Título: Nuptiality Patterns in Afghanistan: a study for the Capital city and five selected provinces

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Palabras-clave: Nupcialidad; Casamiento precoz; Género; Afganistán
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0. Introduction

Nuptiality is a socio-demographic process that can have many and most relevant development implications. In particular, it can play an important role in the demographic dynamics when a number of elements converge, as it seems to be the case in Afghanistan: exposure to pregnancy is only within marriage; marital fertility occurs as a natural process related to the level of fecundity of couples; the use of contraception is limited; there is no social norms geared to protect the women and children’s health by preventing too close and too many pregnancies, thus regulate fertility within marriage (for example a significant practice of abstinence in the port-partum period). Under those conditions, the moment when women enter into marriage, the probability of marriage by age, and the final proportion of ever married persons largely determine the reproductive process: the level as well as the age pattern of fertility.

Beyond its demographic implications, nuptiality also plays an important role on gender issues, on the reproductive health outcomes, on the children rights and on human capital formation of the younger generations. Child marriages and early marriages, as well as the spousal age difference are correlated with gender equality and the status of girls and women in society. When girls enter and remain in the education system for longer time, they not only access knowledge and skills that better prepare them for life, but they also enter marriage in more gender equitable basis. They would have acquired skills which may open opportunities for jobs and the possibility of generating their own income, reducing economic dependence. They would enter marriage physically and emotionally more mature, better prepared to have children and provide them with adequate care, reducing infant and child morbidity and mortality. All these elements are powerful factors in the social and economic development, and in different ways they feature in several of the targets adopted to monitor progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goal.

It is known that in most countries in the South-Central Asia fertility takes place only within marriage; hence, nuptiality is an important component of the reproductive process. This is particularly true in Afghanistan, a country characterized by an early age at first birth, short birth intervals and the continuation of childbirth up to advanced ages (UNFPA-Afghanistan, 2012).

This paper explores the formation of the nuptiality pattern considering entrance at marriage, distribution of the population by marital status and develops synthetic measures of marriage. Finally, an approximation to the potential determinants of the nuptiality pattern is made by using education as a proxy of the socio-economic levels in the population.
The Universe of this study
Data are from the Socio-Demographic and Economic Survey (SDES), a 50% sample size household survey applied in Kabul the capital city and other five Afghan provinces (Bamiyan, Dakundi, Ghor, Parwan and Kapisa) between approximately, 2011-2014. The SDES was conducted by the Afghan government via the Central Statistics Office (CSO) supported by UNFPA/Afghanistan and sponsored by the Japanese and British governments.

Apart for knowing that Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries in the world, it is also known that it is currently experiencing a relative peace, political stability and implementing social policies aiming to improve children and youth social conditions. Specifically to the population surveyed, it is important, also, to consider that their surrounded social and environment context can be defined in general terms as a very vulnerable. More than two thirds of the women at reproductive age have no schooling, the main economic activity is agricultural subsistence and household conditions are rather precarious.

1. The nuptiality pattern
This section analyses behaviour patterns of entering into marriage; since childbearing in the Afghan society only takes place inside marriage, the ever married population is also analyzed. The age difference between husband and wife is analysed because of its demographic role and because it is an indicator of gender relationships.

1.1. The Beginning of Exposure to a Reproductive Life
The beginning of exposure to a reproductive life is here depicted: firstly, by using a well known measure of nuptiality, the singulate mean age at marriage (SMAM); secondly, a more detail look is given to the proportion of married at very young years.

Table 1 shows SMAM for men and women and the corresponding differences between sexes. It is worth to remember that the estimation of SMAM assumes stable populations, i.e., without demographic changes, which is not the case in Afghanistan. Nuptiality has been subject of social policies intending to delay the entrance at marriage, age composition of marital status is changing, hence, these results are representative for the youngest generations.

1 Details of the Afghanistan Social context at provincial level is well documented in: World bank (2011)
2 Original idea from Hajnal (1953), based on the concept of number of years lived by a cohort or generation in the state of celibacy; when applied to a cross-sectional data, no changes among cohorts relative to the way they married is assumed.
Among those never married nor engaged the female SMAM value rank from 20.6 to nearly 22 years. The province of Ghor is an outlier, with a female SMAM of 16.7. The male's SMAM is around three years older than female's in all provinces, with no relevant differences by province. The national SMAM according to the 2010 AMS is 21.5, while neighbouring countries have slightly higher values.

The SDES also provides information about those never married but engaged; this sort of marital status needs to be considered as an analytic category diverse from single population. While it demands no exposure to the risk of sexual intercourse –particularly among Afghan women – similar to the case of those never married nor engaged, it also means that engaged women have a quite high probability of ending up marrying indeed.

The high probability that the girl will be marriage is based on the tradition that if a woman and her family are honourable, an engagement will not be broken. Even if her fiancé has married another woman an engaged woman is required to marry him (Smith 2009).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marriage indicator</th>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Kabul</th>
<th>Parwan</th>
<th>Kapisa</th>
<th>Ghor</th>
<th>Daykundi</th>
<th>Bamiyan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a) SMAM for married plus engaged population</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>24.9</td>
<td>23.9</td>
<td>24.3</td>
<td>19.9</td>
<td>23.6</td>
<td>24.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>21.2</td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>20.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Difference between sexes</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) SMAM for married population (excludes engaged population)</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>25.9</td>
<td>25.2</td>
<td>25.6</td>
<td>22.7</td>
<td>24.4</td>
<td>25.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td>21.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Difference between sexes</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) SMAM difference between married plus engaged and just married (excluding engaged) populations</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: SDES- 2011-2014, UNFPA-Afghanistan and CSO of Afghanistan (Micro data)

The relevance of the never married but engaged is based on gender equity and girl’s rights reasons. It is still frequent that engagement involving children, particularly girls precedes forced marriages (Smith, 2009) that on turn expose young women to unknown situations. Even after the end of Taliban rule in Afghanistan, some traditional customs related to marriage apparently remain, particularly in rural areas. “Parents in

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3 Data from DHS surveys, for instance, indicate the following SMAM values:
- Egypt (2014): 22.6
- Indonesia (2012): 22.1
- Pakistan (2012-2013): 23.3
Afghanistan are likely to marry their daughters at young ages in order to secure their future” (www.unicef.org; access at 7-10-2015). Thus, it is common between young girls to become betrothed, while they wait to reach the aged need to get married with their future husbands. Although there are no reliable statistics, LANDINFO (2011, page. 6) quoting UNAMA (2010), reports that "Occasionally, marriage agreements are negotiated for children as young as one year old”.

While engaged, girls are considered neither married nor single; hence they are classified in this particular status as out of the marriage market. A far as fertility is concerned, the difference between single and engaged status is irrelevant, since neither is associated to a pregnancy exposure that is supposed to start with marriage. However, from a gender perspective this is relevant. The engaged status in general is associated with family decisions made on behalf of young girls. The prevalence of this practice is a concern among decision makers and important for policy decisions.

For the female population, if those engaged are not considered single anymore, the SMAM oscillates around age 21 in three provinces, and near 22 in Kabul and its neighbour Parwan. The exception is Ghor, where SMAM is below 17; since the SMAM is an average value, the situation in Ghor is rather disturbing. If only strictly married people are considered, the SMAM increases by around a year, again with the exception of Ghor, where actual entrance at marriage occurs two years later on average, indicating a significant prevalence of the "engagement" practice.

In the case of men, when just the married status is considered the SMAM increases to near 25 years of age, which means that age difference of entrance at marriage between sexes slightly increases –a difference of three to four years approximately- in these six provinces. These results are coherent, since it is expected that on average men would marry older than women.

The overview of Table 1 reveals two patterns: one with a very early entrance at marriage in Ghor, Daykundi and Bamiyan, at an approximate mean age of 20 years or younger for women, where the earliest age corresponds to Ghor. The second pattern includes Kabul, Parwan and Kapisa, with a mean age at marriage just below 23; this latter group includes the capital city and have a higher level of urbanization, which in turn is associated to older ages at marriage. Were these six provinces a representative sample of the total Afghan population, it could be said that compared to neighbour countries Afghanistan has a nuptiality pattern with an age of entrance at marriage similar to that found in the Region, unlike what would be expected according available literature, which attribute significant earlier age at marriage to Afghanistan

As mentioned before, the SMAM is a useful measure in the presence of a stable population, which currently may not be the case in Afghanistan, considering that

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marriage patterns have evolved during the 10 years preceding data collection for these six surveys, when pro-active programmes to reduce early marriage where implemented\(^5\). In addition, the implementation of national policies promoting girls school attendance are known to have successful impact, and initiatives aimed to abolish child marriages and early marriage were in place; hence the values of the estimated SMAM may be capturing some of the impact of these policy initiatives, and this may be the reason why they are higher than initially expected. Misreporting of married young man and women is, notwithstanding, an issue to be considered in further analyses.

### 1.2. Early Marriage

Early marriage—understood as any marriage carried out before the girl is physically and psychologically ready to shoulder the responsibilities of marriage and childbearing\(^6\)—is, above all, a human rights violation\(^7\). This phenomenon is known to be a reality for many young women in Afghanistan. A number of publications mention the prevalence of child/early marriage as an issue of high concern, reckoning that roughly half of females in Afghanistan marry before their 16th birthday\(^8\); UNFPA web site mentions that "Although getting reliable data is difficult, the most recent surveys estimate some 46 per cent of Afghani women are married by age 18, 15 per cent of them before age 15\(^9\).

Table 2 shows the status of both the *ever married population* and those *already in engagements* as a unique category; it also includes the sex ratio, indicating how many girls are in this category relatively to boys. It must be stated that no children whatever the sex should be married or engaged by the age of 15\(^10\). Although five out of the six SDES surveys indicate that marriage before puberty does exist, it does not appear to be a frequent practice, except in Ghor where it is relevant indeed.

The proportion of engaged or ever married (EEM) girls at age 15 is below 4 per cent in all cases, with the exception of Ghor, where 17 per cent of girls are in this condition. If data are reliable, when compared with standard models of age nuptiality patterns (Coale and Trussell, 1974), early female marriage is statistically significant at ages 12-14 in Daykundi and Bamiyan and slightly before age 15 in the neighbour

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\(^5\) The UNAMA/OHCHR report mentions the enacting of the *Law on the Elimination of Violence against Women* (EVAW law) in August 2009, that criminalizes, for the first time in Afghanistan, child marriage, and forced marriage among other actions to protect women. (UNAMA/OCHR, 2011)

\(^6\) An Early Marriage is any marriage below the age of 18. Child marriage is any marriage before puberty period (12 years old) (UNFPA, 2012).

\(^7\) http://data.unicef.org/child-protection/child-marriage, access at 11/07/2015 15:58:24

\(^8\) See for instance: Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission Economic and Social Rights Report in Afghanistan-III (2008); APHI/MoPH (2011); UNFPA (2012b)


\(^10\) Information about marital status among population younger than 15 was disregarded due to small number of cases and different procedures relating data collection and processing among the six surveys.
provinces of Kabul, Parwan and Kapisa. In the particular case of Ghor, again, when compared with standard nuptiality schedules the number of EEM girls is statistically significant before age 12; that is before puberty, which reveals the presence of child marriage. When comparing this status by sex, we find four provinces where the number of girls in this condition is threefold relatively to the number of boys. Different from what was observed in the previous age group, the extreme situation corresponds to Kapisa; this situation may emerge because of age misreporting among the very young women or misleading answers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Ever married and engaged young population (Per cent)</th>
<th>Sex Ratio*</th>
<th>Abs. number in the ages group in thousands (N)**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a) Age: 15***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kabul</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parwan</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kapisa</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghor</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daykundi</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bamiyan</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) Ages 16 to 17</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kabul</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parwan</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kapisa</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghor</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>31.9</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daykundi</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bamiyan</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) Ages 18 to 19</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kabul</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parwan</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>31.8</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kapisa</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>28.8</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghor</td>
<td>42.7</td>
<td>75.9</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daykundi</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>38.1</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bamiyan</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>34.3</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) Ages 20 to 24</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kabul</td>
<td>30.5</td>
<td>61.3</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parwan</td>
<td>37.4</td>
<td>66.4</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kapisa</td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td>61.4</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghor</td>
<td>73.3</td>
<td>90.5</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daykundi</td>
<td>42.6</td>
<td>70.5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bamiyan</td>
<td>30.5</td>
<td>61.3</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Number of girls at the corresponding ages divided by the number of boys at the same ages.
** The actual number of persons (N) is included here to ensure that figures have included enough observations to calculate the indicators.
*** Uses age groups 14, 15 and 16 to avoid fluctuations of small numbers among ever married population.
Source: SDES- 2011-2014, UNFPA-Afghanistan and CSO of Afghanistan (Micro data)
Marriage before age 18 is considered early marriage. As observed in the previous age groups, early marriage does happen, but the prevalence is relatively low: the highest values are below 10 percent. Again, the only exception is Ghor, where the proportion of EEM girls at ages 16-17 is more than 30 percent. The analysis of sex ratios, as in the previous age group, revealed that this condition affects girls more severely than boys. The engagement or even formal wedding of girls very often may be a way to strength family status or even a strategy to escape from poverty (WCLRF, 2008). It is also known that parents in Afghanistan are likely to marry their daughters at young ages in order to secure their future.

Marriage at ages 18 or older shows proportions of EEM much higher than at earliest ages. At age 18-19, this proportion is about 30 percent among women. The exception is Ghor, as it happened among girls younger than 18. The larger proportion appears in Ghor, reaching 75 percent of all women (see panel (c)). EEM young men are still few, representing around 10 per cent (but above 40 per cent in Ghor). Again in this age group the prevalence is a lot higher for female: two to three young females are EEM for every male.

The proportion of EEM at age group 20 to 24 increases notably and in most of cases represents around two thirds of all women. In Ghor most female are EEM before reaching age 25. Males represent about one third and the sex ratio indicates the start of an equilibrium trend, where the number of men and women ever married are about the same.

It is well known that marriage is strongly associated with certain patterns of the socio-cultural contexts; populations with more traditional values in general present a more universal marriage. It is important to assess the prevalence of early marriage according to a proxy of differentials in life conditions and/or secularism. The proxy we consider here is residence in either urban or rural areas. Urban population, in general, has better life conditions (higher education and income) than rural population and tends to be more exposed to innovations and foreign ideas typical of the secularism.

Figure 1 shows significant differences among urban/rural proportions. While for the total population the proportion EEM was well below 10 per cent in the age group 16-17, in rural areas the proportion is above this percentage. The presence of early marriage in the rural areas of Ghor reaches a sort of disturbing figure: about 30 per cent of girls below 15 are ever married or engaged, and around 40 per cent are ever married before becoming 18 years old, plus 17 per cent who are already engaged. This

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11 www.girlsnotbrides.org, access at 7-10-2015
12 www.unicef.org; access at 7-10-2015
13 Attitudinal dimensions on modernization that are usually a proxy for secularism were not collected in the SDES data.
14 Association of secularism and marital status is widely discussed in the literature. Beresford (2011), in a research that includes muslin population provides a number of related studies.
15 Considering that urban population represents about 10 per cent of the total population, with the exception of Kabul, it is worth to remember that figures may be affected by random fluctuations.
proportion explains the sort of news and pictures spreading by the media (See Appendix 2) and encompassed by international aid agencies. At ages 20-24, the proportions of EEM in either urban or rural areas are rather similar, although the lower values correspond regularly to the former. Furthermore, in Bamiyan there is no difference in practice, and Kapisa has higher proportion of EEM in the urban areas.

Figure 1. Bamiyan, Daykundi, Ghor, Kabul, Kapisa and Parwan (2011-2014) Proportion (percent) of engaged and ever married (EEM) females at selected ages

Source: SDES-2011-2014, UNFPA-Afghanistan and CSO of Afghanistan (Micro data)

Summarizing, with the only exception of Ghor, the SDES data reveal proportions of young married women well below the very high levels frequently referred to in the literature for the previous decades. The SDES registers relative low prevalence of early marriages, and it shows indirect evidence of child marriage only in the case of Ghor. Indeed, according to SDES data early marriage proportions are far from reaching 20 or 30 per cent, with the exception of Ghor. In any case, entrance at marriage accelerates immediately after the girl surpasses ages at which marriage is a fundamental violation of human rights. EEM proportions appears to increase tenfold or more between ages 16-17 and 18-19 as shown in panel (b) and (c) in Table 2. The huge increase implies that either the society waits the girl to reach legal age to marriage or part of the data–given the sensitivity of the issue–are unreliable, overstating age at marriage.

Exploring the SDES nuptiality data in relation to Coale-Trussell nuptiality patterns, there is evidence that the experience reflected in the reports of cohorts older than 25 differ from that of the younger cohorts. Patterns for ages older than 25 reflect ages at the start of nuptiality younger than those associated with the reports of the younger cohorts. Most probably this is evidence of recent positive change toward later marriage; yet, it could also relate to age misreporting. Further analyses would be needed in order to better discern on this issue. However, at this stage the authors trust the
evidence that young people are marrying at later ages. Differences according urban-rural residence are unclear. Whether modern attitudes (or secularism) are influencing marital status calls for further research.

1.3. The Marital Status and the Ever Married Age Pattern

To establish the overall situation of the marital status in these provinces, this section incorporates first an overview of the total marital composition and then it explores the patterns of the ever married population, with an emphasis on the currently married population. The marital composition of the population in the six provinces appears in Figure 2, by age, for males and females.

The single and currently married nuptiality statuses are the most prevalent in the population. The single population covers a wider area in the male category than in the sector corresponding to women, mainly at ages higher than 18, which highlights the practice of men marrying older than women. The single status is virtually nonexistent shortly after age 30. The highest proportion of non-married but engaged population corresponds to Ghor. In Ghor the engaged status is significantly prevalent well before age 14 for both male and female.

At the age of 70 and over, female widowhood (around 60 per cent) is significantly higher than male widowhood (less than 20 per cent). The ratio of widowers to widows is about 4.0, which is high compared to selected countries from other continents and/or countries at a higher level of development, where most often this ratio is below 3. However, Iran holds a ratio (above 5) higher than the six provinces, which may indicate a pattern of relative high female mortality in the region, or a cultural feature where widows would not remarry.

Figure 3 presents an integrated picture of the marital status through the evolution of the ever married proportion by sex and age. Let's set aside the youngest age groups, which hold proportions of EEM that are lower than what previous studies indicate; let’s assume also that no changes in the nuptiality patterns have occurred among women 25 or older. Under these assumptions the proportion of EEM, presented in Figure 3, would represent the cohort behaviour by age and sex for the six provinces; dot lines are always for women. The values in Figure 3 indicate that the entrance at marriage occurs in a rather brief age span: proportions are virtually 100 per cent by age 30, which indicates that marriage is almost universal for men and women. Men's entrance at marriage is delayed relatively to women.\(^\text{16}\)

\(^{16}\) A more detailed study of age at marriage of women from older generations will consider inferences of when had women in cohorts 25-29 and 30-34 entered into marriage, by using Coale and Trussell models; a first estimate was obtained, which indicates that child and early marriages had been prevalent among these cohorts.
Figure 2. Bamiyan, Daykundi, Ghor, Kabul, Kapisa and Parwan (2011-2014)
Marital status by age and sex (percent)

Source: SDES- 2011-2014, UNFPA-Afghanistan and CSO of Afghanistan (Micro data)
Figure 3. Bamiyan, Daykundi, Ghor, Kabul, Kapisa and Parwan (2011-2014)
Proportions of Engaged and Ever married by Age and Sex - percent

(*) At ages 60 or more, proportions are estimated as the average of three age groups.
Source: SDES- 2011-2014, UNFPA-Afghanistan and CSO of Afghanistan (Micro data)

Figure 4. Bamiyan, Daykundi, Ghor, Kabul, Kapisa and Parwan (2011-2014)
Proportions of Currently Married by Age and Sex - percent

(*) At ages 60 or more, proportions are estimated as the average of three age groups.
Source: SDES- (2011-2014) UNFPA-Afghanistan and CSO of Afghanistan (Micro data)

As fertility is only associated with a currently married couples, it is also important to consider the evolution of the currently married status, which is portrayed in
Figure 4, showing the evolution of the currently married group by age and sex. As it occurred in Figure 3, these proportions increase very fast as age increases. However, different from the case of the EEM category, the proportion of those currently married reaches the highest point at ages 35-39; in Ghor currently married women reach the peak at ages 30-35. Then some women start to leave the married status, thereby this proportion declines with age. Among men the decline is slower and at later ages. A fast decrease is observed at advanced ages; despite inconsistent variations, the proportion of currently married women reaches values of 20 per cent or less (see Figure 4).

Regarding most advanced ages, most of the elderly population are predominantly in widowhood status without much difference by sex. At younger ages widowhood status behaves differently by sex. Among the population aged 40 or more, around 95 per cent of women who are out of marriage are indeed widows. The equivalent proportions for widowers are about 92 per cent or 93 per cent. The sex ratio, however, is suggestive of a very specific context. Figure 5 presents sex ratios for both widowhood and divorced/separated population for ages 40 or more\textsuperscript{17}. Continued/straight lines are always referred to widowhood; dotted lines correspond to the category divorced/separated.

As a ratio above 1 means there are more women than men, Figure 5 indicates a very high ratio already before the end of the reproductive period. Then it tends to decrease with age. By age 40 in all provinces there are more than 5 widows for every widower. The set of curves suggest three types of shapes: firstly, an extreme situation corresponding to Kabul, Kapisa and Parwan (the last two are Kabul's neighbours): there are more than 10 widows for every 1 widower below age 50. Secondly, at an intermediary position is Daykundi and finally, the lowest widowhood sex ratio corresponds to Ghor and Bamiyan.

In general, this sex ratio among elderly presents a strong association with the mortality level: the lower the life expectancy, the most balanced the sex ratio. One common explanation could be that at very low life expectancy level, certain causes of death -predominantly exogenous- like famine, drought, flooding would affect elderly men and women equally, levelling off mortality differentials, which would become apparent in the sex ratio. At relative younger ages, another factor that would tend to reduce the number of men relative to women in the status of widowhood is a more frequent remarriage among widowers than among widows (thus reducing proportionally more the number of men who remain in widowhood status). Thus, if anything, the different values from the sex ratio for widowhood may indicate different mortality levels (or distribution of deaths by causes) in these six provinces as well as differences in the remarriage rates by sex among the population in widowhood.

\textsuperscript{17} Ratio of widows to widowers by age. Idem for the separated/divorced population by sex.
Lastly, the sex ratio among the separated/divorced population (dotted lines) is most often less than one, indicating fewer women than men in this category. With the information available at this stage it is not possible to discern whether this may be due to misreporting (some women may not be reported as divorced when they are) or it may be due to a higher remarriage rate among divorced women than men, which is unlikely. Apart from Kapisa and some individual values from other provinces, which are probably associated with random variations due to small numbers, the ratio is less than one, so separated/divorced women are most frequently fewer than men.

Figure 5. Bamiyan, Daykundi, Ghor, Kabul, Kapisa and Parwan (2011-2014) Female to Male Widowhood and Divorced/Separated Ratios

The sex ratio trends presented here are symptomatic of significant gender inequality in these categories.

1.4. Age Difference among Spouses

As seen in previous pages, the mean age at marriage indicate that men, on average, marry at older ages than their fiancée/spouse. This age differential is very important from a demographic perspective as well as from a gender equity point of view. Hence, a more detailed analysis of the age difference among partners is presented in this section. From the demographic point of view this age difference matters because it affects the time span of exposure to reproduction. On the one side, it is related to the risk of marriage disruption due to widowhood: the older the man, the higher the risk of
women to become widows. Also, since maternity takes place only inside marriage, the fertility level will be affected if the woman becomes widow well before the end of her reproductive life. At the other side, it is recognized that marked age differences -being him older than her- is an indicator of unequal gender relationships, mainly in traditional societies. Age differences among couples are plotted in Figure 6.

Three spousal age difference groups, related to women's age, are considered:

- **Negative difference (being the woman older than the men):** this age difference is not a usual practice in traditional societies where men are supposed to be the unique breadwinners, the household head and women have secondary social roles; the common pattern is the men to have a younger partner unless other specific social rules apply.

- **0.0 to 5.0:** those couples with a "reasonable social balanced" age difference among partners, being him up to 5 years older than her; for the same reasons mentioned before and also due to a natural tendency in marriages, this range would be the commonest in Afghan settings.

- **6.0 or more:** couples where a wide age gap exist, with a husband much older than his wife, which may be and indicator of unbalanced gender relationship.

The age difference pattern that emerges is rather similar in the six provinces, with few specific differences in Ghor (see Figure 6). Firstly, at any given women's age, the proportion married with younger men is always below 5 per cent, at least up to age 50. After age 50 the proportion seems to signal an increasing trend, which is most evident in the case of Ghor, but it is clear also in Bamiyan. Whether the upward trend after age 50 in these provinces indicate remarriage of older widows with relatives of the deceased mate is a matter of further research; these two provinces are more rural and traditional, contexts where this practice is associated to the elder women's autonomy and welfare (See Smith, 2009). The prevailing patterns of large age differential which appear in the profiles presented in Figure 6 may have also some association with polygamy, even though in the SDES data polygamy does not show a high prevalence. In any case, those profiles suggest an association with unequal gender relationships, which would also call for further research.

It is important to note that at the younger ages the most frequent situation (highest proportion) is that of a "reasonable balanced" age difference (0 to 5 years) between partners. At older women's ages this proportion tends to decline, a probable result of couples dissolving due to higher male mortality levels than female. This hypothesis finds support when we consider the case of Ghor where mortality level is the highest among the six provinces (see thematic report on Mortality). Despite some erratic behaviour in these proportions, an increasing trend by age is noted, most likely

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18 Mortality risks by age are expected to be always higher for men than for women.
associated to couples dissolving faster when women are married to oldest mates who died.

Figure 6. Bamiyan, Daykundi, Ghor, Kabul, Kapisa and Parwan (2011-2014)
Age difference among spouses by women's age*

At the same time, the proportion of couples where the husband is 6 or more years older, which is less frequent among young women, tends to increase becoming more prevalent among older women. This pattern is clearer up to age 50, after this age some random oscillations in the proportions in this category are observed. After approximately women’s age 60, the proportion of women whose partner is 6 or more years older than her tends to decrease, probably due to the widowhood effect.

Synthesizing, these patterns indicate a process of change in nuptiality. Married women in the younger age groups at the time of the survey present a relative higher probability of holding a "reasonable balanced" age difference with their partners. This is not the case for women currently aged 40 or more. In almost 50 per cent of these cases, they had married to a man 6 or more years older. Most probably these women have married before they were 20/25 years old or decades before the survey’s date. From the patterns of the proportions by age for this category and those in the other categories, it is
possible to infer that the practice of marriages with age differences of 6 or more years between spouses is less common nowadays. The demographic impact of this change can be very important and needs to be properly assessed.

2. Socio-Economic Differentials in the Nuptiality Age Pattern: The Role of Female Education

Previous sections revealed that marriage is virtually universal at ages as early as 30 or 35. Also, life style—associated with rural-urban area of residence—has little impact on age patterns of marriage. This section explores evidences of an association between nuptiality and education in the six provinces.

Table 3 measures the influence of education into the nuptiality patterns considering two age groups: 20-24, when most of the population is not longer in the educational system and 30-34, when the entrance at marriage is almost finished and factors as widowhood or separation that may affect declaration are not yet significant.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Provinces</th>
<th>Age group 20-24</th>
<th>Age group 35-39</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kabul</td>
<td>-12.7</td>
<td>-2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bamiyan</td>
<td>-9.5</td>
<td>-8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daykundi</td>
<td>-20.9</td>
<td>-16.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghor</td>
<td>-26.1</td>
<td>-7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kapisa</td>
<td>-35.2</td>
<td>-3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parwan</td>
<td>-25.2</td>
<td>-8.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(*) Estimated as: [(Proportion of ever married Population with 1-6 years of Education Proportion) - (Proportion of Ever married Population with no-schooling)] / (Proportion of Ever married Population with no-schooling) *100
Source: SDES-2011-2014 UNFPA-Afghanistan and CSO of Afghanistan (Micro data)

The proportion of ever married among young people (aged 20-24) with 1 to six years of education decreases in all provinces compared to those without schooling. The impact of access to education is more accentuated among young women (first column in Table 3). The lowest proportion is noted in Kabul, where marriage among very young women is less frequent relatively to other provinces, as already seen. In all other provinces, proportion of ever marriage women decreases in more than 20% among women with some schooling. This is a strong evidence of association between delaying marriage and education among women. Impact of education on boy's entrance to marriage is also present, although less accentuated. Minor differences correspond to Kabul and neighbour provinces Parwan and Kapisa, where, also among boy's early entrance at marriage is not more the norm.
Impact of education at older ages is less evident mainly because marriage is still highly valued in the Afghan society. It is important, however, to consider a peculiar reverse noted for the male population: variation is positive in most of the cases. Although variation is relatively small, it would mean that the proportion of married men increases when education level increases; given the social context, where the man is the exclusive breadwinner, this may probably indicate that more educated men –meaning in better socio economic position– can better afford to get married, which translate in higher proportions of ever married men when they achieve, at least, basic education.

**Figure 7. Ghor, Daykundi, Bamiyan, Kabul, Kapisa and Parwan (2011-2014)**

Proportion of ever married by sex and age according to educational attainment

Source: SDES- (2011-2014) UNFPA-Afghanistan and CSO of Afghanistan (Micro data)

In short, there are differences in the age pattern of marriage by educational levels. Educational achievements are clearly associated to lower proportions of married young
population - particularly girls. As school attendance improvement is an ongoing process, it may be expected that universal inclusion into the educational system will contribute to delay entrance into marriage at early ages –particularly among women. Impact of education is less evident among adult population. Yet, without discharging the possibility of frailty data quality or random variations due to small the proportion of population with some schooling, patterns among men may suggest the possibility that those with the highest education may intensify the marriage process relatively more than those with lower level of schooling. Data not show here presented similar pattern when the category "more than 7 years of education for older population is considered.

Figure 7 shows the proportion of ever married by sex and three educational levels: no education, one to six years of education, and seven or more. On the one side, in all provinces women enter into marriage at younger ages than men; this is true whatever the educational level. On the other side, also in all provinces more educated young men and women have the lowest proportions of ever married by the same ages.

3. Discussion of results and policy implications

The results of the nuptiality analysis confirm that marriage is universal in the six provinces covered by the SDES programme. It is also a very fast process: in a relative short period of time since the onset of nuptiality almost 100 per cent of women and men have married; in the case of women it starts earlier and it is faster.

The widespread perception that Afghan women enter into marriage at very early ages has been confirmed only in Ghor. Whilst it is said that most girls are married before age 18, this is not the case for the young generations in five of the surveyed provinces. Although there are an important number of girls already engaged or married by age 18, the proportion represents a third or less of all women with ages between 18 and 19, except in Ghor where this proportion is 76 for girls and 43 for boys.

The proportion of ever married women at age 20 or older increases very fast with age. Almost 100 per cent are married by age 30, which confirms that among older cohorts marriage had occurred at very early ages. Another evidence of positive change is that prevalence of a wide age difference among couples, being him older than her, is decreasing among the younger generations. Among young couples, age differences less than 6 years are most frequent. This may herald positive changes in gender relationships. At older ages, most of those outside marriage are widowers, and most of them are women. A by product of considering the sex composition of widowhood status is that it may reflect differences in the mortality level among provinces and by sex; hence, these results can supplement mortality research.

Indicators suggest that important changes are operating in the Afghan Society. Policies for delaying precocious marriages seem to have produced results; the expansion of the educational system with inclusion of girls as well, surely has had an important
role and may continue to do so. Improvement in live conditions and women's empowerment should take-off if universal education is achieved.

In a context of socioeconomic hardship –prevalent in most Afghan provinces– data suggest that marriage and parenthood are more accessible to those who can afford them. Hence, this may explain the reason why the proportion of ever married men is highest in the group of higher educational attainment. These are results in provinces where marriage carries highly social value while development is limited; the most educated and those who are better usually are meant to be emulated.

This may raise some paradoxes on possible effects of inclusion programs, aimed to raise the standard of living. Would better life standards increase the entrance to marriage with the consequent effects on fertility? As it was seen, fertility is very high among married women. Would such effect worsen the already precarious women’s reproductive health? By no means should the consideration of these hypotheses be perceived as a margin of doubt on the need to urgently increase social investments in education, health and other social programmes. These investments are paramount, and decision-makers should strive to ensure that upgrades in social development translate into real life improvements for each female and male citizen. Indeed, these reflexions are meant to highlight the need to adopt culturally sensitive approaches in the design of policies and programmes. In particular, culturally sensitive approaches would be necessary to adequately address traditional values on marriage and motherhood/parenthood, to bring about positive change.
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