Determinants of Early Transition to Marriage among Female Adolescents: A Longitudinal Analysis in Thailand

Rationale

The attitude towards universal and arranged marriage among the Thai population has been changing rapidly and the great majority of Thai females are delaying their marriage into their twenties. In 2000, the female singulate mean age at marriage (SMAM) was 24.1 years (National Statistical Office, 2000). However, a considerable proportion of teenage marriage persists in the Thai society. The proportion of Thai ever married women aged 15-19 years is relatively higher than that of the neighboring countries (United Nations, 2000). Apart from that, Thai teenage fertility is also higher than that of the Southeast Asian regional level and many neighboring countries (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2007). This relatively high level of Thai adolescent fertility is also a proxy measure of relatively high levels of adolescent marriage. Hence, the study explores the determinants of the timing of first marriage among Thai female adolescents by using longitudinal data of the Kanchanaburi Project.

Methodology

The study area was located in Kanchanaburi province, which is in the western part of the central region of Thailand. The socio-economic characteristics and topography of Kanchanaburi province are similar to the average of the whole country. Hence, it is an ideal study site. A longitudinal database was established by the Kanchanaburi Demographic Surveillance System (KDSS) to record the exact time and ordering of events. Data was collected during the period of 2000 to 2004. The study population consisted of all female adolescents aged 15 to 19 years and unmarried at the time of enrollment into the KDSS. They were considered at risk of experiencing the event “first marriage” from the beginning of their reproductive age, i.e. 15 years. They were followed from the round they first entered the KDSS to the round they exited the KDSS. The total number of respondents was 1,450.

The information from the KDSS makes it possible to study the transition from an unmarried state to a married state at the individual level. In KDSS, repeated interviews with the same individual at different points of time assist in creating the temporal ordering of events. Each individual had at least two years of observation

periods in order to establish the temporal ordering of each variable. Hence, all the characteristics of the respondents could measure before the event occurrence. Event history method was the main approach used in the analysis. Life tables and discrete time logistic regression were the specific methods used in the analysis.

The life table method, a non-parametric method, was used to examine the distributions of individuals across the occurrence of events, i.e. the distributions of time until an event occurs. Thus, it compares respondents at the time when the event occurs. This method was used in this study to describe the timing of marriage and how this risk varies by their characteristics. The median survival time could not be estimated in this study because of the high proportion of censored data. Thus survival time at the 25^{th} percentile was used to summarize differences in survival between different groups.

Discrete time logistic regression was used to model the timing of marriage. This method regress a set of covariates on survival time. The covariates act on the underlying hazard probability. Maximum likelihood methods were used to estimate the parameters. Unlike ordinary regression analysis, discrete time logistic model was able to handle right censored data.

Research Findings

The descriptive analysis found that eighteen percent of the sample had experienced a first marriage. Thirty nine percent of the respondents have completed their lower secondary education before they married; whereas 54 percent of the respondents who have completed upper secondary or higher education remained unmarried. Two thirds of the unmarried respondents were in school until the end of observation period; whereas 19 percent of the respondents were in school before they married. Forty percent of the respondents were living in households with poor economic status before they married. Around 60 percents of the respondents were living in extended families before they married.

The life table analysis found that respondents who had either no education or less than a primary level of education were more likely to marry than those with higher levels of education. For this group of respondents, the probability of first marriage was highest at the age of 17 years. Twenty five percent were married by the age of 16.34 years and around two thirds had married by the age of 19 years. In contrast, the hazard of marriage was lowest for women who had completed upper

secondary or a higher level of education. Only 10 percent of these women had married by the age of 19 years. There was a statistically significant difference among educational groups in the timing of first marriage.

The life table analysis also found the highest hazard of first marriage among those adolescents who were out of school and were not involved in any occupation. At the age of 16.45 years, 25 percent of this group had married. In contrast, the lowest hazard of marriage was found for those adolescents who were in school and were not involved in any work. Only nine percent of this group was married by the age of 19 years. The hazard of marriage was highest among female adolescents who belonged to households with a poor economic status. At the age of 17.57 years, 25 percent of female adolescents living in households with poor economic conditions had married. In contrast, only 11 percent of the female adolescents living in households with a rich economic status were married by the age of 19 years. The difference among groups is statistically significant. A statistically significant difference in timing of first marriage was observed by family structure. Female adolescents living in a nuclear family had a lower hazard of first marriage compared to those who had been living in an extended family. By the age of 18.6 years, 25 percent of young females who had been living in an extended family had married.

The final model of discrete time logistic regression also found a statistically significant relationship between the odds of marriage and educational continuation, and family structure. The odds of marriage were 96 percent less likely among those who were in school as a student compared to those who were out of school. The odds of marriage were almost 70 percent lower for respondents living in nuclear families compared to those living in extended families.

Conclusion

The findings suggest that young Thai females who were able to continue their education beyond lower secondary level delayed their marriage. Their successful transition from lower to upper secondary education is a commitment to continue their education. They realize the benefit of education for their future and are therefore likely to postpone marriage. In contrast, those who could not overcome the socio-economic barriers to continue schooling, were more likely to accept marriage as a part of their life.

The study findings also reflect that the poverty is one the factors driving early marriage. Poor adolescents who do not have ability to fund their education are more likely to marry at an early age. Female adolescents living in nuclear families were more likely to delay their marriage compared to young women in extended families. It is likely that this is related to some extent to financial factors, as nuclear families are better off than extended families. However, as this relationship remained even after controlling the economic status of the household, it reflects an underlying preference that links early marriage and extended family structure. In Thailand, family structure is more towards nuclear families due to improved socio-economic development (Richter and Podhisita, 1992). So, it could be hope that in near future, this factor will play an important role to reduce teenage marriage in Thailand.

The Thai Government has attempted to address the issues of early marriage through targeted programs and policies. This study also identified some specific areas where Thai policy makers need to pay special attention. Along with the development and implementation of new programs and policies, the Thai government should give more emphasis to ensure the effective implementation of existing policies, especially the National Educational Act of 1999 which focused on 12 years of education (Office of National Educational Commission, 1999). Although the Thai government has attempted to implement this act, progress has been slow. The findings of this study provide insight to policy makers to enhance the speed of the implementation process of this education policy and to allocate more resources to bring secondary schooling within the reach of all young women; so that Thai teenagers can continue their education until the end of upper secondary level. This will also contribute to delayed marriage.

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