and 60s and life expectancy was in the 47 then compared to 63 in the 90s for both men and women in Pakistan. While in the earlier decades women lived shorter lives than men, the situation has equalised and there is less pressure to marry early to initiate the child bearing process as soon as possible to ensure the survival of generations. This is the most important factor underlying a later age at marriage in Pakistan.

Thus more women are available due just to the levelling out of the sex ratios. Generally, sex ratios are around unity while they were much higher in the past. Of greater relevance is the relative availability of persons of one gender over another. Since women marry men that are older than them it is interesting to note that the 'pool' of potential partners available to women is smaller because it is the convention for women to marry men older than them and the ages pyramid in Pakistan is bottom heavy. Table 7 presents the ratios of men to women in the two consecutive five-year age groups that is 15–19/20–24 and 20–24/25–29. We find that these ratios have been declining because of changes in age structure and in overall sex ratios. It has almost halved between 1968–71 and 1995-96 from 1.06 to .69. Thus the marriage "squeeze" is reflective of a shortage of men for Pakistani women to marry. This is a departure from an earlier period where there was a shortage of females due to lower population growth and higher mortality among females.

Table 7

Sex Ratios, By all Marital Status and Age Groups, Pakistan, Censuses 1961–98

Age Groups		1961	1972	1981	1998
20–24 M	15–19 F	1.02	0.97	0.92	0.87
25–29 M	20–24 F	1.01	1.11	0.98	0.94
30–34 M	25–29 F	0.91	0.94	0.92	0.87
35–39 M	30–34 F	0.94	0.94	0.95	0.82
40–44 M	35–39 F	1.08	1.07	0.93	0.98
45–49 M	40–44 F	0.97	0.91	0.84	0.82

Source: Census of Pakistan 1951, 1961, 1972, 1981. Census Organisation. Government of Pakistan.

Even more pronounced are the uneven ratios between the pool of men matched to the relevant pool of women when we look at proportions single in the two adjacent age groups (Table 8). Those who remain unmarried from one age cohort to another face ever decreasing chances of becoming married. This may be even more exacerbated by what are increasingly stringent standards of who is considered a "suitable" boy or a "suitable" girl. Qualitative data[1] in this area points to the fact that boys and girls genuinely want to marry at later ages and want more participation in the choice of marriage partners. While many girls seem to be drawn towards boys who are educated and have urban employment, boys too may be drawn to educated wives or those who bring in substantial dowry payments. Such changes have been documented for South India also [Caldwell *et al.* (1982)].

Table 8

Sex Ratios of Never Married Persons for Adjacent Age Groups:
1968–71 to 1995-96

Age Groups		PGS 1968–71	PFS 1975	PCPS 1985-86	PDHS 1990-91	PIHS 1995-96
20–24M	15–19F	1.05	.79	.73	.96	.69
25–29M	20–24F	1.76	1.33	.86	.98	.66
30–34M	25–29F	2.28	1.88	1.14	1.28	.67
35–39M	30–34F	2.70	1.78	1.94	2.0	.84
40–44M	35–39F	4.42	2.08	1.08	1.4	.92
45–49M	40–44F	2.02	2.28	4.94	0.87	.75

Sources: PGS: Population Growth Survey 1968–71.
        PFS: Pakistan Fertility Survey 1975.
        PDHS: Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey 1990-91.
        PIHS: Pakistan Integrated Household Survey 1995-96.
Note: PGS 1968–71 males and females with no information are excluded.

Implications for Reproduction and Women's Status

While it was hypothesised from the onset that nupitality changes precede fertility transition it should be pointed out that fertility transition has only begun in the 90s, three decades later than the nuptiality transition. Fertility seems to have been only very slightly affected by the delays in marriage. This is puzzling. But looking at the most recent data for the 90s from the Pakistan Contraceptive Prevalence Survey 1994-95 we do in fact see the beginning of real change in marital fertility outcomes associated with rising age at marriage (Table 9). Fertility of those women who do marry at later ages after 20 is substantially lower fertility than for those who marry before that age. The differential is seen across all age groups but is particularly pronounced after age 35. Not surprisingly then, unmet need of women

[1]Based on twelve focus group discussions with adolescents conducted by Minhaj ul Haque and other Population Council team members in December 1998.

Table 9

Unmet Need, Contraceptive Use, and Fertility, By Age at
Marriage and Current Age of Females

Age at Marriage (in Years)	Current Age of Respondent (in Years)		
	< 25	25–34	35 and above
Unmet Need Levels			
< 18	20.4	33.7	35.5
18-19	14.7	34.4	30.1
20-21	20.2	22.9	25.1
22 and above	13.5	21.2	33.5
Contraceptive Prevalence Use			
< 18	5.8	16.5	20.7
18-19	14.3	19.5	27.3
20-21	16.0	21.0	31.9
22 and above	–	22.3	20.8
Mean Number of Live Births			
< 18	1.71	4.85	7.43
18-19	1.18	4.00	6.90
20-21	0.83	3.04	5.78
22 and above	0.24	1.99	5.03

Source: PCPS 1994-95.

who enter marriage later is lower, with the notable exception of those who marry above age 22. These women who desire a smaller family size also manage to implement their reproductive intentions better than those who marry earlier do. The contraceptive prevalence rates of those who marry at 20–21 are 32 percent, which is higher than those who marry earlier (Table 9). Thus a later age at marriage does seem to be indicative of a greater authority of women to implement lower fertility desires and to practice contraception.

Perhaps the most important change, which is likely to occur as a result of the rising age at marriage of females, is change in their status. It is very likely that the cause of postponement of marriage is related with breaks in traditional status of women. Educational attainment of women has been rising and employment patterns too have been changing in recent decades in a large part due to inflationary pressure necessitating women to supplement family income [Kazi (1999)].

The role of daughters may begin to deviate from the one where a girl was regarded as a temporary visitor in the house, and was unlikely to contribute to family income. There was little incentive therefore to investing in her. Daughters may in fact become more desirable in the marriage market if they are educated and demonstrate they can contribute to family income. Most importantly, a girl who has

attained education or participated in paid employment is likely to enter marriage with greater power of decision-making and authority than one who does not. There is some evidence that a later age at marriage leads to greater decision-making powers within the household and enhanced autonomy in carrying out important functions and decisions [Sathar and Kazi (1997)]. Thus overall rises in the female age at marriage improve the status of Pakistani women.

CONCLUSIONS

There is evidence that the changes in nuptiality patterns between the 1950s and 1990s has had a substantial impact on population growth rates through the reduction of population momentum due to the delay in the age at first birth. These changes also directly influence the quality of lives of young persons in society. The changes in marriage patterns are clearly affecting women more than men. The greater delay in the marriage of females means that the gap in spousal ages is narrowing. Furthermore, the factors behind the changes in marriage patterns are likely to be quite different for males and females. The social and demographic change which affect men are more related to education and employment choices. In the case of women it seems almost likely that the changes are largely affected by the availability of 'suitable' spouses since they have an ever shrinking pool of men to choose from. But to some extent the delayed marriage patterns are enabling women to avail of additional educational and employment opportunities. These in turn are leading to profound changes in attitudes towards women in the society generally since they are seen to be enjoying roles in addition to marriage and motherhood. However, it there has to be a cautionary note regarding the general trends noted here describes averages. They do not emphasise the fact that substantial number of Pakistani women and even men do marry at early ages. These young people are not yet part of this overall change in social and economic structures described in the paper.

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Comments

The authors have produced an excellent paper. I congratulate both of them. Delayed marriages no doubt play a significant role in the enhancement of status of women and also influence fertility level. Although, the authors have not delineated a cut-off point between early and delayed marriages in case of Pakistan, research findings from elsewhere show that an increase by one year in age at marriage produces an almost 20 percent decline in fertility holding every thing else constant.

The authors have provided us with new insights in the nuptiality patterns in Pakistan. There seem to be a new emerging pattern. However, the results show that the delay in marriages was witnessed both for the educated as well as for uneducated persons. This new pattern needs a very careful examination whether the delay in onset of reproduction was a result of a choice or a result of the economic hardships arising out from the unemployment fuelled by an increasing inflation in the economy.

Malthus was the first one to present the homeostatis hypothesis that the reproduction increases when there are good times. Economic prosperity, historically play a greater role on nuptiality changes. Let us look at the US experience of the post war Baby Boom. Although the US was involved in the Second World War, the mainland remained largely undisturbed from the war activities which were in progress both in the Europe and the Asia. After the war was over, early marriages and fertility resulted into the Post War Baby Boom. The more relevant example that will be compatible with our conditions is that of the Sri Lanka which experienced a similar situation of delayed marriages when the economy was in bad shape and this nuptiality pattern reversed once the economic conditions got better especially when the increased investment generated more employment opportunities. The newly emerging trend of delay in marriages seem to be mainly a result of the worsening economic conditions. This need to be sustained with right type of social policy choices. The results show that female education and female labour force participation are crucial factors for the delayed marriages. These two factors also seem to enhance the status of women.

The other variable which is endogenous in this process of delayed marriages context is the level of infant mortality. Research evidence exists that shows that the infant mortality rates (IMR) have negative relationship with age at marriage. The main argument behind this is that parents already have a certain number of desired number of family size containing the living children. If the expected mortality conditions are viewed as high, the potential parents will theoretically decide for early marriages. Although the process of IMR decline has set in Pakistan for the both sexes, still a further decline will not only help sustain the delayed pattern but will cause a further gradual increase in the age at marriage.

It is very important to observe that the economic changes and restructuring produced more effect on nuptiality pattern than any legislation that would have been required for late marriages. It, therefore, becomes very clear that social benefits of raising the status of women by investing more in the female education and generation of female employment in a variety of economic and social sectors go beyond the mere objective of a fertility reduction. This type of development of social norms where the status of women is elevated results into expeditious socio-economic development that entails among other aspects the reductions in fertility levels. This will also make the pursuit of female education as productive one but will produce a sustained effect of delayed marriages and lower fertility levels.

The other aspect of new emerging nuptiality pattern relates with a marriage squeeze problem where sex ratios are almost equal on the assumption of five years difference between the age of partners reflects an almost even distribution of the supply of mates in the marriage market. This situation poses a complicated research issue for an emerging situation of this type of social problem. Are we really heading towards Hajnal's described Western European nuptiality patterns characterised by late marriages and celibacy? If that is the case then fertility can be postulated to swoop down rapidly even with the modest family planning efforts. Only future will unfold a real situation whether we are really heading towards Western European pattern or no. This is a complex research issue for research community of demographers in Pakistan and demands their attention to study it in further detail by making use of newly available census 1998 data.

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