

# The Changing Marriage Institution in Malaysia

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In many South-East Asian countries, marriage was nearly universal until the 1960s, and most marriages were arranged by parents. By the early 1970s, a trend towards delayed and non-marriage had emerged, with a decreased parental role in arranging the marriage. By 1990, the singulate mean age at first marriage for men and women had exceeded 25 years and 23 years, respectively, in most of the South-East Asian countries.

Marriage postponement in many of these countries was intimately linked with rising education and female labour force participation, women's empowerment, and macro-structural changes involving urbanization and industrialization. Age at marriage is also influenced by social norms and expectations of young people, whose family formation goals may respond differently to urbanization, modernization, and globalization. Changes in the marriage pattern have occurred in tandem with other dynamic changes such as increasing inter-ethnic marriage, transnational migration, more frequent travel, and expanded and transformed labour markets. Such changes, are associated with the demise of traditional institutional systems and are related to rising individualism, mobility, modernity, and other dimensions of globalization. Young people living away from home enjoy much more autonomy in decision-making than was the case in the past.

In Malaysia, educational improvement, urbanization, modern sector employment, migration, and the attendant changes in the norms and values regarding family formation have brought about the rising age at marriage and non-marriage, not least among Malays from the less developed states where very early marriage used to be the norm. Between 1970 and 2000, the singulate mean age at marriage among men and women increased from 25.5 years and 22.0 years to 28.0 years and 25.7 years, respectively. During the same period, the proportion remaining single among those aged 30-34

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doubled from 12% to 28% among males and 6% to 18% among females. In 2010, 21% and 14% of the higher educated women aged 30-34 and 35-39 were never married, and these proportions were much higher among higher educated Chinese women, at 32% and 21%, respectively.

Delayed and non-marriage is a primary proximate determinant of fertility, and it has brought about the rapid fertility decline to below replacement level. Malaysia's total fertility rate (TFR) is now at 1.8 for the country as a whole, and the ultra-low level of 1.1-1.2 among the Chinese and Indians.

Another alarming trend is the sharp rise in divorce among both Muslim and non-Muslim populations. Between 1995 and 2019, the number of Muslim marriages increased by 39%, from 106,399 to 147,847, while the number of divorces increased from 11,474 to 45,502, an increase of 300%. Over the same period, the number of non-Muslim marriages decreased from 65,082 to 55,974, but the number of divorces rose almost ten-fold from 1,233 to 11,473. The divorce rate per thousand marriages for Muslims had increased from 108 to 308, while that for non-Muslims had increased from 19 to 205. The Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM) reported in 2011 that 21% out of 651,851 Muslim couples who married between 2005 and 2010 were divorced within five years of marriage.

The rising age at marriage and increased non-marriage can be expected to continue with socioeconomic development<sup>1</sup>; trends in divorce rates between 2010 and 2019 differ according to the indicator used, so projections of divorce are hazardous. With modernization, increased mobility, and social interaction, international marriage, and inter-ethnic marriage are likely to become more common. The changes in nuptiality patterns have a profound impact on the family institution, reproductive health, reproduction, population growth and structures. Research findings are needed to inform policy, such as the national population policy, national family policy, and national social policy, and we hope that this special issue will make a useful contribution to such policy formulation.

The five papers in this special issue are:

- Correlates and Consequences of Delayed Marriage in Malaysia
- Divorce in Malaysia: Historical Trends and Contemporary Issues
- The Changing Educational Gradient in Marriage: Evidence from Malaysia

- Family Social Reproduction: Conflict and Compromise in Cross-Border Marriages between Chinese Malaysian Men and Vietnamese Women
- The Changing Spousal Differentials in Socio-demographic Characteristics in Malaysia

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### **Note**

- <sup>1</sup> Concomitant with the structural changes in the economy, shifting from agriculture to manufacturing and services, Malaysia has undergone rapid urbanization, which is now around 75%. The educational level has been rising steadily. In 1980, the tertiary enrolment ratio was only 3.1% for females and 4.9% for males. By 2000, the females had overtaken the males in tertiary enrolment (26.4% versus 24.9%), and the gap widened further in 2017 (45.5% versus 38.6%). The female labour force participation had gone up from 46% in 2010 to 55% in 2018 (World Bank, 2019). Many higher educated and working women are choosing a career over marriage and family formation.