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MODERNITY AND EARLY MARRIAGE IN IRAN: A VIEW FROM WITHIN

SORAYA TREMAYNE



The past few decades have witnessed important changes in the patterns of marriage in the Middle East and North Africa. These changes are well documented by specialists from various disciplines and from diverse perspectives (see Hopkins 2003; Singerman and Hoodfar 1996; Tucker 1993; Moghadam 1993; Afshar 1993; Abbasi-Shavazi, McDonald, Chavoshi 2003). They stem from a multitude of reasons moulded by modernity and globalisation, which include inter alia rapid urbanisation and physical mobility; better access to education, especially for girls; the transformation of the relationships between the generations and genders; the shift from extended to nuclear family and the loss of larger family networks; the emergence of new opportunities and aspirations in the choice of marriage partners; changes in the marriage and divorce laws, giving women new rights; a considerable increase in the rate of divorce; and finally the inclusion and participation of women in the labour market. The extent of the change, however, varies not only from country to country but in different areas within each country.

In spite of the great diversity in marriage patterns in the region, marriage itself remains fundamental to the social identity of all women, regardless of their achievements in other spheres of life, and pressure on women to marry persists. A recent study by DeJong et al. (2005) reviewing the sexual and reproductive health situation of young people in the Arab countries and Iran emphasises that marriage remains central to any discussion in the region of the sexual and reproductive health of young people “because of the universal valuation of marriage and the taboos and religious sanctions against pre-marital and extra-marital sex-

ual relations" (49-59). While acknowledging the differences in the patterns of marriage, DeJong et al. identify certain recent general trends as being "rising age at marriage for both sexes; early marriage still a problem in pockets of all societies; high incidence of consanguineous marriages; persistence but decline in polygamy in some countries; higher numbers of single women; and resurgence of forms of non-conventional marriage" (52).

Whereas the rise in the age of marriage has attracted sufficient attention by researchers and is relatively well understood, some of the other general trends, including early marriage and legally unprotected forms of marriage, remain underresearched (54). As an example of unconventional forms of marriage DeJong et al. refers to temporary marriage (*mut'a*), a form of marriage practised by the Shia Muslim and actively encouraged by the Iranian political leaders since the Islamic Revolution in Iran, and points to the recent spread of this practice among the Sunni (*ibid*), albeit in a different form.

The rise in the age of marriage is viewed as a positive sign particularly for women, which Fargues (2003) as cited in DeJong et al. summarises as follows: "it [rise in age] is protective against early childbirth and associated with greater educational and employment opportunities" (53).¹ The role of education is also singled out by others as the most important factor in preventing early marriage (Hamamsy 1994). In general, education has been viewed as an indicator of social modernisation and all-empowering institution liberating women from gender inequality and discrimination. Implicit in the urge for education for girls is also their economic and social empowerment, and the lack of participation of women in the labour market is blamed on their lack of education (see Fargues 2003). DeJong et al.'s review mentions that "in the Middle East and North Africa gender disparities in social opportunities are wide, and indeed the region ranks next to last behind Sub-Saharan Africa on the UN Development Programme gender empowerment measure," more than half of Arab women are illiterate, and the region has the world's lowest rate of female participation in the labour force at twenty-six percent (51). However, the rate of female employment varies from country to country. In Iran, in spite of a remarkably high literacy rate for women between the ages of ten and twenty-four, which has risen from forty-eight percent to ninety-two percent in the past two decades (51),

the rate of female employment remains low at around twelve percent (Abassi-Shavazi 2003:19).²

In spite of the considerable rise in the age of marriage and a decline in early marriage, the practice persists in the region as a whole and may even be on the rise in some areas (DeJong et al. 2005; UNICEF 2000; Forum on Marriage 2000). During the past decade, the practice of early marriage has witnessed an increasing interest and an unequivocal condemnation by human rights activists, advocates of gender equality, policymakers and planners, and health practitioners. Policies to eradicate the practice are often made on the basis that early marriages are coercive, that they stem from poverty and lack of education, especially for girls, and that by empowering girls and young women they will stop. An understanding of the impact of social transformations on early marriage is essential to the understanding of the modern context of early marriage. Simply linking a rise in literacy level to a decline in early marriage misses the fact that early marriage is no longer just a matter of education. Instead, the practice has adapted itself to modernity and its imperatives. Girls can and do go to school and get married early, and are not necessarily empowered after leaving school.

The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in 1994 was convened at a time of growing consensus about the complexities of the relationship between education, work, fertility, and family planning and the fact that improving just one aspect of life (e.g., education alone) does not necessarily empower women (Tremayne 2001:7). Nevertheless, the feminist agendas remain emphatic on the role of education in empowering women. Several factors affect education as a means of liberation for women. First, consideration should be given to the concept of "empowerment" itself, which is ridden with complexities and needs careful examination and redefinition (Kabeer 2005:14). Also, early marriage in many parts of the world has adopted a modern face while retaining its conservative structure, and the new face can be misleading with apparent empowerment. Finally, the inevitable clash resulting from the encounter between the new form and old practice has provoked new and unexpected reactions, which in many instances has left girls even more vulnerable than before. Can we therefore say that new rules are being set up in the process, and if

so, whether these are indicative of the apparently fundamental changes we are witnessing with regard to family and gender relations?

THE MODERN VIEW OF EARLY MARRIAGE

“Early” or “child” marriage, whereby either or both the bride and groom (usually the bride) is under the age of eighteen³ remains contentious. While these marriages have been practised for centuries in many parts of the world, it is only during the past decade that they have become the target of an active campaign by various human rights advocates and national and international agencies across the world to stop their practice.

Various agencies on human rights and the rights of the child, such as UNICEF (2000), the Forum on Marriage and the Rights of Women and Girls (2000), and the International Centre for Research on Women (2003), refer to the harmful effects of early marriage due to its physical and psychosocial effects on adolescent health and reproduction, especially for girls (sexual exploitation of young girls, the impact on their reproductive health, and early and multiple pregnancies), the denial of human rights such as education and access to economic independence, and finally, the risks of violence and abandonment. From a biomedical perspective, risks of early pregnancy are well documented and include premature labour complications during delivery, low birth weight of babies, and the poor survival chances for newborns. Mothers under fifteen are five times as likely to die during labour as women in their twenties. While the high death rate is not solely linked to the low age of mothers—and poor socioeconomic conditions that prevent them from having access to antenatal and obstetrics care are listed also as contributory factors—physical immaturity has been identified as “the key risk for the under 15s” (UNICEF 2000:11).

Several reasons for the practice of early marriage have been offered, and literature on the subject suggests that most early marriages continue to be coerced and are often a strategy for economic survival (Forum on Marriage 2000:10), poverty is the key motivation behind the practice (UNICEF 2000:6), and there may be an increase in early marriage among populations under stress (*ibid*). Although early marriage involves both boys and girls, the main focus of the human rights activists remains on

girls and their well-being since the consequences of early marriage can be more serious for girls, who are more likely to be subject to coercion and health risks (UNICEF 2000:11). However, early marriage does not happen in isolation from other social bonds and obligations. Viewed in its broader social and cultural context it takes on a different meaning, and local communities often demonstrate a different understanding and do not necessarily consider it a violation of their personal rights. "Rights," as approached by global conventions in the context of marriage, effectively means the ability of individuals to make decisions on their fertility, reproductive health, and sexual freedom in isolation from their other bonds and obligations in society. The reality is that the way men and women perceive, manage, and negotiate the various forces exerted on their lives (which are paramount in any measures to improve their health and rights) is embedded within the wider construction and negotiation of social identity. The relationship between power, marriage, kinship, and gender is shown to be intertwined and to affect the interaction between individuals, the community, and the state. Power taken in both its aspects of repressing as well as constructing identities (to use Foucauldian analysis) needs to be built into the equation when seeking solutions to early marriage (see also Locke and Zhang 2004; Petchesky and Judd 1998).

Few studies have addressed the reasons for the survival of early marriage in spite of progress achieved in the areas of education and a rise in female employment, or the possible consequences of giving up the practice and its impact on the family, the "children" themselves, and their wider social network. Little is known of the choices open to those who do not marry very young and whether the new solutions are providing fairer conditions in terms of human rights. The extent to which girls benefit from delaying their marriages and following the education path, which in many cases is provided in a vacuum for the sake of education per se, remains unknown. As Kabeer (2005:23-4), in an assessment of the Millennium Development Goals mentions, "Women's access to education may improve their chances of a good marriage or their capacity to sign their names on a document, but unless it also provides them with the analytical capacity and courage to question unjust practices, its potential for change will be limited." Finally, the nature of the accommodation and adjustment to modernity by the institutions

that practice and control early marriage remains misunderstood.

The connection made between education, delay in the age of marriage, and the economic empowerment of women is not as straightforward as it may appear and does not necessarily lead to the ideal solution of liberating girls from their marriage and kinship bonds. Even when the persisting patriarchal values accommodate modernity by trading the early marriage for a few more years of education, "a token gesture of paternalist benevolence," as Kabeer puts it (2005:23), the prevailing social and cultural demands for girls, including their own desire to get married and not to miss their chance at marriage, act as an incentive and create unforeseen circumstances well beyond the expectations of the advocates of human rights.

This study provides a view from within a community in which early marriage continues to be practiced: on whether early marriages are necessarily coerced and/or driven by poverty, as well as the impact of education upon early marriage. Although the data presented are part of a larger study undertaken in Yazd (2004) in central Iran, many of the findings can be extended to most other conservative communities in Iran, since they also draw on previous data collected in Ardebil (Azarbaijan) and Tehran between 2000-4 and on other relevant research carried out by Iranian scholars. The study includes perspectives from various parties involved in the practice of early marriage, i.e., three generations of women from extended families and their kin group, local clerics, and health professionals. That this chapter focuses on women does not imply that early marriage for boys does not exist. A visit to the barracks in any town or the seminaries in religious cities in Iran reveals the wide extent of early marriage among boys. The conscripts' families marry them off for a variety of reasons, including an attempt to gain exemption from the army by claiming family responsibilities (although they often serve in the army anyway). Young religious students of the seminaries get married early under pressure from the religious community.

THE CASE OF IRAN

No study of early marriage in present-day Iran can be understood without an understanding of Shia practices. Iran, with a theocratic

regime, closely follows the Sharia (Islamic law) and presents a special case as far as early marriage or child marriage is concerned. The age of marriage is a much-disputed subject in the Islamic Republic and is closely linked to the definition of childhood. What constitutes childhood according to Sharia differs from that of the Convention of the Right of the Child (CRC, 1988), which describes “anybody under the age of eighteen as a child” and to which Iran is a signatory. When the delegation from the Islamic Republic of Iran signed the CRC, it reserved the right not to implement those sections that were against the Islamic practices of the country. It maintained that Sharia provides clear instructions for the responsibilities and conduct of people, which in some instances do not accord with international agreements. One such exception was the practice of early marriage. It is therefore not surprising that no official action has been taken to prevent the practice following the signing of the CRC.

The definition of a child, according to the law, is not restricted to a certain age and differs from context to context. A child can be a child in one context and an adult in another. For example, a girl is eligible to marry at eight years and nine months and a boy at fourteen years and seven months, when they are supposed to have reached puberty and can reproduce. However, they are not considered mentally mature and require a guardian until they reach mental maturity, the judgement of which is more elaborate (Ebadi 1997, 2002, 2003). Although Article 1041 of the Civil Law specifies that the legal age of marriage is fifteen for girls and eighteen for boys, after the Islamic Revolution the minimum age of marriage was dropped to that approved by Sharia law (see above). In August 2003, after much pressure from the female members of the Iranian parliament (*majilis*), the age of marriage was raised to thirteen for girls, but a clause was added stating that earlier marriage would be allowed if the girl's guardian and a judge or medical doctor considered that the girl was ready for marriage. Effectively, this means that the application of the law is not compulsory.

From what precedes, it is clear that the contradictions between the Sharia, the human rights approach (both on human rights and health grounds), and the modernising policies of the government (see Tremayne 2004) as they impinge on day-to-day realities provide fertile ground for a study of whether and to what extent policies, laws, and conventions affect

the practice of early marriage and whether they are responsible for any changes that have taken place in this sphere.

EXTENT OF EARLY MARRIAGE IN IRAN

The exact extent of the practice of early marriage is not known in Iran and is likely to be considerably higher than the official statistics suggest (for statistics on early marriage see Iran Demographic Health Survey 2000 and Kian-Thebaut 2005). One reason for lack of reliable information in this area is partly due to the discrepancies in the data collection methods (Country Population Assessment Report 1998). A second and important factor affecting the accuracy of the information on marriage in general and early marriage in particular is the practice of temporary marriage (*mut'a* or *sigheh*), which is unique to the Shia sect and has been practiced in Shia Iran for centuries (Haeri 1989). A considerable number of early marriages continue to take place,⁴ some of which are changed to permanent marriage when the children become adults. Others remain temporary and either dissolve at the end of the contract or with the couple living together without changing their status to a permanent one. A temporary marriage need not be registered (although it can if the parties involved wish it to be), and witnesses are not required. Interesting statistics were released in 2004 by the General Registration Office of Iran mentioning that the figures for registered temporary marriages showed an increase of twenty percent as compared to the previous year (see Zanan.co.ir/news/000129.html).

Temporary marriage or *mut'a*, meaning a marriage of pleasure, is a contract between a man and an unmarried woman in which the couple agree to be married for a specified length of time and a fixed sum of money is given to the temporary wife. The time agreed could be anywhere from one hour to ninety-nine years. At the end of the contract the temporary spouses may part company without any divorce ceremony, but many continue to live together for life. In Haeri's (1989) words, "Ideologically, Shia doctrine distinguishes temporary marriage, *mut'a*, from permanent marriage, *nikāh*, in that the objective of *mut'a* is sexual enjoyment, *istimita*, while that of *nikāh* is procreation, *tulid-i-nasl*"(2).

The children born as a result of temporary marriage are recognised as legitimate and theoretically have status equal to their siblings born of

permanent marriage. "Here lies the legal uniqueness of *mut'a*, that which distinguishes it from prostitution, despite their striking resemblance" (Haeri 1989:2). Haeri distinguishes the permanent marriage as a contract of sale and temporary marriage as contract of lease. In this sense, because the objective of a temporary marriage is sexual enjoyment, *sigheh* women are often considered temporary sexual partners, thus suggesting a close structural association to prostitution. The temporary marriage does not provide the protection or social prestige women seek, as it often takes place in secrecy, and the very word *sigheh* has a pejorative connotation in society. Temporary wives are not treated as equals to permanent wives, and *sigheh* marriages for women are highly stigmatised. However, in addition to temporary marriage being used for the purpose of sexual pleasure, it is also used to legitimise early marriage with full approval of the parents, and in this case it does not carry the same stigma as the marriage for purely sexual pleasure. In the few decades leading to the Islamic Revolution, the minimum age of marriage was raised to fifteen for girls (Article 1041 of the civil code), and the registration of marriage became compulsory. At that time, early marriage was still practiced to a considerable extent by conservative layers of the society, both urban and rural. Parents prohibited under the civil code from registering the marriages of their underage daughters resorted to temporary marriage, which the couple changed into a permanent one upon reaching the legal age.

To return to the extent of the practice of early marriage, research by academic and governmental agencies reveals that the number of early marriages in some provinces is high and the practice admitted publicly. For example, in some rural areas of Sistan and Baluchestan, children as young as seven are known to have been given in marriage, but the figure for towns in the same provinces is between eleven and twelve years for girls (confidential report by sociologists for UN agencies). The prevalence of attitudes toward early marriage is also confirmed by other studies. In Baluchestan, where the age of marriage is still one of the lowest in the country, one university student interviewed about his views on the age of marriage stated that "the most suitable age of marriage for girls is eight or nine years old. As soon as a girl can count her fingers, she is ready for marriage." My earlier interviews with marriage consultants in the province of Ardebil also confirmed the existence of similar attitudes in many villages in that area. Firsthand observation from provinces such

as Khousestan, Kurdistan, and Khorasan confirm time and again the same attitudes and behaviour. Examples abound of the forms the practice takes, from two octogenarian men exchanging their fourteen-year-old daughters in Kurdistan (confidential report by sociologists for the UN agencies) to a report of an early marriage between a thirteen-year-old boy and his sixteen-year-old cousin in Khousestan whereby both parties expressed total happiness at being married and mentioned that early marriage is customary in the province and takes place regularly (Yas-e-nou August 2004).

Studies show that the changes in the rise in the age of marriage (the mean age of marriage for women in Iran was 22.4 according to the 1996 census) and the continuation of early marriage are related to a multitude of factors that do not stem from laws imposed by the ruling religious authorities, government, or by global agreements reached at international conventions. These external factors only affect these practices in an indirect way and by innuendo. Changes in the age of marriage tend to follow their own internal dynamics. For example, the practice of early marriage in the rural and tribal areas was widespread before the Revolution in 1979 in spite of the law setting the minimum age of marriage at fifteen, but the indications were that it was declining due to a variety of social reasons (Mehryar 1998; Mehryar et al. 1998). Likewise, the rate of early marriage continued to drop after the Revolution in spite of the encouragement of the clerics, who follow the Islamic instructions in relation to the age of marriage (Mehryar 1998; Abassi-Shavazi 2001; Tremayne 2005).

The cultural context in which early marriage occurs seems to be similar almost everywhere in Iran. The prevalence of patriarchal systems, the persistence of traditional values with regard to family and marriage among conservative communities, and the endorsement by the ruling clerics are some of the historical reasons behind the practice. Although "modernity" has entered many spheres of life, attitudes towards early marriage have not kept pace with this change. Economic hardship and an increase in poverty, cited as key factors in the continuation and increase in the rate of early marriage, may have reinforced the attitudes towards early marriage, especially in some areas where family ties have been affected by change.

Reliable statistics are hard to come by, but limited research shows

that, contrary to the general belief that early marriages are prevalent in rural and tribal areas, early marriage takes place at a higher rate in some urban areas (IDHS 2000:38), especially those that have remained more conservative and traditional and/or have retained a strong sense of ethnic or religious identity. A recent report estimates that as much as fifty-three percent of the total numbers occurs in urban areas (Yas-e-nou June 2003). Kian-Thebaut's (2005:52) study of various ethnic and linguistic groups estimates the average rate of early marriage at sixteen percent, with Baluchestan at thirty-two percent as the highest, and Guilan at under 0.5 as the lowest (see also IDHS 2000).

EARLY MARRIAGE IN THE TOWN OF YAZD

As mentioned earlier, data used in this chapter derives from a larger project and was collected during fieldwork on the sociocultural transformations that have taken place within the family with regard to reproductive health values. The research was carried out in Yazd, situated in central Iran with 326,776 inhabitants. Yazd seemed a particularly suitable choice for the study of early marriage. In many respects, it epitomises the interface between tradition and modernity and their ensuing paradoxes. In a comparative study of four provinces in Iran, Abassi-Shavazi et al. conclude that Yazd has retained most of its traditional and religious characteristics in spite of approaching one of the highest levels of socioeconomic development in the country (2003:16) and that it has a high level of female literacy at eighty-one percent⁵ and a low level of employment (2003:19, 2005). Yazd also has the lowest rate of divorce in Iran, which classifies it as the most conservative town in the country (350 divorces for 8,868 marriages—1 in 25). The comparative figures for Tehran for the same year were 17,956 divorces for 104,496 marriages—1 in 6) (Statistical Centre of Iran 2000).⁶ Abassi-Shavazi's findings reveal that women in Yazd place more emphasis on education as a means of enhancing marriage for girls rather than for the purpose of employment, and that the expression of more conservative attitudes by women in Yazd is consistent across all indicators chosen. Yazd maintains relatively conservative attitudes with regard to early marriage despite the fact that its education levels are actually higher than in any of the other four provinces (2003:18); one of the interpretations in Abassi-Shavazi's

research is that "Yazd has family-religious values that may have counter-balanced the effects of its higher education levels." Although patriarchal values do not get a mention in the above study, the present study shows that they remain the strongest driving force behind the persistence of conservative values, which are not necessarily Islamic but are reinforced by Islamic values.

The present research in Yazd focused on highly conservative families in which modernity exists alongside patriarchal and religious values. Of course many men and women from Yazd no longer follow the traditional way of life, and some have gone on to have successful and distinguished careers, but the community studied here reflects the more conservative layers of the society. In this sense, it may be more similar to several other conservative communities in Iran such as Khousestan, parts of Azarbaijan, Kurdistan, Sistan, and Baluchestan than to the more liberal ones in Yazd itself. Men in the study included clerks in private companies, long-distance lorry drivers, builders, junior civil servants, goldsmiths, office managers, and some unemployed. Their wives either worked from home as dressmakers or hairdressers or were engaged in cottage industries (e.g., preparing dried herbs for other households, small-scale carpet weaving, etc.) or did not have any income-generating occupation.

Methodology

Two main sources were used to identify women who had married early. A study of the archives of Mojibian Hospital, the oldest private maternity hospital in town, was undertaken. The main aim of the study, however, was not to obtain statistics and percentages but to identify women who had given birth under the age of fifteen and therefore married early.

The second source for the in-depth study and day-to-day observation was the host family. The wife and husband, who were cross-cousins, came from large families of eleven and nine brothers and sisters respectively, and introduction to their extended network of relatives allowed access to a considerable number of case studies.

To extract data from the hospital archives, the limit of early marriage was set at 15 years of age, and by studying the archives between 1971 and 2004 at 5-year intervals, 537 cases of women who had given

birth under the age of 15 over the past 33 years were identified. Fifty cases were selected for interviews, and those women were invited to come to an initial interview. This led to invitations to their homes, which in turn led to meeting their mothers, daughters, or granddaughters, and some of the husbands or sons also agreed to be interviewed. Such large gatherings allowed observation of the changes in the attitudes towards early marriage among different generations of women. It also made it possible to investigate early marriage of men in the same families.

Some basic and preliminary facts from the hospital archives showed that the minimum age of mothers who had given birth was 12 years. Fourteen of the cases had a second baby before reaching 15. Thirty-two had Caesarean sections. In one extreme case, a 12-year-old had given birth to quadruplets, all of whom died after a few hours. The analysis of the data for the 537 cases showed that 404 of the cases were normal deliveries, and 101 cases ended in termination of the pregnancy. These figures seem to be consistent with those for other countries (UNICEF 2000:36). In addition, several of the hospital staff volunteered similar information from their own families, and it became evident that two decades ago such pregnancies were more the norm than the exception.

Much of the data used for this paper is the result of several weeks of meeting and discussing issues related to early marriage with women who belonged to the same kin group, mainly first and second cousins, some of whom formed three generations of grandmothers, mothers, and daughters, and most of whom married under the age of fifteen. Other participants were relatives of the first group and of different age groups. Of the forty women who took part in discussions, all but two had married their cousins (see also DeJong et al., p. 52, on the high incidence of consanguine marriages).

Coercion and Violence

One of the objectives of the research was to understand the context of early marriage as far as coercion was concerned. Had all these women of different generations been “beaten” into submission to being married off, and had their rights been violated?

The accounts by the first and second generations of women were almost identical in that making one’s own decisions about marriage was not even thought of. “We were just told that we were going to be married

to our cousin or the next door neighbour's son, and that was it. We did not even think of resisting it any more than resisting our parents' other wishes and commands in other matters." In many cases the marriage had been decided at birth, when the umbilical cord had been cut in the name of the future husband. No violence had taken place, since none of the girls had resisted. They said that "at that age, the idea of saying no was inconceivable, even in retrospect. If we did not get married, we would have brought great shame upon our family." Breaking a promise or refusing a long-standing agreement between two families would have led to bloodshed and feud. A female medical doctor from Baluchestan, in a separate study, said that she herself had consented to an arranged marriage for the fear of family feud and that her superior education had been overshadowed by her kinship obligations.⁷ Obligations to the family and kin group seem to have remained untouched and continue to be the greatest determining factor in any decision made in relation to marriage. The word coercion in such an instance seems somewhat inappropriate because it is not perceived as such but rather as fulfilling a heavy obligation to the family. In addition, the only prospect for a girl from a conservative family a few decades ago was to get married.

The main difference between the first- and second-generation women, interestingly, was that the majority of the second generation had married at an even younger age than their mothers, from between twelve to fourteen years. These marriages coincided with an increase in urbanisation (in the 1970s); moving away from the closely-knit communities into the less well-known surroundings in towns required securing girls' protection, which may have played a role in earlier marriage. These changes also coincided with the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the abolition of the minimum age of marriage, and the relaxation of the marriage law, dropping the minimum age of marriage to nine for girls and the ruling clerics' encouragement to marry early (Tremayne 2005). The civil disturbances surrounding the Revolution itself may have been a contributing factor in bringing forward the age of marriage. Lack of reliable data makes it impossible to know whether there was an increase in numbers of early marriages at this point, but the drop in the age of marriage among the group studied seems consistent with the suggestion that early marriages often increase at a time of crisis and in societies under pressure (UNICEF 2000:introduction).

The second generation was more reflective about coercion. For this group, their mild resistance had been diffused in a variety of ways by the family. Their accounts were frequently that of persuasion and lack of other choices rather than coercion. Persuasion itself was applied indirectly and gently guided the girl to come to a decision herself. Akram (not her real name), one of the women in the group, said that her mother had asked her to marry her mother's nephew. When she resisted the idea because she thought that "his family were people of low culture" (in spite of being her cross-cousins), the mother said, "It is up to you, but this is the first time that my brother has asked me for a favour. I don't know how to refuse him." The negotiations continued with her paternal uncles, who, in the absence of her dead father, were consulted. They all supported the mother and mentioned that Akram should be considerate of her mother's position vis-à-vis her brother, as her mother would lose face by turning down her brother's request. However, everybody's last words were "it is up to you." She also said, "I was promised by my husband's family that he will allow me to continue my studies if I married him, but once he married me, he insisted that I should stay at home, and I agreed because in those days studying was not such an important issue." Although Akram married the cousin sixteen years ago, she is still angry and resentful because she feels that "I myself made the decision in the end, and nobody forced me into the marriage."

The slightly higher level of education among the second generation of women seemed to be a determining factor in shaping their outlook to coerced marriage. Those who were completely illiterate or had little education agreed with their mothers that marriage was their only choice since they had no other way of living, and remaining unmarried would have been socially unacceptable and an imposition economically on the family. Unmarried girls above thirteen years of age were stigmatised as "something being seriously wrong with her" and as being "spoilt goods."⁸ The majority of the more educated women of the same generation remained unconvinced about the advantages of marrying later for a few more years of education.

The third generation, some still in their teens, is more literate compared to the first two generations. Several have completed either the first part or the full term at secondary school, while others have left school voluntarily because they did not wish to remain at school or because

they had fallen in love and wanted to get married. Both saw marriage as a blessing and a way to freedom from education. Two girls in the group had been to university. They were both engaged to their cousins and waiting for their fiancés to find jobs so that they could get married. One had chosen not to work, and the other could not find a job in spite of her higher education.

In discussing education with the parents, it became clear that the fathers saw their authority, hitherto unopposed, challenged by modernity and change, and they sensed the ground for their patriarchal authority beginning to shift. The gradual loss of power vis-à-vis the change and the challenge to their authority provokes two types of reactions among men in general. Fathers might allow their daughters a few extra years of education, even though most of them remain unconvinced of its advantages. In such cases, coercion shifts and appears in the form of a stricter control of the daily activities of their daughters or sisters and often by preventing them from pursuing their education even further. The boundaries of freedom for these girls are restricted to going to school for a few more years, but at all times accompanied by a male member of the family. A typical fourteen-year-old girl's time outside her school and homework is occasionally to go to a pizza restaurant with the family or, with the family present, watch local or even satellite programmes, to which a great majority of families now have access. Leisure and entertainment equals socialising within the kin group and an occasional pilgrimage to the Shrine of Imam Reza, the eighth Shia Imam, in Mashhad. Some of the younger generation of women recently had started going to the public swimming pool, but a gang of women had secretly filmed them in their swimsuits and sold the photographs. The predictable fury and loss of face for men led them to stop their wives and daughters from going to the pool. The paternal bargain, in most cases, stops at the end of secondary school, when the girl is either married or stays at home waiting to get married. In such cases, education, whether secondary or at a higher level, employment, or economic independence of girls does not necessarily empower them, as they effectively remain the property of their fathers and under their authority until they marry, at which point the responsibility is transferred to the husband (see Ebadi 2003a). The same argument applies to married women who have an income but have to hand their incomes to their husbands or families. Some of the women

in this study earned a little from hairdressing but handed their earnings to the husband, who controlled all expenditures, including everything needed for their hairdressing purposes. No financial decisions were made by these women. Neither education nor income earning made a dent in the patriarchal attitudes and behaviour of the men in question (see also Afshar 1998).

The second type of reaction arising from modernity in relation to coerced marriages often occurs among less closely knit families. Evidence is abundant whereby the unity of family has been greatly affected by social transformations and the use of coercion and increased violence has become a substitute for the previously unquestioning paternal authority and a method of self-defence for men. In such cases, education and other empowering measures for women may well be a liberating force but also have led to adverse consequences. Girls' deviations that touch on their sexuality and the family's honour provoke fierce reactions by the male members of the family and lead to violence and coercive measures. In its extreme form it can lead to honour killings. For example, the mobility created for young people in rural areas who have to go to school in a nearby town (since not every village has its own school) separates children from parents during the day and limits parental control of girls, giving the latter a certain degree of freedom and a resistance to total submission to their parents' will. The clash often leads to extreme violence. The suggestion by Kian-Thiebaut (2005) that patriarchal values are weakening and that Iranian society has become more child centered may be true in more liberal and educated urban families, but the weakening of parental, more specifically paternal, authority has not necessarily resulted in a child-centered society among the more conservative layers of the society, whether rural or urban. The result is shown in an increase in violence, suicide, and running away from home (which often leads to prostitution and a life of crime) and setting fire to themselves to be freed from the tyranny of their dominant male members of the family. An example of this was widely reported in the media, when a young woman from Lorestan graduated from engineering studies and returned home to be controlled by her six-year-old brother in the absence of her father, which drove her to set fire to herself.

Attitudes toward Education and Marriage

Attitudes towards early or temporary marriage carried no stigma for women whose marriages were stable, and their main wish of sending their daughters to secondary school was to improve their chances of a marriage. However, they viewed a delay in the age of marriage as a mixed blessing, "seeing that girls who study further do not necessarily have a better life, we are not so sure now." Akram, who has two teenage daughters, said, "Nowadays there is great pressure on our girls to continue their studies, and even our husbands have to submit to the pressure of letting the girls finish at least the secondary school. But the girls leave school and cannot find jobs, have no skills, have to sit at home, and can't find a husband either. In our community, no man who has a choice will marry an older girl who has passed her 'desirable childbearing' age. So maybe it is better to marry the girls off if they have a good suitor than let them stay at school." In their analysis, Abassi-Shavazi et al. (2003:18) also conclude that "the accepted pattern seems to be that it is good for girls to be educated, but so far the education has been mainly education for marriage and family rather than for employment." They continue that "education may have had an impact on the status of women within the marriage, but interestingly Yazd, a conservative province, maintains relatively conservative attitudes in this regard despite the fact that its education levels are actually higher than in any of the other four provinces" (see Abassi-Shavazi 2003:18-9). However, as mentioned earlier, these attitudes are not unique to Yazd and persist in many other areas in Iran.

It was evident from the discussions that marriage remained ultimately the prime value for all the women in this study, and none of them could countenance a future without a husband. A woman can be a highly respected practicing medical doctor, but if she remains unmarried she will live with her parents, since living alone for an unmarried woman usually is not an option; outside her professional life, her identity will remain uncertain, with people looking at her as an object of pity or wonder.

Although education is valued, none of the women viewed early marriage as a stigma or education as a barrier to marriage. One fourteen-year-old girl still in school mentioned that a few of her friends had already left school of their own choice to get married. She implied that

she may do the same, since her father will not allow her higher education. On the subject of the continuation of early marriage, some mothers said they did not approve of the social pressure on girls not to marry young. Their reaction to the fact that early marriages lead to early pregnancies and might affect the health of women was that access to contraceptive facilities for married women can prevent unwanted pregnancies. The suggestion of “early” marriage was met with great amusement from most of the women interviewed. It was obvious that the first two generations of women had a clear idea about their future as wives and mothers and knew what to expect of marriage. When I asked an older woman who had married at the age of thirteen what marriage meant to her, she said, “Marriage to me meant the continuity of chores. I was working from the morning till the evening in my father’s house. I moved next door to my husband’s parents’ house, and I continued to work from the morning till the evening.” Her husband and mother-in-law, who were present in the room, nodded approvingly, as if this is how things should be. The younger generation, on the other hand, seemed more uncertain and confused about what they wanted from marriage. Similar to their mothers and grandmothers, marriage remained the ultimate aim and aspiration for the younger group. Husbands should be the breadwinners and responsible for maintaining the family. Young girls did not see their own level of education as a factor that might contribute to sharing the family’s financial burdens.

I asked another woman to talk about her first memory of her marriage. She said that, curious to see her future husband, she went to the street where he lived and looked through his window. Her ten-year-old brother, who had followed her, felt his honour was offended and slapped her hard and taken her back home. There was clear evidence that the sense of honour and duty to protect the female members of the family has not diminished among the younger generation of men, i.e., brothers and sons. They continue to consider themselves the custodians of the family’s honour and are even more anxious than their fathers to protect it. While traditionally girls’ chances of meeting boys were limited, more opportunities now exist for girls to meet boys, and young men are fully aware of the risks of letting their sisters out of sight. Among these families, at least one man in each family knew at all times where all the female members of the family were. Most families did not allow their women to

leave the house without one of the *mahrams* (relatives who are not potential marriage partners—their fathers, husbands, brothers, or sons).

Identity and Marriage

For all the women in the study, marriage, motherhood, and identity remained closely linked. The identity of a married woman is clear at all times, unlike that of an unmarried woman, who is viewed as a failure and remains in limbo in her social interactions. Girls over the age of twenty are referred to as “gone sour” (*dokhtar-e-torshideh*). The length of time spent at school for girls in this study has no relation to their ultimate status. Beliefs such as “too much education jeopardises the harmony of family life, since women will not submit to their husbands” or “younger women have healthier babies” seem to remain deeply anchored, especially among men and older women. However, higher education can work against girls, since many boys leave school to learn skills and earn money, and they do not wish to marry girls who are better educated than themselves. As a result, many girls who might have been married early but have attended secondary school remain unmarried, and the future identity they so badly seek remains uncertain. Although the ideals of motherhood strongly persist and retain their links with women’s identity, they are no longer associated with having a large number of children.⁹ While having too many children is no longer fashionable, infertility remains a stigma and a major cause of divorce and of conflicts between the families. Following the successful populating policies of the government, women are now able to yield some power and make joint decisions with their husbands on their reproductive decisions, and they tend to use this shift in the position to negotiate better deals, especially for their daughters, including their educations. Regardless, such power has its limitations, and once women have achieved the number of children they want, it ceases to be effective.

The Spinster

As discussed earlier, education per se and without further training has a limited scope for improving girls’ prospect of employment. In general, working outside the home for a woman is still not viewed favourably in conservative communities. Occupations such as small-cottage industries, carpet making, hairdressing, and preparing food such

as dried herbs is what many young girls do after their studies. But these often remain as sporadic pastimes. Sheeda was one such woman. She was thirty-two years old, had completed the first three years of secondary school, lived with her parents, had no skills, and had little hope of finding a husband. Her chances of finding a husband might have been improved by going to university or working in an office, but she had done neither. Due to her age, her social network was not making any effort to find a match for her; conservative neighbours did not approve of her “advanced” education and were reluctant to allow their sons to marry her. Although the rate of consanguine marriages is high, most of her cousins were married or younger, and the potential suitors’ female relatives are on the lookout for much younger women. She regularly attends religious ceremonies and spends her time looking after her elderly parents, attending to her nieces and nephews when their parents are ill, and watching cookery programmes and foreign films. She is not judged young enough to bear children, and a likely possibility is to become a temporary wife to an older man or a second wife to a married man. Her mother, on the other hand, enjoys great power over the extended family, since her husband is old and incapacitated.

The Temporary Wife

Zhila, who is thirty years old and the youngest daughter in a family of nine children, completed her secondary education. While most of the women in her family married early, she missed her chances of marrying her cousins by attending school, after which she continued living with her mother. She found a job in an office as a secretary and came home every evening after work. One day, an acquaintance told Zhila’s mother that Zhila was the temporary wife of her boss, who also has a first permanent wife. Unlike the case of temporary marriage for underage girls, Zhila’s was a shameful one, since it had taken place purely for sexual purposes. When confronted, Zhila denied the story but under pressure admitted she had been married to the man for two years. The disgrace and loss of face for the family was beyond imagination. For a respectable family to have their unmarried young daughter secretly become the temporary wife of a married man is a true shame. No amount of pressure, however, convinced Zhila to leave her temporary husband, and when she said she loved him, the family’s fury became even stronger. Letting down the

family's honour for love was adding insult to injury. Finally, her brothers came over from another town, tied her up, and locked her in the cellar of the house until she consented to become the man's permanent second wife. Although her husband eventually divorced his first wife and married Zhila, her relatives treat her with contempt for having brought shame upon the family, and she is marginalised in social gatherings.

An increasing number of young girls are faced with the same predicament as Sheeda and Zhila and have to face the embarrassment of being a spinster, living a barren life, or becoming a temporary wife.

The Married Woman

As mentioned earlier, completing secondary education before marriage seems to have become the norm and an end in itself in Iran (Aghajanian 1999; Abassi-Shavazi 2003). Both Sheeda and Zhila had done so to no avail as far as their future was concerned. But Mahin, a twenty-year-old woman who had completed secondary school by the age of eighteen, married immediately after. Her father would have allowed her higher education if she had been admitted to Yazd University, but she did not get in and therefore had to give up her education. The anxiety about allowing their daughters to go to university outside Yazd is so great that some parents are even prepared to move to the town where their daughter has a place at university and stay there until she completes her studies.¹⁰ Mahin had a baby, but her lifestyle is identical to that of her mother's. She spends her days looking after her family, attending religious gatherings, and reading the Koran. She remains utterly financially dependent on her well-off husband, who would lose face if his wife had to work. She in no way could be considered "empowered" compared to her educated but unmarried friends and relatives. Her mother, however, enjoys great authority within the household, which Mahin may achieve in twenty years' time.

The Clerics

While the above reflects the new face of the families involved in early marriage and caught in conflicts resulting from the encounter between modernity and conservatism, the view of the religious authorities seems more definite and less paradoxical. Several of the senior clerics and, also, marriage registry clerks (who are also clerics) queried the definition of

“early” marriage when I asked about it. One lecturer in divinity at the University of Yazd, an extremely elegantly dressed cleric with a matching green cloak and socks and a hairdo that obviously had been arranged to form curls around his turban, protested that “there is no such a thing as an early marriage. When a girl is ready for marriage it is not too early. It is the late marriage which is causing the most problems nowadays.” He cited the Prophet as saying that “lucky is the girl who reaches puberty in her husband’s house.”

The marriage registry cleric agreed with this view. When I asked who decides whether a child is ready for marriage, he said, “I do,” and when asked how he knows, he replied, “I ask them a few questions, and I know whether they are ready.” When I advanced the idea that one of the most respected ayatollahs, Ayatollah Sanei, had set the age of puberty at thirteen and not nine for girls, the cleric became agitated and dismissed the Ayatollah’s edict (*fatwa*) by saying that “his holiness is entitled to his views.” When I asked the cleric about the rate of early marriages in Yazd, he looked disconcerted and said that the numbers have dropped drastically in the past few years and that only between fifteen and twenty percent of girls are now married under the age of fifteen. Both clerics were emphatic that the rise in the age of marriage is the problem and not early marriage. It may be appropriate to mention that at the start of my interviews with the clerics, I was anxious to start the conversation on a friendly note and thus mentioned my respect for traditions and that I would like to see them preserved whenever possible. The reply and body gesture was that of total dismissal, and the answer was “most traditions are rubbish, and they must go. Islam is a modern religion and can accommodate modernity.” A great deal of time was then spent explaining the application of the Islamic laws that had been devised to protect and empower women.

The Doctors

I also spoke with medical doctors who are natives of the villages around Yazd in which early marriage is practiced on a large scale. Two of them came from neighbouring villages, and each denied that early marriage was practiced in his village, accusing the “people of low culture” in the next village for condoning the practice. While they showed their up-to-date knowledge by explaining in medical terms why early marriage

involved risks, they refused to condemn it and cited some of its social and cultural advantages. One referred sarcastically to Ayatollah Sanei's fatwa and said, "[I]jtihad [*interpretation of the Koran*]¹¹ is a wonderful thing in Shia Islam. We interpret the Koran and come up with new ideas." It was clear that he did not approve of the Ayatollah's views on a later age of marriage for girls. Subsequently I found out that one of doctors had married a thirteen-year-old girl from his village.

I also spoke with some of the health practitioners visiting Yazd from Tehran who were preaching the disadvantages of early marriage. It appeared that despite a general awareness that the practice of early marriage is undesirable from a health perspective, attitudes to these marriages have altered little, and different approaches to the issue live side by side without anybody paying much attention to the consequences of the paradoxes and the confusion that these conflicting messages are creating for young people and their identity.

Poverty

Finally, poverty is identified as one of the main reasons for the continuation of early marriage in the child-rights' literature. While this may be true in some contexts, it should not be taken as a universal reason, since poverty can also delay the age of marriage, as shown by a 2003 study from the Ministry of Crusade for Agriculture on the causes for the rise in the age of marriage among rural girls in the Province of Yazd. The findings of the study reveal that a considerable number of fathers prevent their daughters' marriage so that they can continue to contribute to the family's income, and as a result many girls remain unmarried. The link between poverty and early marriage also proved not to be the case among the closely knit community in this study. None of the families studied were rich, but they were not very poor either, and none of the girls had been married off because of their parents' poverty. They all had married men of their own social standing, and the marriage had not taken place with the prospect of improving the financial situation of the family; rather, the family bonds, obligations, and traditions were the driving force behind the choice of the marriage partner. I did, however, come across some cases of men who had married early because of their parents' poverty and because their uncles had persuaded their parents to coerce their sons into marrying their daughters who could not find husbands.

Several visits to the Yazd bazaar revealed that both the assumptions of poverty encouraging early marriage and the “small” scale of the practice of early marriage were not correct. There I found a considerable number of brides-to-be who had been brought to the bazaar to buy their wedding jewellery. As I was looking at them with great curiosity, a woman I had met earlier whispered with contempt, “The only way I can tell that these poor souls are very young is in their ignorance in choosing gold and good jewellery. The look of bewilderment in their faces gives it all away.” The amount of jewellery purchased for the brides-to-be indicated that early marriage is not restricted to the poor.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have examined some of the global assumptions with regard to early marriage and the persistent belief that education is the most effective measure to prevent early marriage, which is largely driven by coercion and poverty. A conservative town in Iran with a high literacy rate and where early marriages continue to be practiced was selected to investigate these assumptions. The findings of the study demonstrated that progress in female education and employment may not necessarily lead to the empowerment of women and a decline in the practice of early marriage, and every success story appearing in the form of statistics and reports has another side.

The high level of literacy in Iran is shown not to have led automatically to the empowerment of women. Changes that have empowered women are often due to other factors, some of which leave a longer-lasting impact, while others are provisional. One such influence has been the impact of family planning, which gives women the power to negotiate their fertility but vanishes once reproductive activities are over. This is true even for illiterate women, albeit to a lesser degree. The reduction in the number of children also has adverse effects, as some men have resorted to second wives to have more children. I have argued that in the short term a few more years of education without a fundamental change in other aspects of their lives adds little value to their quality of life nor does it free them from their social bonds. Education has opened doors for girls from certain social and economic backgrounds, but at the same time it has also triggered, either directly or indirectly, inevitable reactions

among the less-advantaged layers of society. As a result, those girls who do not have the protection of a closely knit social group find themselves in an increasingly vulnerable position. It remains to be seen whether the generally accepted assumptions about empowerment and education will prove correct in the long run in Iran.

From my study in Yazd, it can be seen that the ideals of marriage as the only route to acquiring an identity have remained unchanged among three generations of women, regardless of their level of education. Although early marriage continues at a relatively high rate, the age of marriage has gone up due to the girls completing secondary or higher education, although education without the additional skills has not added any apparent real value to their lives. In some instances, it has resulted in them missing their chances for marriage among their social equals. Education has been used as a bargaining chip, especially by mothers, with the idea of improving the chances for a better marriage for their daughters, but there was no evidence girls had married up due to a higher level of education. The sanctity of family life has remained prevalent, but the expression of this sanctity differs greatly between the genders. While women's preference is for smaller families and thus for providing better opportunities for their families, men continue to link the sanctity to creating larger family units.

Finally, to return to the question asked earlier: can we say that new rules are being established? At a microlevel there may be some consistencies in behaviour in the short term, but there are also some indications of ongoing alterations and expectations, norms and ideals. These rules may gradually shift from the patriarchal control of women to global and local influences such as the question of women's and children's human rights and women's agency as choice makers and expecting to become central in such a process. The transformations in the patriarchy itself, which will be inevitable but unpredictable in their form and force, will shape the new perspectives on gender relations. Whatever the outcome of such interactions, there is hope that gender relations will find equilibrium, albeit via a bumpy road.

In the long run, several influences are all likely to impact young women's aspirations, e.g., a more open society in which a dialogue exists between young people, access to the outside world through, for example, TV, and new values introduced through communication such as the

internet. The diminishing importance of protecting the collective values and obligations towards the kin group following the drastic reduction in the size of the family; the development of a more individualistic personality among the young; the weakening of parental control; a shift in the way young people meet their future marriage partners; and also various legal changes giving women more equal rights with regard to marriage, all may help girls and young women have more freedom and a choice over marriage. The question remains whether this alternative will provide greater harmony and stability in the family.

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NOTES

1. See Fargue in "Terminating Marriage" in Hopkins, N and The Forum for Marriage 2000.

2. This figure varies depending on the type of survey conducted. It also refers to the official rate of employment and does not include the contribution of women to the informal economy. The 2000 Iran Demographic Health Survey gives the rate of employment for women as 10.5 for urban areas and as 19.5 for rural areas. On average, we can perhaps say that the rate of female employment is around 15 percent (personal communication with Abassi-Shavazi August 2005). For a detailed study of female employment in Iran, see Mansour Zarra-Nezhad 1998, Employment of Women in Iran, SOAS Economic Digest, December 1998 2(2). See also Demographic Transition and its Implications on Women in the Labour Force. This article states there is little sign that women in the countries in which fertility has dropped are becoming more active. In Iran and Turkey, preliminary data shows that the percentages of all working women and all educated working women have both decreased. In Iran, the percentage of women with a high school education who joined the labour force decreased from 19 percent in 1990 to 13 percent in 1997, while in Turkey it declined from 46 percent in 1988 to 33 percent in 1998. http://www.ert.org.eg/html/economic_00/html.body_demographic.html.

3. The Convention on the Right of the Child (CRC) (1988) defined anybody under the age of eighteen as a child.

4. Interviews with marriage counsellors in Tehran and Ardebil and marriage registration offices in Tehran and Yazd.

5. Various factors determine the level of female literacy, such as primary, secondary, or higher education. This figure is a general one for the total of the literate population.

6. Figures given by the Office of the President published on 12 May 2005 mention that Tehran, with an average of 15.6, and Yazd, with an average of 3.24, have the highest and lowest rates of divorce respectively.

7. Personal interviews with sociologists.

8. Confidential reports and personal interviews with academics and practitioners confirm this in several provinces.

9. The demographic transition in Iran has been discussed abundantly, and it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss this. For examples, see Abassi-Shavazi, Mehryar, and Hoodfar.

10. Some of the wealthy community leaders in Yazd have funded a girls' boarding house at Tehran University to secure their safety.

11. Ijtihad is unique to Shia Islam and allows changes to the original text.

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