

Recent changes in union formation in Nepal (*)

Recenti Cambiamenti nella Formazione delle Unioni in Nepal

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Riassunto: La ricerca studia i cambiamenti nei comportamenti nuziali e sessuali delle coorti nate in Nepal tra 1942 e 1986, usando i dati dell'indagine DHS 2001. Le ipotesi sono: 1) per le donne l'intervallo tra matrimonio e primo rapporto sessuale si sta riducendo; 2) la proporzione di uomini e donne che hanno avuto il primo rapporto prima di coabitare sta crescendo; 3) la modernizzazione dei comportamenti è più veloce nei gruppi più esposti al cambiamento sociale. L'impiego delle sequenze "matrimonio, coabitazione, primo rapporto" conferma la prima ipotesi, mentre la seconda è verificata solo per gli uomini. L'impiego di modelli di *event history* per studiare i processi di prima coabitazione e primo rapporto, controllando la possibile presenza di selettività nella formazione del campione e di eterogeneità non osservata, mette in luce alcuni segni di modernizzazione, ma anche la permanenza di forti differenze legate alla tradizione.

Keywords: developing countries, marriage, cohabitation, first sexual intercourse

1. Introduction

In Southern Asia, marriage is universal and takes place early, while cohabitation between spouses is delayed. Median age at cohabitation of women is everywhere slowly increasing, although it shows differences among countries. Among men, median age at marriage is more constant, and countries are more similar each other (Westoff, 2003).

Young age at marriage is connected to the diffusion of marriages arranged by the families, where relationships between families prevail on individual choices. Then, a decline in very early marriages and a decline in the interval between marriage and cohabitation are indicators of an increasing involvement of spouses in union formation.

If spouses are more involved in their choices, we can expect further changes within couple relationships. In first place, as long as marriage weakens its social role of contract between families and derives more and more by mutual choice by future spouses, then love and emotion become the heart of couple and family relationship, and sex becomes mainly an instrument of communication between partners (Choe et al., 2004).

Changes in sexual behaviours are expressed also by changes in the timing of first sexual intercourse. As long as sexuality depends on marriage, premarital sex is forbidden and considered as morally deviant. On the contrary, the more couple relationship becomes the heart of marriage, the more sexual experience does not require the legitimisation of marriage. In this work we intend to describe changes in behaviours regarding the whole process of union formation in Nepal:

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- 1) Which is the relation between marriage and cohabitation? If young people are more and more master of their choices, we would expect a decline of arranged marriages, and consequently a postponement of age at marriage and a decline of delayed cohabitation.
- 2) What about the age at first sexual intercourse? If sexual transition will follow western patterns, we would expect an increasing proportion of men and women who experience their first sexual intercourse before cohabitation.
- 3) Which factors are linked with more profound changes? We could expect changes more diffused among groups of population living in urban areas, more educated, and more opened to social changes.

2. Sequences

Nepal is the only country in Southern Asia where DHS 2001 Survey collected answers about first sexual intercourse of males and females. Moreover, age at first marriage and at cohabitation have been collected. For this country, then, we can study these two stages in family formation process, and cross them with entry into adult sexuality. However, age at marriage and age and time of cohabitation have been collected only for ever married men and women, and age at first sexual intercourse has been collected only for currently married people (Rutstein and Rojas, 2003).

In order to verify hypothesis 1 and 2, we study the sequences “*marriage – cohabitation – first sexual intercourse*” of currently married males and females. In order to compare cohorts, which are censored at different ages, we must select people who already experienced both events before a fixed age. Moreover, we can calculate the mean duration of time spent in different statuses: without any event (status 0), after only one event (only marriage – status M, or only intercourse – status S), or after all the events here considered (MCS).

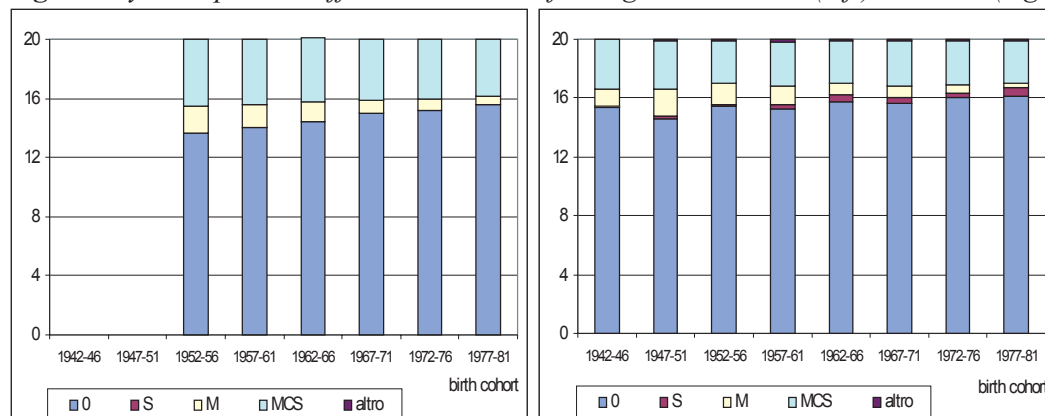
Let’s begin by the description of sequences “*M - C - S*”. The traditional behaviour of delaying cohabitation, very common among women cohorts born in the fifties, is declining, and involves nearly 20% of youngest married women. Moreover, it is strictly linked to younger age at marriage. First sexual intercourse of women takes place everywhere within marital experience. The link between marriage and cohabitation is the same among men. However, proportion of men with premarital sex is higher and increasing, mainly among later marriage and cohabitations. It is evident that a double standard model exists in Nepal: premarital sexual relationships are viewed as strictly prohibited for female youths but permissible for male youths.

Changes among cohorts and among males and females are highlighted also by means of duration in different statuses. The increase in age at first union for females is evident in the declining interval spent in status MCS before age 20 (figure 1, left); on the other side, the increase of the interval spent in status 0 means that the starting point of transitions is delayed. Also time spent in status M is declining, as a witness of the declining practice of celebrating marriage without cohabiting. Similar results can be seen in female life courses censored at higher ages.

Regarding to males behaviour, many differences can be highlighted. First of all, no clear delay can be observed in age at the beginning of transitions (status 0). The only sign of changes in this respect could be found considering events before age 20 (figure 1, right): among very young males a weak lengthening of status 0 can be seen, which suggests a slow erosion of very traditional behaviours. Secondly, durations in status M

decline among cohorts. This is similar to women: there is a decline in mean interval between marriage celebration and cohabitation. Finally, whereas the time spent in status S is absent for females, it is increasing for males (figure 1, right). This follows the increasing widespread of premarital sex among young men.

Figure 1: years spent in different statuses before age 20 – women (left) and men (right).



3. Behavioural differences

In order to verify if changes are more diffused among less traditional groups we carried out an event history analysis: first cohabitation and sexual intercourse are analysed using event history models. We included as covariates: husband and wife education and age, residence in rural and urban areas during childhood, ecological region of residence at the interview, ethnicity.

As already stated, dependent variables have been collected only for currently married individuals. Thus, as we select as target population a sub-sample of the general sample (73% of the total sample for females and 17% for males), we included in our models a probit equation to control for selectivity (through the Heckman approach). This is necessary, because the selected respondents can be a non-random subset of population (Lillard and Waite, 1993). Results confirm the importance of controlling for this form of selection as the correlation between unobserved heterogeneities is significant.

Covariate effects on cohabitation and first sex for women are very similar, but for men there are some differences because of earlier sexual debut. Moreover, results show some changes connected to modernization, mainly for women, although many traditional differences persist.

High *education* of women is related to lower risk of cohabiting and having sex. They do not marry while they are at school, and conversely they do not leave school until the family arranges the suitable marriage. Moreover, better educated women are more independent, which makes them more autonomous from family ties. Education does not affect first intercourse and cohabitation of males.

Husband education strengthens wife education effect for females. On the other hand, high *wife education* reduces the risks of first sex and cohabitation for males. One can have some doubts about hypothetical effects of wife characteristics on premarital behaviours; however, when we select only men without premarital sex in order to “clean” the sample, the effect of wife education is confirmed.

The *distance between age of man and woman* is a measure of couple relationship: when

age of wife is similar or higher than husband, the couple is more balanced and modern behaviours are expected. Results confirm this hypothesis for women: age at first sex and at cohabitation is higher when wife is older than husband. However, in the same couples, age at first cohabitation (and age at first sex) of men is lower than traditional couples with men older than women. It means that in more “balanced” couples, age difference is short; in more “traditional” couples husband are many years older than wife.

Place of residence during childhood can also influence marital behaviour: women socialized in rural areas get married earlier than women from urban areas, where less traditional behaviours are more widespread.

Also the *ecological region of residence* plays a key role on both events. The Terai region borders on Northern India and is influenced by traditional Hindu cultures of that area. The Hill ecological region is economically more modernized: it consists of numerous valleys including the capital Kathmandu and other urban areas. Risks of cohabiting and having sex are higher in Terai region than in Hill region both for males and females.

Ethnicity strongly affects the cultural background. Nepal population can be defined an “ethnic mosaic”: there are at least 60 ethnic groups. Each of them represents “a sub-system of institutional arrangements, values and norms” (Thapa, 1997). Model results suggest that many and strong differences among ethnic groups in male and female marital and sexual behaviour persists.

As described in section 2, first sexual intercourse of women takes place within marital experience, while proportion of men with premarital sex is higher and increasing, mainly among later cohabitations. In order to verify the effect of first sex on cohabitation for males, we first introduced a fix dichotomous variable distinguishing between men who experienced early sex and men who did not. Men with premarital sex have a lower risk of cohabiting, that is, premarital sex delays entry into cohabitation. This solution, however, assigns the status of “entered first sex” to young men before they actually experienced it. The alternative solution of considering the experience of first sex as time varying covariate does not satisfy again, because estimated risk of cohabitation is too high for men who had premarital sex and absorbs many other important effects. This is because we had to select only married people. Consequently, although models for males are not completely satisfying, we accept the result suggested by the first model.

Lastly, models results show that some signs of modernization can be seen: more educated women, socialized in urban areas, with a partner of the same age postpone cohabitation and first sex. However, many traditional differences persist, connected to ethnic and geographical origin.

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