Changing family formation in Nepal: marriage, cohabitation and first sexual intercourse

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Abstract

1. Background

Does the "sexual and marital revolution" experienced in the western countries spread also in the less developed countries? Is the relationship between marriage and sex really changing in the developing world? Unfortunately, theoretical references on sexuality in developing countries are scarce, because research on this subject is mainly approached within "emergency" problems: reproductive health, teen-age pregnancies, HIV/AIDS, gender discrimination, sexual rights, etc. Nevertheless, some relevant behaviours can be measured and described, and their change among cohorts can be studied.

A possible method for approaching this issue is to observe if the populations of the developing countries are now walking on the footsteps of people living in the developed world.

For women of the developed countries, the relationship between the entry into adult sexuality and marriage has deeply changed during the XX century. During the romantic marriage era, sexuality was confined to marriage, and weddings were often the time of first sexual intercourse. In the following phases, sexuality has become a value on its own, firstly as communication between partners, then as pleasure and self-well-being. Sexual experiences have spread within couple relationships, without the legitimisation of marriage (or cohabitation, in countries where it substitutes formal marriage). For men, first sexual activity has not been led by marriage: it took place well before marriage, and often it was an independent, socially accepted rite of passage from adolescence to adulthood. However, during the "sexual revolution" the proportion of young males having their first sexual intercourse within a couple relationship increases.

2. The situation of Nepal

The aim of this work is to describe marital and sexual behaviours and changes among cohorts in Nepal, having the experience of the developed countries as a reference. There are many differences from developed countries (whereas similar behaviours are shared by other Asian and African populations). Traditionally, marriage takes place when the bride is very young, it is arranged by families, and it is universal. Moreover, cohabitation is often postponed. Then, for females, the traditional sequence of events leading to family formation is the following: marriage →cohabitation and sex. However, also in this traditional context some changes are taking place: median age at marriage is increasing, and the interval between marriage and first sexual intercourse is decreasing. For males, traditional behaviours are different: they experience their first sexual intercourse on average one year before marriage.

Choe, Thapa and Mishra (2004) studied early marriage and early motherhood in Nepal with data from the 2000 Nepal Adolescent and Young Adult Survey, where data of people aged 14-22 have been collected. They showed that delayed consommation, measured by delayed cohabitation, is common among early married

women, especially in rural areas. They showed also that covariates associated with faster pace of marriage are also statistically significant for the pace of motherhood, but effects are reduced. This is caused by the intermediate effect of delayed consommation of marriage.

3. Aim and hypotheses

In this work we will extend the results of this study, using 2001 DHS data. These data allow us to compare cohorts of women and men born in 1952-1986, in order to highlight changing behaviours. In the DHS survey, age at marriage, time of cohabitation and age at first sexual intercourse have been collected for both males and females. This last parameter has been rarely collected in Asia up to now. Therefore, it is possible to study the sequences "marriage – cohabitation – first sexual intercourse".

The main hypotheses are the following:

1) The interval between marriage and first intercourse for females is decreasing
2) Proportions of men and women who experience their first sexual intercourse before cohabitation are increasing
3) Modernization of behaviours is quickened among groups of population living in urban areas, more educated, richer, and more opened to social changes

4. Methods

Most of individual data collected in the Nepalese DHS survey concern ever married women and men, who have already experienced cohabitation with their husband/wife. The analysis of sequences "marriage – cohabitation – first sexual intercourse" will be performed dealing with these individual records.

A preliminary analysis will describe changes among cohorts, for males and females, considering also duration of permanence in each status, order of events, and synchronizations.

Event history techniques will be used in order to study the two interrelated processes of first cohabitation and first sexual intercourse, with marital status considered as a covariate. These analyses will highlight individual and family characteristics associated with different behaviours.

As individual data are collected only for married women and men, we need to control the selection process. Household questionnaire collected some basic data for each member: age, sex, marital status, cohabitation, education. Moreover, household variables are collected concerning residence, life conditions, religion and caste of household head. These information allow us to control the selection process for cohabitation, following the Heckman approach (1979).

References

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