

# CHANGING MARRIAGE PATTERNS IN LEBANON

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**M**arriage is probably the oldest social institution in human history. It constitutes an important step in starting a family to which both men and women have to be initiated. The age of women at marriage is an important determinant of the type of society, indicating its status as "traditional" or "modern". Age at marriage is related to a number of phenomena including the level of education, the participation of women in the labor force, the economic situation prevailing in a society, and the social perception of marriage.

This article sheds light on the changes that have taken place in the last 25 years concerning the age of women who marry in Lebanon. The pattern depicted represents an increasing proportion of single women in Lebanese society, which is coupled with marriage at a more advanced age. The reasons for this pattern are linked to phenomena affecting both men and women.

## Evolution of the marital status of women

An analysis of the percentage of single women in Lebanon over the past 25 years, *i.e.*, between 1970 and 1995, reveals an increasing proportion of single women among all age groups.

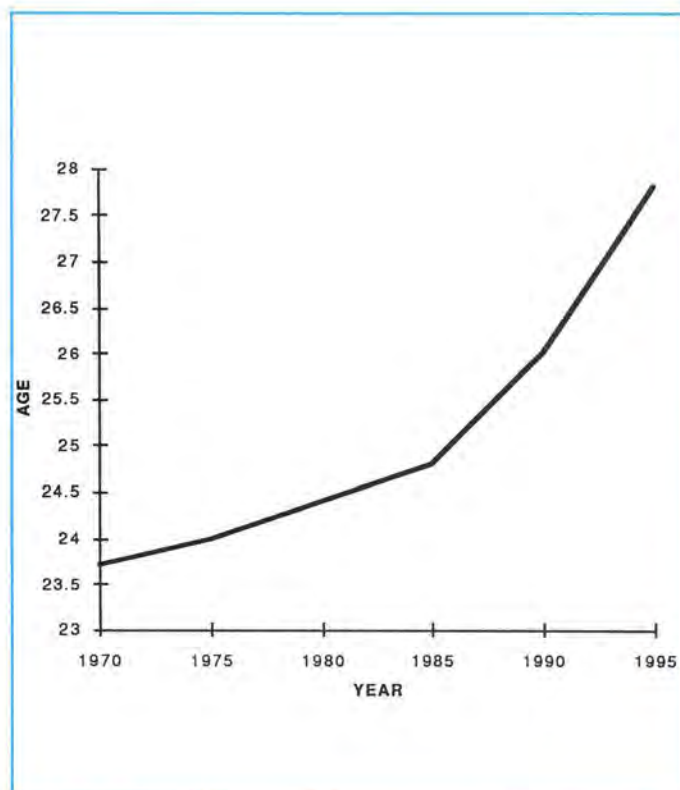
### Percentage of unmarried women

Age Group	1970	1986	1993	1995	
15 - 19	86.9	86.2	94.5	95.0	
20 - 24	51.3	58.3	74.4	72.0	
25 - 29	25.4	35.5	47.5	46.6	
30 - 34	14.1	19.5	28.6	30.4	
35 - 39	9.7		12.3	18.2	20.9
40 - 44	7.5	7.2	11.6	15.2	
45 - 49	6.8	6.7	8.4	11.5	
50 and above	5.9	6.0	5.7	7.3	
Average 15 and above	29.3	35.1	38.9	37.5	

The most striking finding in this table is the increase in the proportion of unmarried women in the age groups (20 - 24) (25 - 29) (30 - 34) (35 - 39). These are the age groups in which most of the women get married and that were mostly affected by the war, *i.e.*, those whose youth coincided with the war years.

## Evolution of the average age of women at marriage

The increase in the population of unmarried women in the various age groups has been coupled with a delay in the age of women at marriage, as revealed in the following figure:



Source: The Lebanese Woman 1970 - 1995: Numbers and meanings, National Commission for Women and La Source, 1997.

## Discussion

Lebanese society has undergone major changes in the last 25 years due to the effect of the war that lasted about 17 years. Large population movements, displacement, threats to physical survival, deteriorating economic conditions, as well as changes in the patterns and levels of education among both men and women, have deeply affected Lebanese society.

The changes represented by the increasing proportion of unmarried women, especially in the young age groups, and the delay of marriage to a more advanced age, can be explained by the following:

1. An increase in the level of education among women. The illiteracy rate among Lebanese women dropped from 20.1% in 1970 to 3.6% in 1995 for the age group 15-19, from 28.5% to 4.8% for the age group 20 - 24, and from 59.4% to 25.6% for women aged 25 and above. This is coupled with an increase in the number of women who pursue a university education.

The percentage of women enrolled in universities increased from 47.1% in 1982 to 50.1% in 1992 and to 52% in 1994. The single most important determinant in the age of marriage is education. The positive relationship between education and age at marriage is a common pattern found in rapidly developing societies. Access to education seems to have a tremendous impact on women's perception of themselves, on their reproductive and sex roles, and on their expectations of social mobility. There is a prevailing idea that marriage will hamper the woman's ability to pursue her education, and hence marriage is delayed until a later age.

2. The participation of women in the labor force. Lebanese society has witnessed an increase in the proportion of working women from 14.3% in 1970 to 18.5% in 1995 for all women aged 15 and above. In particular, it has gone up from 20.3% to 31.1% for women aged 25 - 29, from 16.1% to 26.7% for those aged 30 - 34 and from 13.6% to 25.4% for those aged 35 - 39. The increased participation of women in the labor force means that they have started to earn an income that allows them to be independent to a certain extent rather than depend on potential husbands for their livelihood. This is linked also to the feeling of social and intellectual independence, and to the higher self-esteem and change of self - image associated with participation in the labor force.

3. The over-all deterioration of the economic situation in Lebanon, which presents a serious challenge for young men of marriageable age. Young men who are faced with

job insecurity and high cost of living - particularly housing costs - postpone marriage. Indeed, although no statistical figures are available to document the age at marriage of men, it is possible to observe that most of the marriages of men at early age occur either among very wealthy families able to support their sons or among migrant men. The pressures that are put on men for paying the dowry and various other marriage - related expenses are also worth noting.

4. Migration, population movement, and urbanization. The years of war have resulted in several phases of massive displacement of the population both within and outside the country. Lebanon is also one of the highly urbanized countries in the Arab World; 86% of its population is urban.

The movement of families from rural to urban areas results in the weakening of family ties and in severing the relationship between the migrating family-members and those who stayed behind in rural areas. In a country like Lebanon, which is known to have a high proportion of consanguineous marriages, this is bound to have an impact. On the other hand, the patterns of nuptiality are definitely influenced by urbanization: the more urbanized young people are, the later they marry.

## Conclusion

The patterns of marriage in Lebanon are definitely changing in the direction typical of a rapidly modernizing society, which is characterized by a higher proportion of unmarried women in all age groups coupled with an advanced age at marriage. Although I have identified some reasons for this phenomenon, a qualitative study among women of different age groups and various socio-economic backgrounds remains essential to shed more light on this interesting pattern of development. Another aspect to be investigated is the impact of this change on lifestyles, patterns of child-rearing and child-rearing, as well as maternal and child health resulting from delayed marriages.

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