Session 4: The ongoing nuptiality transition in developing countries

Factors affecting female age at marriage in South Asia

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In contrast to East and Southeast Asia, changes in marriage patterns have been surprisingly small in mainland South Asia. With the exception of the island nation of Sri Lanka, South Asian marriage remains early, and, for both women and men, universal. The demographic consequence has been that changes in marriage have made only a minor contribution as a proximate determinant in reducing fertility. Perhaps even more important, early and universal marriage for South Asian women reflects, and may contribute to their close identification with family roles. The massive changes that are currently taking place in Western societies, and a somewhat parallel change that is taking place in East and Southeast Asia, are, for good or ill, transforming the position of women by loosening, at least to a degree, the automatic assumption of this identification.

Steadily accelerating economic development in India and to a lesser extent in the other countries of the region suggests marriage age will also begin to rise in South Asia. Indeed Sri Lanka is a case where it has already happened, but what is remarkable is how slow this shift has been in mainland South Asia. In this paper we examine whether the conditions now exist for a major change, and, assuming they do, examine the reasons for the slowness of the change to date, and indications as to what may happen in future.

In addition to changes in marriage patterns the paper also examines possible links with the arrangement of marriage and dowry. In Sri Lanka, as in many countries in East and Southeast Asia, changes in marriage patterns relate, in part, to the breakdown of arranged marriage (Caldwell 1996a, 1996b, 1999, 2001). However, changes in marriage patterns and arranged marriage cannot be studied in isolation from dowry. There is evidence that dowry may have delayed female marriage in India while parents save for dowry (Caldwell *et al.* 1988), but dowry can also act to hasten marriage for older brides who may require higher dowries. Moreover, dowry is central to the arrangement of marriage, and may act to perpetuate or, alternatively, to undermine the family's role in marriage, thereby indirectly affecting marriage patterns.

The key question that the paper will examine is whether the changes that are occurring in East and Southeast are a reliable indicator of what will happen in mainland South Asia. This paper examines this issue in Sri Lanka, which has already shifted towards later marriage, and Bangladesh where marriage remains early. After a preliminary overview the paper will draw upon fieldwork in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and India with which the author was associated.

Marriage patterns in Asia

Asia was historically identified with very early marriage having been part of what Hajnal (1965) described as an 'eastern marriage pattern' with early and universal marriage, in contrast to the pattern of Western Europe characterised by a late marriage with a significant proportion of the population never marrying. This latter pattern, as

Malthus (1970) pointed out, earlier protected Europe to some degree from the famines associated with a very high birth rate. Hajnal (1965) suggested that Europe's late marriage allowed European families to save up the capital that funded Europe's economic and colonial expansion after 1500.

In recent years this once neat division in marriage patterns has begun to break down. In much of Asia, in particular, in East and Southeast Asia, age at marriage for women has risen by several years, and more recently evidence has appeared indicating that a substantial section of the population who will never marry (Jones 2004, Smith 1980, Xenos and Gultiano 1992).

The longest delay has occurred in the cities, where social and economic change has been greatest. Hull (2002) notes that in Indonesia female marriage is over three years later in the cities than in the rural areas. However, this is partly a compositional effect as unmarried women are more likely to move to the towns.

Increasing focus is being placed on another aspect of marriage change; it appears increasingly likely that a substantial proportion of the population in many Asian countries will never marry (Jones 2004). This represents the most far-reaching of changes from a traditional family-based society where all members of society marry, usually early and usually with the marriage being arranged by the families of the individuals rather than by the individuals themselves. Non-marriage levels for women aged 45-49 years is approaching ten percent in a number of Southeast Asian and East Asian countries, including Thailand and Vietnam and exceeds it in the city state of Singapore (Jones 2004). It is generally higher in urban areas, approaching 20% in the city of Bangkok.

Delayed marriage and non-marriage, sometimes referred to as 'celibacy' (Xenos and Socorro 1992) are increasingly being preceded or replaced by less formal relationships, which may involve sexual relations, though generally this is much less common than in Western countries. Hull (2002) refers in Indonesia to a transitional period to marriage where sexual relations are tolerated.

The reasons given for the changes in marriage are complex and may differ between causes of marriage delay and those leading to individuals not marrying at all. In some countries it is clear that aspects of the marriage market have played an important role in delaying marriage (Casterline et al 1986; Preston and Strong 1986). However, the broad nature of the delay in marriage suggests that more fundamental forces are at work. Rapid economic development, urbanization, mass education, changing family systems have been associated with increased individualisation, new economic opportunities and new concepts of the purpose of marriage (Xenos and Socorro 1992).

Tsuya (2001:6) argues that in Asia the combination of 'social-structural and socioeconomic changes have facilitated the increasing acceptance of "freedom of choice" of young individuals, especially of young women, shifting the locus of marriage decision-making away from parents/families to young women and men themselves'. This may be termed a shift from family-arranged marriage to self-selected marriage. She indicates that the key factors have been changes in women's attainment, paid employment outside parental homes and the urban environment, which in combination have led to 'increasing acceptance of individual freedom of

choice while simultaneously reducing the social, economic and cultural necessity of marriage.'

The reasons for individuals never marrying are, in part, probably related to the reasons for delayed marriage. However, the much greater variations between countries in the proportion never marrying suggest that changes in social pressures to marry are much more important (Jones 2004). The expectation historically found in most Asian countries that all individuals, and especially all women, will marry is lessening. This is probably linked to the decline in arranged marriage, once dominant but now rare in many East and Southeast Asian countries (Retherford *et al.* 2001). Arranged marriage not only encouraged early marriage, it helped to ensure universal marriage.

Marriage in South Asia

Marriage patterns in South Asia have also changed, but with the exception of Sri Lanka much less radically than in East and Southeast Asia. Age at marriage for females, but much less for males, has risen from a much lower base. Historically, women in South Asia, with the exception of Sri Lanka, married around or before menarche. The singulate mean age at marriage (SMAM) in British India (including modern India, Pakistan and Bangladesh) was still below 15 years in the 1931 Census before slowly edging up thereafter. This process only started in Bangladesh after the 1961 Census In contrast to female age at marriage, the male marriage age has risen only a little and inconsistently. This indicates that very different factors have been driving it.

While the female marriage age has been rising slowly in South Asia, in contrast to East and Southeast Asia, there is little firm evidence outside Sri Lanka that a sizable proportion of the population will not marry. This is in part because age at marriage remains much earlier than in East and Southeast Asia and there is more time to marry. It is also because arranged marriage remains dominant and is used to ensure marriage.

Marriage in Sri Lanka

Historically female marriage appears to have been late in Sri Lanka by South Asian standards even if it was early by western standards. Perhaps crucially whereas in many South Asian societies marriage preceded menarche, in Sri Lanka marriage negotiations followed menarche, an event marked by a major 'rite de passage' (Percival 1803: 213, Davy1969, Denham 1911: 327, Caldwell 1999). This may have made further delay possible, by legitimising the state of singleness among teenage women. The first census of 1901 indicated a SMAM of 18.5 years for women which was to rise by 1921 to 20.6, but continuing this rise only from the 1960s (Table 1).

Table 1. Singulate mean age at marriage (SMAM) by sex 1901-2000

Census Year	Male	Female	Difference
1901	24.6	18.1	6.1
1911	26.9	19.8	7.0
1921	27.5	20.6	6.9
1946	27.0	20.7	6.3
1953	27.2	20.9	6.3
1963	27.9	22.1	5.8
1971	28.0	23.5	4.5
1975 (SLWFS)	28.2	25.1	3.1
1981	27.9	24.4	3.5
1987 (SLDHS)		24.8	
1993 (SLDHS)		25.5	
2000 (SLDHS)		24.6	

Sources: 1901 figure Fernando (1975); 1911-21 Dixon (1970:205); 1946-1981, Nadarajah (1986: 100); 1975 Sri Lanka World Fertility Survey (SLWFS), 1987 Sri Lanka Demographic and Health Survey (SLDHS), 1993 SLDHS De Silva (1997: 8); 2000 SLDHS (Sri Lanka Demographic and Health Survey 2002).

.Male age at marriage rose in the early period but has not shared with females the more recent rise, thus diminishing the age difference. Less certainly the proportion never married appears to be rising (Trussell 1980; Fernando 1985). De Silva's analysis (1990) of the 1982 Contraceptive Prevalence Survey (CPS) data suggested that the proportion of females remaining unmarried will be about ten percent, well above the rate elsewhere in South Asia.

A number of authors have commented on the dramatic rises in the female marriage age in the 1950s, 1960s and particularly 1970s. Fernando (1975, 1985) argued that a marriage squeeze was the principal factor driving up female age at marriage. A steep mortality decline in the late 1940s meant that the size of cohorts of women reaching the prime marrying ages twenty to twenty-five years later were substantially greater than the size of the male cohorts of the preferred marriage ages, around five years older. The effect was greatest in the 1970s, when the female marriage age rose substantially, thus reducing the impact of the squeeze. Nevertheless, it should be noted that age at marriage has not declined in recent years as the squeeze has relaxed, though the steepness of its increase has declined.

Fernando (1985) and other writers (Dixon 1970, Abeyesekere 1982, Hannenburg 1987, Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988, De Silva 1997) emphasised the impact of Sri Lanka's economic crisis of the period and associated unemployment in reducing the feasibility of marriage. This is undoubtedly important, but it is worth noting that the unemployment should directly affect men, yet it was women's age at marriage that changed most dramatically, the male age at marriage hardly budging.

Marriage in Bangladesh

In comparison, marriage in Bangladesh, as in neighbouring North India, was traditionally very early (Maloney et al.1981; Lindenbaum 1981). Among Hindus, in particular, child marriage – marriage before menarche - was common. Child marriage

reflects a society where marriage is between families, not individuals; it created marriage alliances providing families essential support in uncertain environments. It was also widely believed that early marriage for girls made them more malleable and accepting of their new family circumstances, and in particular of the authority of their husbands, and in-laws. In many cases they were virtually brought up by the husband's family. Early marriage is perceived particularly by Hindus to be in keeping with the notion of the Joint Family, where ideally property is held jointly with the husband's brothers and father – while he is still alive. Maloney et al. (1981: 86) report that many of their Hindu respondents believed that it was meritorious if a girl was married by the age of eight years, but a disgrace if she had her first menstruation while still living in her natal household. Under Muslim law guardians do not have the right to contract marriage for a pre-pubescent girl (Jhabvala 1975: 28 cited in Maloney et al. 1981: 87), but clearly the Hindu example has influenced Bangladesh's Muslims.

Apart from protecting family norms the major pressure for early female marriage is the fear of the consequences of delayed marriage for the girl and her family. For Hindus it is critical to prevent miscegenation between different castes: this would result in ritual pollution with disastrous consequences for all families involved. For Muslims premarital sexual activity or even 'unchaste' behaviour challenges not only the young woman's virtue but also the *ijat* (or *izzat* - honour) of her family members (Maloney et al. 1981; Kotalova 1996: 71; White 1992: 153). This was closely linked to the Islamic concept of 'purdah' (known in Bangladesh as *parda*), involving the separation of adult women (post-pubertal) from the presence of men, and tightly controlled behaviour.

The ideal and most practical way of ensuring the preservation of *ijat* was to marry the girl off as soon as possible after menarche. This was encouraged by there being no respected role for an unmarried adult woman in a purdah society, and made possible, given the limits on girls meeting boys, by arranged marriage. Indeed, not to marry a daughter risked social censure. Kotalova (1996:193) comments that 'a daughter is a debt of honour and there is hardly a more shameful failure for a man than the inability to marry off his daughter/sister.'

Early marriage was further supported by the fact that the young couple were not expected to be independent, and more importantly that no close correspondence was expected between the ages of the bride and the groom; indeed a large difference was preferred because it emphasised the subordination of the bride to her husband and his family. It is in keeping with a belief that a woman is her father's charge when young, and then her husband's.

Female age at marriage has been rising intermittently since the 1960s. The singulate mean age at marriage (SMAM) was 13.9 years at the 1961 Census – an apparent decline from 14.4 in 1951, but it rose to 15.9 by the 1974 Census, 16.4 by the 1981 census and 18.1 by the 1991 Census (Xenos and Gultiano 1992: 28; United Nations 2000). This rise is supported by data from other sources. The Bangladesh Fertility Survey of 1975-76 (cited in Maloney et al. 1981:88) found that mean age at marriage of women who first married in 1927 was 10.9 years, while for women who married in 1957 it was 13.0 and for the youngest marriage cohort it was about 15. Maloney *et al.* (1981:88) note, however, that in retrospective data early marriage is affected by a tendency to provide an ideal marriage age, which is generally younger than their true marriage age.

The 1999/2000 Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey (BDHS) found a median marriage age among all women 15-49 (including both married and unmarried women) of 14.7 years. Older women aged 45-49 years recorded 13.8 years, and those aged 20-24, 16.1 years (Mitra *et al.* 2001). Age at marriage varied by region, education and urban/rural residence. It was earliest in the two Divisions believed to be most influenced by Hindu ideals, Rajshahi and Khulna, even though these areas are said to be those where purdah is weakest. This is also despite the fact that Hindus now, in general, marry later than Muslims, in part because of higher education rates.

However, while education does have a significant effect on marriage for girls with secondary or more years of schooling, it has only a minor effect for girls with primary schooling, the great majority of those with any schooling. For the ages 20-49 years, women with no education married at 14.0 years, primary incomplete 14.4, primary complete 15.0, and secondary plus 17.2 years. The effect of secondary plus schooling is partly a direct effect. Given that secondary education begins with Year 6, around age 12, and there is a high repetition rate, to attend secondary schools often means delaying marriage. Surprisingly the effect of education appears to have grown over time. Women aged 45-49 years with secondary plus schooling married 2.1 years later than women with no education (15.6 years versus 13.5); for women aged 20-24 years the difference was 4.5 years (19.0 versus 14.5 years).

Urban women aged 20-49 married at 16.2 years as compared to 13.7 years among rural women, a difference of 2.5 years. The difference increased from 0.9 years (14.6 years versus 13.7) for women aged 45-49 to 2.6 years (18.3 years versus 15.7) for women 20-24 years. The real differences are undoubtedly greater especially for the older women as many women now urban were living in rural areas when they married. This implies the rural-urban difference is larger than suggested by an uncontrolled comparison, but also that the change over time within the urban population is exaggerated.

Islam and Mahmud (1996) in a logistic analysis of the 1989 BFS found that the most important factor for early female marriage were in order female education, husband's occupation, region of residence (urban or rural), women's work status, and husband's education. Similarly, Shaikh (1997) found in an analysis of data from the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh (ICDDRB) field station at Matlab that wife's education and husband's occupation had the largest effects.

The data imply that rising education, urbanisation, and changes in occupation and women's work status associated with urbanisation are key factors in increasing marriage age. Education rates for males and especially for females have increased greatly since the 1960s. Urbanisation has also proceeded rapidly from around 5% in 1971 to over 20% today. What this does not reveal is the underlying mechanisms that are involved.

One of these may be the garment industry. There has been a tremendous growth in female employment in the urban areas particularly in the garment industry. Amin *et al.* (1997) argue that this employment has provided an alternative to early marriage for many young women. In the next part of the paper we will explore this and other factors influencing marriage.

Methodology

Sri Lanka's marriage patterns were one of the topics covered by the Sri Lankan Demographic Change Project (SLDCP)[1]. The SLDCP was conducted in seven localities in coastal Sri Lanka in the Western Province in 1985, and one locality, in the tea estates above Kandy, in 1987. The sites selected were not random, but they represented in socioeconomic terms, a broad cross-section of Sri Lanka's population mix. The Western Province sites were a mix of rural, commuter area, urban well-off and urban slum populations, reflecting the make-up of Sri Lanka's most developed region, Colombo and its surrounding area. This is a predominantly Buddhist Sinhalese population but with significant Hindu Tamil and Muslim Moorish minorities with small numbers of Christian Sinhalese and Tamils. The estate site had a much poorer and less educated population, many of whom were employed as tea pluckers. They were predominantly Hindu Tamils, many of immigrant origin, with some Buddhist Sinhalese. They are a somewhat isolated population with a reputation for social conservatism.

The SLDCP involved a combination of structured survey and extensive in-depth interviews. Additional questions were added to the questionnaire in later survey sites. In two sites in the 1985 sample and in the 1987 survey special questions were asked of women over 60 concerning changes over their lifetimes (see Caldwell 1999). The 1985 survey included 1,974 households with a total of 10,956 household members. The 1987 survey covered 242 households with 1,290 household members.

Bangladesh's marriage patterns were one of the topics examined by the Bangladesh Urban Slums Health Project (BUSHP). In 1999 a survey was conducted of four bastes[2] and four non-baste populations broadly representative of the other poor sections of Dhaka city. The sample yielded interviews with 911 baste households and 914 poor non-baste households, a total of 1,825 slum households and 8,429 persons, giving an average of 4.6 persons per household (see Caldwell et al. 2001). The study involved two components, a survey held in the last months of 1999 and an in-depth follow-up study in the first months of 2000[3].

Findings in Sri Lanka

The SLDCP's retrospective data reflected in general terms the marriage patterns recorded by the censuses (Table 2). There is little sign of a decline in proportions marrying for age groups older than 45, but thereafter quite a sharp decline with a slight rebound for the youngest age group.

[1] The SLDCP was conducted by the Demography Department of the Australian National University in collaboration with the Demographic Training and Research Unit (DTRU), now the Demography Department, of the University of Colombo. The author was a Principal Investigator with the project responsible for the marriage component.

[2] Bastes are illegal settlements marked by their poverty, temporary housing, lack of government services, and generally squalid living conditions.

[3] The survey was carried out on behalf of the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health, of the Australian National University by Mitra and Associates, Bangladesh's leading demographic survey organisation, responsible for Bangladesh's Demographic and Health Surveys. The author was the Principal Investigator, responsible for the design of the survey instruments and overall conduct of the project.

Table 2 Proportion of Sri Lankan women married by age (in five-year cohorts)

	Age at survey								
Age at marriage	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49	50-59	60-69	70+
Western Province (1985)									
19	31	36	29	40	42	47	45	46	49
24	-	69	60	70	73	81	78	78	81
29	-	-	79	87	92	93	93	91	90
N	612	456	404	369	243	211	322	199	99
Tea Estates (1987)									
19	19	19	18	25	29	61	40	55	50
24	-	59	59	54	79	87	81	90	100
29	-	-	84	81	90	100	86	100	100
N	58	58	44	52	42	31	37	20	4

Source: Primary Analysis of the Sri Lankan Demographic Change Project, 1985 and 1987.

The sharp decline in proportion marrying among those married in recent years (aged less than 45 years when surveyed) is in keeping with both a marriage squeeze and the economic problems of preceding years. The marriage squeeze as reflected in the survey was similar to that of national census data. The survey data, in common with other data, exhibit low levels of divorce, separation and widowhood, all statuses that may lead to remarriage and hence ease the effects of marriage squeeze.

Lack of grooms was mentioned as a problem in getting married, but to a lesser degree in the main survey among the predominantly Sinhalese population of the Western Province than in the predominantly Hindu Tamil population of the Tea Estates, and in similar work in southern India (Caldwell 1996a, 1999, 2001, Caldwell *et al.* 1988). The difference appeared to be not that the marriage squeeze was less severe in the Western Province but that the Sinhalese were less concerned about its impact, that is late marriage and even the fear of never marrying. This was reflected in differences in dowry. In the tea estate, as in India, dowry had increased dramatically, apparently as a means of 'buying' a groom, because the non-marriage of daughters was unacceptable (Caldwell 1996a, 1999, 2001 Caldwell *et al* 1988). Among the Sinhalese, in contrast, despite dowry being an accepted part of marriage, there was little sign of the same development.

Economic stagnation also closely corresponded to the period of major change in age at marriage. In Sri Lankan society in general and Sinhalese in particular, it is expected that newly married couples will be economically independent, though many do temporarily reside with either the husband's or wife's parents. This means that it is important that, at least, the husband has a means of support. Respondents emphasised the ideal of a permanent job, and how the unemployment of the 1970s made this difficult (Table 3).

Table 3. Unemployed males by selected age groups in Sri Lanka (percentages)

Age	1963 census	1971 census	1981 census	1985/86 L. F. Survey
20-24	16.0	29.8	27.6	37.8
25-29	6.7	14.5	14.0	15.4
30-34	3.5	7.6	7.4	7.0

Source: De Silva 1997: 20

Nevertheless, when asked what factors they believed had delayed marriage, most respondents emphasised longer-term factors, in particular, the time spent in completing education (Table 4). Given the very small number undertaking tertiary education, time spent in education would not seem to be directly responsible for delaying marriage in the mid-twenties, but it may delay the commencement of the marriage search, and perhaps more critically reflect a change in what is looked for in marriage partners, and an increased role by the young in the marriage process.

Table 4. Changes have delayed marriage

Reason	%	N
Western Province		
Time spent in completing education	52	94
Education makes girls more independent	8	15
Girls want possessions and money before marriage	5	9
Girls want to find the right man	4	7
Time spent raising dowry	4	7
Time spent raising dowry and education	2	3
No later marriage	18	33
Don't know	7	12
Total	100	181
Tea Estates		
Time spent in completing education	36	21
Education makes girls more independent	10	6
Girls want possessions and money before marriage	3	2
Girls want to find the right man	5	3
Time spent raising dowry	34	20
Time spent raising dowry and education	2	1
No later marriage	3	2
Don't know	7	4
Total	100	59

Source: Primary analysis of the SLDCP, 1985-87.

The change in the nature of marriage is most clearly manifested in a shift from family-arranged marriage to self-selected ("love") marriage. The proportion of love marriages has been increasing steadily for decades, but in the 1960s and 1970s it became amongst the survey population the dominant type of marriage (Table 5).

Table 5. Type of marriage by year of marriage - females			
Year of marriage	Marriage type		
	Arranged %	Love %	N
Western Province			
Before 1940	73	27	92
1940-1949	70	30	209
1950-1954	63	37	139
1955-1959	66	34	187
1960-1964	60	40	206
1965-1969	43	57	238
1970-1974	37	63	287
1975-1979	29	71	341
1980-1985	32	68	470
Tea Estates			
Before 1950	94	6	31
1950-1959	93	7	42
1960-1969	87	13	54
1970-1974	67	33	33
1975-1979	59	41	41
1980-87	62	38	74

Source: Primary analysis of Sri Lankan Demographic Change Project, 1985-87.

While arranged marriage was becoming dominant, a second and related shift was occurring. Whereas arranged marriage had been on average the earlier marriages, it changed to being on average to being the later ones. In effect, arranged marriage changed from being an institution ensuring early marriage to a means to ensure (or at least to attempt to ensure) universal marriage.

The question is why the shift to love marriage is taking place. The respondents were asked a number of questions relating to their marriages while women over 60 years were asked about changes they perceived to have taken place in society since they were young. They indicated that society, in general, had changed; it had become more individualistic, and there were more opportunities for the young to meet. The key point here was that the change was not so much driven by the desires of the young but allowed by the parents, the families. Earlier, marriage was regarded as a concern for the families for it affected the concerns of all being in effect a vital alliance between families (Dumont 1961, Yalman 1971). Moreover, the families were in a better position to judge critically the qualifications of the bride or groom, or rather of their families because it was the family position and resources that was critical to a successful marriage alliance. Most importantly, family support was regarded as essential for a successful marriage; indeed without family recognition as implied by support it was not regarded as a true marriage. When respondents were asked about the primary reason why there were fewer love marriages in the past, the primary

reasons given were that ‘girls were not allowed to go out unchaperoned’ and ‘young people had less freedom’ (Table 6).

Table 6 Reasons for few love marriages in the past		
Reason	%	N
Girls were not allowed to go out unchaperoned	53	65
Young people had less freedom	16	20
Few opportunities for girls and boys to meet	3	4
Gils did not go to jobs	2	2
Children feared parents	4	5
Girls obeyed their parents	6	7
Girls were not educated	8	10
Segregated schools	1	1
Girls left school at menarche	1	1
Small population	1	1
Don’t know	6	7
Total	100	123

Women over 60 years
Source: Primary Analysis of the SLDCP 1985

The most common answer to the reverse question, ‘why are love marriages more common now’ was that boys, and especially girls, have more freedom. Now families are allowing their children more freedom, and allowing them to choose their mates. This is not to say that families no longer have a role. Parental support is still important, but increasingly parents see little advantage in early arranged marriage and considerable costs. This was particularly the case in the 1960s and 1970s when rising unemployment amongst grooms meant that families – with whom most young couples resided immediately following marriage - were likely to bear much of the living costs.

More broadly, arranged marriage was the more logical marriage when the local economy was largely agrarian, because family attributes were more important to the marriage than individual attributes, but this has changed as agriculture has declined in importance and individual ones have become more important. Now it is increasingly in the interests of those involved to wait not only for the young to be educated but for potential partners to mature and gain the desired attributes. In the case of men this means qualifications and a good job, preferably a permanent one in the formal sector. For women it can mean qualifications and a job, but it also means a broader maturity associated with being ‘a good mother’ (Caldwell 1996b).

The role of the family has changed, but it has not disappeared; whereas once the family’s role may have been to provide a livelihood and to arrange a good marriage, it increasingly lacks the means to do this; now its job is to provide the education and the opportunities to achieve a good position in life, and consequently to be in a good position to contract a good marriage.

A final point concerns a change in the nature of marriage. Parents have relinquished control over marriage to a large extent because they recognise that the young, particularly young women, want a different sort of marriage, a clearer more companionate type for which 'love' marriage is most appropriate. This may be a factor in reducing the age gap between spouses, and may, in part, be why male unemployment has affected the female age at marriage. This reinforces the importance of the need for the woman to wait until the groom has gained the necessary attributes for a successful marriage, a particular concern in a period of high unemployment when only a few have access to the desired permanent jobs in the formal sector.

Findings in Bangladesh

The data from Bangladesh reflected a society where in contrast to Sri Lanka marriage was early and universal (Table 7). As noted, this reflects a history of early marriage, a strongly patriarchal society, and a deep concern about female sexuality outside marriage. It is also connected to a continuing belief that marriage is the responsibility of the family, and it is the parent's duty to arrange their daughter's marriage.

Table 7 Proportion of women married within selected age-groups, 2000	
Age group	%
15-19	56.2
20-24	82.6
25-29	93.6
30-34	99.0
35-39	100.0

Source: Primary analysis of the Bangladesh Urban Slums Health Project (BUSHP) 2000

Nevertheless, in common with data from other Bangladesh sources there are signs of a shift to somewhat later marriage. Table 8 provides data on age at marriage for ever-married 15-49 by current age. The restriction of the data to ever-married women means that overall age at marriage is understated as many women in these age groups have not yet married. This is a particular problem for the youngest age group. Nevertheless, given that over 80% of all women have married by age 20 it is not greatly understated except for those currently aged 15-19. It again emphasises the very young ages at marriage involved, including a significant number aged less than ten years at marriage. Nevertheless, the proportion of very young marriages has been falling with a decline of marriages under ten across the age groups, and under 15 across the age groups – excluding the severely truncated group aged 10 to 14 years at the time of the survey. However, it should be noted that this decline may, in part be a compositional one. Many of the older women, especially in the bastes, married when still living in rural areas, where marriage is earlier than in urban areas.

Table 8. Age at first marriage by current age – ever married women 15-49, poor areas of Dhaka					
	Current age				
	15-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	All ages
Age at first marriage					
Bastes					
0-9	2.9	3.0	7.7	8.4	4.8
10-14	63.6	61.1	72.5	73.9	66.0
15-19	32.9	31.9	18.5	16.8	26.9
20+	-	4.0	1.4	0.8	2.3
Number	172	401	222	119	914
Non-baste					
0-9	1.5	2.3	3.6	6.5	3.2
10-14	46.0	42.9	56.7	59.4	50.1
15-19	52.6	45.7	30.2	31.6	40.0
20+	-	9.1	9.5	2.6	6.7
Number	137	352	252	155	896
All areas					
0-9	2.3	2.7	5.5	7.3	4.0
10-14	55.8	52.6	64.1	65.7	58.1
15-19	41.6	38.4	24.7	25.2	33.4
20+	-	6.4	5.7	1.8	4.5
Number	309	753	474	274	1810

Source: Primary analysis of the BUSHP 2000

There are also other significant changes in marriage. Dowry has played a much greater role in marriage in recent years. Perhaps most significantly, there are signs of an increase in self-selection in marriage.

Given that marriage was still very early, the BUSHP did not ask about factors the respondents believed to be responsible for delayed marriage. Instead it asked the respondents about the advantages and disadvantages of early and late marriage. Even though marriage was early by international standards, the great majority (83.2%) said early marriage had no advantages.

In comparison, only a miniscule 0.2% said there were no disadvantages with early marriage, while 88.4%[4] said that early childbearing was dangerous to the health of the mother (there is little contraception before marriage in Bangladesh), 60.1% that it could lead to too many children, 40.4% that young wives lacked the maturity to make good decisions (in effect to undertake their duties properly) and 31.7% that young mothers did not know how to look after children. A very small number (6.9%) said that it was a disadvantage because it prevented young women from undertaking further education.

The responses as to the advantages and disadvantages of later marriage essentially reflect the responses about early marriage. The most notable point being that 71.3% could see no disadvantage in late marriage.

This apparent sentiment in favour of later marriage would seem to suggest that the conditions for later marriage exist, but the reality is that marriage remains early. Early and late marriage was not defined to the respondents. Perhaps most critically, the reasons given favouring early marriage appear to reflect public information campaigns against the danger of early marriage, and hence convey idealized responses. Furthermore, while people may in principle prefer the ideal of a somewhat later marriage, they are aware that where most marriages are early and if they delay their daughters' marriages they may find it difficult to find a desirable groom. It is worth noting here that perhaps for this reason dowry tends to be higher for older brides.

Interestingly the proportion of respondents who perceived there to be disadvantages in late marriages was much higher in the bastes, the slum areas (35.8%), than in the somewhat better-off and generally safer non-slum poor areas (21.3%). The major disadvantages given that people criticise families whose daughters are not married. There are real dangers for unmarried young women in the bastes; harassment, rape and acid attacks are feared (Rashid 2004).

Given this it is more realistic to examine actual behaviour. The respondents were asked whether there were any unmarried women in their households over the age of 16 years. Of households with such women (42 out of 921 in the bastes, and 111 out of 900 in the non-baste poor areas), 69.9% had sought to arrange their marriages. Three-quarters (77.5%) said they had failed to find a suitable boy, but two-fifths (40.5%) said that the boys' family's had wanted too much dowry. As to whether there were any advantages in the young woman not being married, a surprising 69.8% said there were. The major reasons given for this were 'ability to work and contribute to family

[4] Multiple answers were allowed for these questions.

income' (37.6%) and 'to get an education' (32.9%). Contribution to income was much more emphasised in the baste areas (69.2% versus 26.4%) and education in the non-baste areas (42.7% versus 5.1%).

The implications of these data are that, while there continue to be strong pressures for early marriage, especially in the bastes, there are also factors which could operate to delay marriage. Potentially these factors may also undermine arranged marriage because they all relate to the costs and benefits to the family in arranging early marriage. The costs are often considerable for poor families while the benefits are, especially in the urban environment, under challenge.

The BUSHP asked the respondents about the advantages and disadvantages of family-arranged and self-selected marriages. Very strong support was expressed for family-arranged marriage. Only 0.8% could see no advantages in arranged marriage while 79.5% could see no disadvantages. In comparison, 49.8% could see no advantages in love marriages while only 8.6% could see no disadvantages. The main advantages in family-arranged marriage were that the family was happy (60.8%), the family was able to choose wisely (39.6%) and most importantly that the family would be able to assist the young couple (69.4%). The main advantages of self-selected marriage was that the couple would be compatible (44.0%) but this was easily outweighed by those who saw disadvantages in its causing family discord (68.2%) and unwillingness of the family to provide help (68.6%). Although these figures would seem to provide convincing evidence of support for arranged marriage in Bangladesh, yet the same questions in Sri Lanka brought often similar answers yet most marriages there were no longer arranged.

The BUSHP explored the factors affecting arranged marriage by asking the respondents about their own marriages. The great majority of the respondents' marriages had been arranged, but there were signs of an increased number of self-selected marriages in recent years. Overall 11.7% of all first marriages were self-selected matches, a low but not insignificant number. The figure was slightly higher in the non-baste poor areas (13.6%) than in the bastes (9.9%). Subsequent marriages were much more likely to be self-selected (49.5%) as the parties involved are older and have more resources.

For first marriages, the proportion of self-selected marriages increases from 2.5% for women 40-49 to 5.1% for women 30-39, 15.1% for ages 20-29 and 21.6% for 15-19. The latter figure is probably an underestimate as many women in the younger age groups are still to marry, and for all age-groups self-selected marriages take place on average at older ages. As Table 9 indicates arranged marriage are slightly more common in the non-baste poor areas, but is increasing steadily in both areas.

Table 9. Proportion of self-selected marriages by area

	Current ages				
	15-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	Total
Bastes	17.9 (173)	12.7 (401)	3.2 (222)	0.8 (120)	9.8 (916)
Poor areas	26.3 (137)	17.9 (352)	6.7 (253)	3.9 (155)	13.6 (897)
Total	21.6 (310)	15.1 (75.3)	5.1 (475)	2.5 (275)	11.7 (1813)

Source: Primary analysis of BUSHP 2000

A number of socioeconomic factors were associated with high levels of self-selected marriages, but the associations were small, and in the case of education had largely disappeared for the youngest age group. The outstanding factor affecting marriage type was whether the bride had lived in an urban area (usually Dhaka) or a rural area prior to marriage (Table 10).

Table 10. Proportion of self-selected marriages by origin					
	Current age				
	15-19	20-29	39-39	40-49	Total
Rural	8.7 (115)	6.7 (344)	1.6 (243)	0.0 (158)	4.3 (860)
Urban	29.2 (195)	22.2 (409)	8.6 (232)	6.0 (117)	18.4 (953)
Total	21.6 (310)	15.1 (753)	5.1 (475)	2.5 (275)	11.7 (1813)

Source. Primary analysis of the BUSHP 2000.

The importance of the bride's origin as a factor in the arrangement of marriage reflects the greater potential benefits of arranged marriage in rural society. The family is central to the economic and social organisation of rural communities. Families have an important role in ensuring the success of marriages. The groom's family ideally should assist him with earning a livelihood, though this is becoming more difficult as land is becoming increasingly divided with many families becoming landless. The bride's family should protect her interests by intervening with the groom's family, and helping the young couple in need. Purdah keeps young girls within the household compound protecting them, and the family's reputation. There are considerable costs for the family but also important benefits. For the groom's family it is important to obtain an 'obedient' bride who will bear and raise children, assist her mother-in-law and ultimately look after her parents-in-law. For the bride's family it helps to create a marriage alliance, and a good marriage enhances the family's reputation.

In urban areas, the family is in a much weaker position, it is usually not a unit of production, and hence the groom's family is not in a position to ensure a livelihood for their son. The bride's family likewise rarely has the influence with the groom or his family to protect her. Purdah is weak in the towns; while the family will try to protect their daughters' reputations, they cannot stop them meeting young men. The result is that there is less advantage to the family, and to their children in arranged marriage, and more opportunities for the young to meet.

An important cost of many marriages in Bangladesh is the marriage payment. Traditionally the main marriage payment for Muslims and most Hindu castes was the

bride-price, referred to in Bangladesh as *pawn* and in Islamic parlance as *mahr* (Amin and Cain 1997: 291-3). An exception was among some of the higher Hindu castes where a large payment was made with the bride, in part to provide for her. In recent years, however, a new form of dowry, referred to as *joutuk* or by the English term 'demand' (ibid) has spread through the population, a payment made with the explicit intention of attracting 'a suitable boy'.

In our population 29.8% of respondents said that their parents had paid a dowry to the husband's family at their marriage. This is a much lower figure than is common in India, probably because of a greater resistance to the concept of dowry in Bangladesh. It is regarded by many people as being contrary to Islam which only recognises the mahr, as well as greater acceptance of remarriage among Muslims as compared to Hindus (Amin and Cain 1997). Nevertheless, the data shows that the proportion of marriages involving dowry has steadily increased, especially if it is restricted to arranged marriage (Table 11).

Table 11. Proportion of marriages involving dowry

	Current age				
	15-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	Total
Arranged marriages	44.9 (109/243)	38.5 (246/639)	27.7 (125/451)	14.9 (40/268)	32.5 (520/1601)
Self-selected	11.9 (8/67)	9.6 (11/114)	12.5 (3/24)	0.0 (0/7)	10.4 (22/212)
Total	37.7 (117/310)	34.1 (257/753)	26.9 (128/475)	14.5 (40/275)	29.9 (542/1813)

Source: Original analysis of BUSHP 2000

Dowry is higher for women who lived in a rural area before marriage – Table 12. This reflects the greater importance of arranged marriage in rural areas, and the greater willingness of parents to invest in a good marriage.

Table 12. Proportion of marriages paying dowry by origin

	Current age				
	15-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	Total
Rural					
Arranged marriages	55.2 (58/105)	42.1 (135/321)	30.1 (72/239)	16.5 (26/158)	35.4 (291/823)
Self-selected	20.0 (2/10)	13.0 (3/23)	25.0 (1/4)	- (-/-)	16.2 (6/37)
All marriages	52.2 (60/115)	40.1 (138/344)	30.0 (73/243)	16.5 (26/158)	34.5 (297/860)
Urban					
Arranged marriages	37.0 (51/138)	34.9 (111/318)	25.0 (53/212)	12.7 (14/110)	29.4 (229/778)
Self-selected	10.5 (6/57)	8.8 (8/91)	10.0 (2/20	0.0 (0/7)	9.1 (16/175)
All marriages	29.2 (57/195)	29.1 (119/409)	23.7 (55/232)	12.0 (14/117)	25.7 (245/953)
Source: Original analysis of BUSHP 2000					

In the short run dowry may act to support arranged marriage. While it imposes considerable strains on the bride and her family, it means that many grooms and their families seek brides from families who promise dowries. Indeed many families pressure their sons into accepting arranged marriages that are accompanied by large dowries.

Nevertheless, dowries by raising the costs of family-arranged marriage, may ultimately contribute to the undermining of arranged marriage. As noted, 40.5% of the respondents who had sought a marriage for a daughter over 16 years but had not succeeded attributed their failure to their inability to pay the dowry demanded by the families of potential grooms. The proportion of marriages involving dowry has been increasing, but the rate of increase appears to have slowed down. However, this is less because the rate of increase has slowed down in arranged marriage than because the proportion of self-selected marriages, which are much less likely to involve dowry, is increasing.

Apart from the bride's place of residence before marriage, the other factor that is related to a higher proportion of self-selected marriage is whether she earned an income before marriage. This is partly an issue of age; older unmarried women are more likely to earn an income, and to choose their own marriage partner. But it does seem that taking a job acts to delay marriage, and to make a self-selected marriage more likely irrespective of age.

Just over one-fifth (21.8%) of the respondents had earned an income before marriage. This figure is considerably higher in the bastes (26.4%) than in the non-baste poor areas (17.6%), reflecting the greater need for outside income in the bastes, in spite of a strong cultural preference against women working. The main occupations were as garment workers and house maids. The garment industry, in particular, has grown dramatically in recent years. Among woman aged 20-29, 56.2% of those with a job married after the age of 15 years compared to 40.3% of those without a job. Similarly among women aged 20-29, 28.6% with an income before marriage had a self-selected marriage compared to 9.9% without.

The BUSHP data supported the findings of Amin *et al.* (1998) that the garment industry has created an increasing if grudging acceptance of young unmarried women earning their own keep through respectable means. As noted above many families admit that there are some benefits to them from the young woman's earnings. Amin et al (1998) comment that it is not seen to be good to be dependent on women's earnings and consequently it is often rationalised that the young woman is saving for her dowry, though in reality the young women concerned have minimal control over their own earnings. While the young women's earnings may be beneficial, delaying a marriage carries a risk if this harms a woman's marriageability. It might be hypothesised, however, that her ability to earn and pay a dowry might offset this by enhancing her attractions.

The BUSHP data indicate, however, that women who earn an income are less likely (25.8%) to bring a dowry to their marriage than women who do not (31.0%). Most of the difference is explained by the higher proportion of self-selected marriage amongst the income-earners. Nevertheless the data suggest that the women's ability to earn a dowry is not an important factor in marriage (Table 13). It is possible, however, that their ability to earn an income is more important, and indeed may help to explain their

lower dowries. However, many, but not all, men prefer their wives to give up work once married. There are emerging differences in the social acceptance of women working.

Table 13. Proportion of marriages involving dowry by whether bride earned an income before marriage			
	Earned income	Did not earn income	Total
Arranged marriage	31.7 (91/287)	32.6 (429/1314)	32.5 (520/1601)
Self-selected marriage	10.2 (11/108)	10.6 (11/104)	10.4 (22/212)
Source: Original analysis of BUSHP 2000			

Conclusion

As already noted, female age at marriage has risen across Asia in recent years, but it would be more accurate to say that there are two patterns. The first is a sustained and indeed remarkable rise in age at marriage, coupled in some countries by a rise in age at non-marriage, typical of East and Southeast Asia. The second is a more hesitant rise from a lower base that is typical of most of South Asia. Sri Lanka is closer to the first pattern, though age at marriage there does not seem to have experienced the recent very rapid rise in age at marriage experienced in some countries further east, and Bangladesh to the second pattern.

A critical difference may have been the collapse in arranged marriage across East and Southeast Asia which contrasts with its remarkable resilience in South Asia. In theory, arranged marriage need not be related to early marriage – indeed the SLDCP data indicate that in Sri Lanka arranged marriage in recent years had been on average later than self-selected marriage, but in general where arranged marriage is dominant it appears to be linked to early marriage – as was the case in Sri Lanka in earlier years and is the case in Bangladesh today.

The argument here is that it was the failure to arrange early marriage that led to the rise in age at marriage. Once age at marriage had risen and self-selected marriages had become dominant it was impossible to return to the former marriage pattern. What needs to be answered is why families in some countries, mostly in East and Southeast Asia, stopped arranging early marriage, but not others, mostly in South Asia. The answer would appear to be a combination of greater economic development in the former and greater socio-cultural resistance in the latter.

The two countries being examined here are of interest because they represent two contrasting aspects of marriage in South Asia, Sri Lanka, where marriage patterns are closest to East and Southeast Asia, and Bangladesh where they are closer to traditional South Asian patterns. Sri Lanka has not fully shared in the remarkable economic advances of East and Southeast Asia, but nevertheless, it has the highest per capita income in South Asia, and, while its urbanisation rates are low, it has a high proportion of the workforce working outside agriculture. In particular, it has very high education rates amongst both males and females, and a high proportion of women working outside the household. These have created conditions which have changed the nature of what marriage is about, from one where the family is central to one where the individual is. Marriage nowadays is to a much lesser degree about creating

family alliances, or ensuring the continuation of the lineage. It is much more about providing a good relationship, preferably a companionate marriage between relatively equal partners. The result is that it is no longer in the family's interest to ensure an early marriage or even to take a direct interest in arranging it. It is for this reason that families have stopped chaperoning their daughters - a measure aimed at preventing contacts that might lead to illicit relationships or to self-selected marriages. It is now increasingly up to the individuals to determine their own marriages and their timing.

This is likely to be latter than if the families were involved in the arrangements. This is partly because the marriage search is likely to start later while both parties grow up and mature, and then to take longer as the ideal partner is sought. A critical factor is that individual attributes take longer to develop. This is especially so if higher levels of education are required or occupations that require experience and involve promotions. Furthermore, the desire for a companionate marriage is likely to lead to a narrower age-gap. In the SLDCP the age-gap for self-selected marriages was considerably narrower than for arranged marriages.

While the modern orientation of Sri Lanka is critical to the disengagement of the family from arranging marriage, the acceptance of self-selected marriage was also related to characteristics of Sri Lankan society. While the predominantly Buddhist Sinhalese, the main population group, have a modified caste system, inter-caste marriage, though often disapproved of, is generally not a social disaster, especially if the spouse is regarded as a desirable choice for other reasons. This is in contrast to Hindu India, where inter-caste relations can lead the ostracism of the family from the community, individuals from their families, and the siblings of the pair to be unmarriageable. Similarly, while premarital sexual relations are strongly disapproved in Sinhalese society, provided they are discreet, they are not seen as seriously challenging family honour. This is in contrast to Muslim Bangladesh, where its fear is a major reason for ensuring early arranged marriage.

Marriage squeeze appears to have been a factor in delaying marriage, especially arranged marriage, in Sri Lanka – at least temporarily. However, how the squeeze affected marriage patterns was determined by broader issues, including cultural issues. In India, the marriage squeeze seems to have resulted in some rise in age at marriage, a dramatic increase in dowry as parents try to attract desirable grooms and may have reduced the age at which grooms married, thereby reducing the age gap (Caldwell *et al.* 1988). In Bangladesh it seems to have led to increased instability of marriage, and more polygamy (Amin and Cain 1997).

The more critical point may be that in neither India nor Bangladesh does a marriage squeeze seem to have contributed to the breakdown of arranged marriage as in Sri Lanka. This reflects the greater weakness of the socio-cultural supports for arranged marriage in Sri Lanka and the shift towards a more individualistic society. Once arranged marriage had broken down it was not possible to go back, and it was inevitable that age at marriage would continue to rise or at least not revert to early marriage. A key point here is not that arranged marriage has disappeared - it has not, but to have an arranged marriage is becoming optional. The very delaying of marriage, and the acceptance of self-selected marriage as an option has legitimised the concept that starting with adolescence a young woman may reside at home or on her own while she looks, at least in theory, for a potential husband.

The other factor identified as delaying marriage in Sri Lanka were the economic problems of the time and the high unemployment level. This reduced the 'feasibility' of establishing a new household. It also meant that it became more difficult to establish the desirability of a spouse, especially a groom. Given that the groom's desirability depended on his job, ideally a permanent job, in a situation of high unemployment, where the job market was often capricious, this often meant waiting for a considerable period. As noted, arguably this circumstance should affect the male marriage age more than the female one, but increased schooling and the move towards self-selected marriage has been accompanied by increased preference for a companionate marriage, itself, associated with a smaller age-gap.

Age at marriage among the Bangladesh urban poor of the BUSHP has not changed to the extent that it has amongst the mixed rural and urban population surveyed in Sri Lanka by the SLDCP, nor did it seem likely that in the next few years that it would do so. Even though many of the features that led to early arranged marriage are associated with rural society they continue to influence the urban slum population. In part this reflects the recent rural origin of the urban slum-dwellers, but it also reflects the continuing ideal of female purity, very low female education rates, and the lack of perceived advantage in delayed marriage. Among the slum population, and to a large extent in Dhaka generally, there are considerable advantages in early marriage, particularly in protecting young girls in a society where unmarried young women are not socially accepted, and few advantages in later marriage since there are few job opportunities in the formal sector and minimal demand for experience.

This situation will no doubt change as education levels rise and the economy develops, but the signs suggest that this break-through has not yet arrived. Arranged marriage is rising but acceptance is minimal. Perhaps, in part, because education levels, especially for women, remain low, they are not regarded as able to make a good choice of a partner, and there are difficulties in the way of their doing so. In contrast to Sri Lanka there is little acceptance of longer-term friendships between girls and boys that may lead to more permanent friendships and eventual marriage.

Work for women is a new and an important factor that may lead to major change. It seems to have encouraged some rise in the marriage age, and even an increase in self-selected marriage, but the effect may be temporary. Unlike Sri Lanka where having a job is a desirable attribute for a bride, there is strong feeling in Bangladesh that women should not work, and indeed upon marriages many women including garment workers give up work. Even women who work have only limited control over their income, it being expected that their income goes into the family budget. This means that unmarried women do not have the economic independence to organise their own marriages.

Nevertheless, given that urban living is expensive, women's work is likely to be of increasing importance, a reality which, if realised, is likely to bring major changes to marriage. In the longer run, although female education has a surprisingly small association with later marriage and self-selected marriage, it is likely to be a key part of the transformation of society that will eventually undermine the early marriage regime. Assuming that the conditions underlying early arranged marriage do eventually crumble, the resulting transformation in marriage patterns towards later marriage and, in many cases no marriage at all, may be dramatic.

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