Health Education and Health Promotion (HEHP) (2016) Vol. 4 (4)

The Prevalence of Late Marriage and the Information Sources of Clients in Premarital Counseling Centers about Marriage

Fariba Heidari[1]*

Abstract

Aim: This study aimed to: a) investigate the prevalence of women's marriage above the age of 35 years, b) determine the magnitude of age gap between women and men who want to marry, and c) assess the clients' information sources in premarital counseling centers about marriage.

Methods: In this descriptive-analytic cross-sectional study, we collected the data of all marriages registered in one year period in two premarital consulting centers in Tabriz City. Also the prevalence of women's marriage above the age of 35 was calculated. All subjects registered in one month were asked about their information sources about marriage and the age gap between woman and man.

Findings: In total, the median age of marriage for women was 21 years and for men was 26 years. In 5% (no. 980) of all marriages, the age of bride was above 35 years. On average, women were 5 years older than men. The main information source of the couples about marriage was their families followed by mass media like Radio & TV.

Conclusion: A substantial proportion of women's marriages occur after the age of 35 and this issue necessitates the actions to improve the knowledge of young people about the ideal age for marriage in order to reduce the couples' problems and decrease the probability of congenital diseases in their children.

Keywords: Marriage, Age at marriage, Knowledge

1. Assistant Professor, Social Determinants of Health Research Center, Department of Community and Family Medicine, Faculty of Medicine, Tabriz University of Medical Sciences, Tabriz, Iran Email: Fariba_heidari@hotmail.com

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Introduction

Marriage is one of the most important stages in every human's life. From social perspective, marriage is defined as a union between a man and a woman that is accepted as formal in the community. On the one hand, marriage can fulfill one's sexual, emotional, and social needs. On the other hand, it enters the man or woman into a process of decision making and personal evolution, which can result in personal development and constituting the real concept of a family [1]. Marriage is a complex social phenomenon that happens freely and voluntarily. However, various factors may effect on the decision to marry, including physiologic factors such as sexual puberty, social factors (like intellectual puberty, and psychological puberty), moral and religious factors, social context, economic status, level of education, culture, and ethnicity [1, 2].

Studies recommend an ideal age to marry in order to reach its maximum positive effects on mental, physical, and social health [1]. In addition, delayed marriage can result in suppression of sexual and emotional needs that, in turn, would influence different aspects of health [1]. Beside these individual outcomes, late marriage or less marriage has adverse social harms in larger scale [2]. One of the consequences of deceased marriage rate and advanced age at marriage is lower fertility rate in the population [3]. Because, on the one hand, marriage age is the main predicting factor of number of children in the family; on the other hand, as the age of the first marriage rises, the rate of contraceptive use, delay in childbearing, and abortion rate will increase [4, 5]. Additionally, many studies have suggested that delaying the marriage may increase the risk of infertility in couples [6]. Infertility imposes much stress and dissatisfaction on couples and economic cost on both the families and health-care system [7]. For example, in Japan, general fertility rate is lower than replacement rate in the population, and it is predicted that this country will encounter workforce shortage and high proportion of elders in the future [3]. Decline in general fertility rate in Asia is slower than in the western countries but it is expected to speed up in the coming years [4, 7].

Moreover, marriage age has the potential to impress both mother and child health. Pregnancy in higher age can result in many irrecoverable consequences. For example, pregnancies over the age of 35 years in comparison with pregnancies in women aged 20 to 34 years are exposed to more risk of health-related outcomes including spontaneous abortion, gestational diabetes and hypertension, preeclampsia, prolonged and difficult delivery, bleeding during pregnancy,

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perinatal fetal death, intrauterine growth retardation, congenital chromosomal and non-chromosomal disorders, and cesarean [8-11].

In this study, we had three aims: a) to investigate the prevalence of women's marriage above the age of 35 years, b) to determine the magnitude of age gap between women and men who want to marry, and c) to assess the clients' information sources in premarital counseling centers about marriage.

Materials and Methods

This cross-sectional study was conducted in the premarital counseling centers in Tabriz City in North-west of Iran. Study population was the couples whose marriage was registered in these centers. Data for all marriages in the period of one year from April 2012 to March 2013 were collected to calculate the prevalence of women married after the age of 35 years. In order to evaluate the second and third aims of the study, we asked all the men and women referred for duration of one-month about their age and information sources about marriage. The obtained data were analyzed by SPSS (ver. 16) with a level of significance set at 0.05. The aim of the study was explained to all the couples who gave consent to enter the study. The Ethical Committee of the university approves this study.

Results

In total, our analysis showed that the median age at marriage was 21 years (IQR=17-25) in women and 26 years (IQR=23-29) in men. The youngest age of marriage was 12 years in women and 15 years in men, and the oldest woman was 51 years and the oldest man 67 years. During one-year period of the study time, 19639 marriages (couples) were registered in two premarital centers, from which in 980 cases (5 % of all marriages), the age of bride was above 35 years. In order to assess the second aim of the study, 1532 participants (766 couples) were interviewed and the results are summarized in Table 1. The main information source of the couples about marriage in both men and women was their families, followed by radio and TV, friends, instructors and professors, Internet, books, and newsletters. The least one reported by the study participants was public health centers.

On average, the men were 5 years older than their wives (SD=4.5 years). In the majority of cases (84%), husbands were older than their wives with a maximum age gap of 21 years. In 10.3% of the participants, the bride was older than the husband with a maximum of 14 years. Equal age was seen in 5.5% of the couples. The distribution of age gap between the couples is presented in Table 2.

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Table 1: The information sources of couples about marriage

Source of information	Women N (%)	Men N (%)
Friends	192(12.5)	275(18)
Books	122(7.9)	105(6.8)
Newsletters	45(3)	67(4.4)
Instructors and professors	188(12.2)	113(7.4)
Family	557(36.4)	463(30.2)
Radio and TV	344(22.5)	380(24.8)
Internet	79(5.2)	129(8.4)
Public health centers	5(0.3)	0
Total	1532(100)	1532(100)

Table 2: Frequency of different age gaps between the couples

Age gap for marriage	N	%
Equal ages	42	5.5
Wife ≥5 years older than husband	16	2.1
Wife 1-4 years older than husband	63	8.2
Husband 1-4 years older than wife	226	29.5
Husband ≥5 years older than wife	418	54.6

Discussion

Iran is experiencing a transition toward modernity, a phenomenon that accompanies changes in the pattern of marriage and spouse choosing, tendency to have university educations, and opportunity for women to enter the workforce [2]. One consequence of this transition is negative attitude toward marriage, which, in turn, can result in false, unreal, and irrational beliefs, assuming the marriage as a difficult and limiting task. This misperception and incorrect opinion about marriage is a determinant of unsuccessful marriage, dissatisfaction in family, and divorce [2]. Therefore, it is not surprising to have a rising in the rate of divorce in the western communities, which, in the recent years, have increased up to 2 folds. This upward trend in Asian countries is happening at a slower pace [7].

Our study results reflect that 5 % of women married in one year period in an urban context are above the age of 35 years. This means that, each year, about 1000 couples are at risk of different adverse consequences of late marriage for themselves or their children. The results of Iranian census show that the mean age at marriage is increasing, more rapidly in women than in men. From 1966 to 2002, the mean age of marriage was increased from 18.4 to 23.2 years in women and from 25 to 25.9 years in men [1]. In addition, reports of the National Statistics Center of Iran demonstrate that mean age at first marriage has also increased between 1986 and 2011 from 19.9 to 23.4 in women and from 23.8 to

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26.7 in men [12].

Studies suggest that marriage age is 2-3 years higher in educated people compared to illiterates [1]. Another factor influencing on this trend is urbanization, which can be explained by differences in culture, concern and opportunity to continue schooling and having a profession in cities in comparison with rural areas [1-3, 10, 13, 14]. One study on Iranian population concluded that late marriage is significantly related to the level of education and, on average, for each year of increase in schooling in women, the probability of late marriage rises by 12 %. Other factor that should be considered in predicting the increase in age of marriage is being employed in contrast to non-employed women [15]. The results of this study showed that the main source for couples to be informed about marriage is their families followed by the mass media. So, there is a great occasion to use the potential of mass media in improving the knowledge and attitude of community about the best age of marriage. Similarly, another study has reported that personal experience along with parents, family and television can constitute the individual's attitude toward marriage [2].

In some communities, singlehood is a social problem. For example, in Japan, single people are called as *parasite singles*, which reflects the stigma and negative view of population over unmarried adults. As a result, singles themselves are stressed, isolated, and deprived. As in Indonesia, social services are not offered to non-married people [7].

Considering the age gap between couples, our study showed that, on average, men were 5 years older that women, which is similar to the reports in other studies [7]. One study in Iran has reported that age gap in first marriage is decreasing. This alteration may reduce the tensions and discrepancies in the family, because higher age gaps of couples can cause distance in culture, mode of thinking, and beliefs between the spouses, and thus lower duration and quality of life after marriage [1].

In order to improve the knowledge and attitude of young adults and their families about marriage, multiple strategies are needed including financial support of young people, offering educational programs in high school and universities, and delivering marriage counseling services in the community [2, 15].

Conclusion

Today, a substantial proportion of women are marrying after the age of 35 years. To eliminate and reduce the couples' and the families' health-related and social problems, it is vital to improve the knowledge and attitude of the community about the adverse consequences of late marriage and less marriage, along with offering financial and

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social support for the youth.

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