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## Early Marriage in Educationally Expanding Societies



Social scientists tend to associate educational attainment with age of marriage, since numerous studies have shown that women with more years of schooling tend to delay their entry into first union. This thesis focuses its attention on some of the countries where there has been a delay in the timing of marriage, as well as increased levels of female education, although it presents three different scenarios on the effect of the change in educational structure and the prevalence of early marriages.

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As adolescence progresses, having more or less freedom of choice influences the different events that characterize the transition to adulthood for women, with the initiation of sexual activity, first marriage and childbearing often being perceived as key steps in family formation.

In the domain of marriage, in particular, even though in the last decades, an increase in the age at marriage has occurred in most countries worldwide, still to date many young girls will keep marrying before their eighteenth birthday. This practice prevails across much of Africa, Asia and Latin America, and in some form or another exists throughout the world. To date, although regional variation within national boundaries can be found, an early median age at first marriage is still prevalent in Middle/West Africa and the South of Asia, followed by the East/Southern

Africa, Southeast Asia, and to a lesser extent the Caribbean and Central America. However, national figures can often veil an elevated prevalence of early marriage for some regions or population sectors.

In the last decades, nonetheless, early marriage has been slightly diminishing, more so in some countries than others. Hence, this changing pattern arises one main question: Why is the postponement of marriage really taking place? There are two main forces usually employed for its explanation: education and labour force participation.

There is a general awareness among social scientists of the association between age at union formation and the educational level achieved, in which education is seen as being a strong agent on family change. The fact that studies show that, systematically, women with more years of schooling tend to delay their entry into first union, brings upon the idea that in a scenario in which a great educational expansion has been taking place, marriage timing will evidently alter. Hence, one would expect to observe later ages at first marriage. And, due to the fact that in many countries there has been an increase in the age at marriage as well as an educational expansion, occurring almost in parallel, both phenomena have often been linked together. Consequently, in terms of the prevalence of early marriages, the expected outcome would be a descent of child brides as more girls reach higher levels of education.

Figure 1: Median age at first marriage among women aged 25-49 (national and by sub-regions). Data source: ICF International, 2012. MEASURE DHS STATcompiler.

Hence, in the present thesis on early marriage, instead of performing in-depth analysis of those regions in which child marriage is a profoundly rooted practice, the focus is mainly on some of those countries in which there is some change in the marriage timing towards its delay as well as an increase of female schooling levels.

Thus, one developing country for each continental region -that is India, Kenya and Colombia, comprise the Doctoral dissertation's major body-, with India representing the one which child brides have historically been a common feature in their society; while certain populations within the Kenyan context have also practiced such early marriage timing; and in Colombia unions happen somewhat later.

Yet, although these three countries have seen relatively impressive gains in their female educational expansion, they present three different scenarios in terms the possible effect of the change in the educational structure on marriage timing and on the prevalence of early marriage specifically. So, with data from the *Integrated Public Use of Microdata Series* international project (IPUMSi) and the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) Program, the central aim in the present research has been to provide some evidence on this regard by comparing three different experiences -India, Kenya and Colombia- since they have all undergone major advances in terms of educational achievement, as well as changes in their early marriage prevalence.

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### References

“Tying the knot and kissing childhood goodbye? Early marriage in educationally expanding societies”, Sonia Chager Navarro doctoral thesis, supervised by doctors Albert Esteve Palós and Joaquín Recaño Valverde and read at the Department of Geography.

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