

2018

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The Open Family Studies Journal

Content list available at: www.benthamopen.com/TOFAMSJ/

DOI: 10.2174/187492240181001????



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Recent Trends of Marriage in Iran

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Received: November 14, 2017

Revised: February 16, 2018

Accepted: February 21, 2018

Abstract:

Background:

In Iran, historically, establishing, maintaining, and continuing family units have been perpetuated through the development of strong ideals about marriage and reproduction that are integrated with Islamic values. Despite the long tradition of marriage as the foundation of both family and society, the data show there are declines in both the rate and the number of marriages. The popular belief among both laymen and social scientists is that, while there has been a decline in permanent marriages, there has been an increase in the number of what can be called temporary marriages. There are no data demonstrating trends in these marriages.

Methods:

In this paper, we present data on the declining trend in marriage and review the literature on factors considered as a barrier toward marriage. In addition, we examine data from a snowball sample of couples involved in temporary marriages or *Sighe*.

Results:

Our analysis suggests that those in such marriages may generally ignore or defy cultural prescriptions and proscriptions about marriage, seemingly reflecting a more modernistic view.

Conclusion:

From this perspective, we suggest that both recorded and non-recorded temporary marriages may reflect changing attitudes that stress individualism, autonomy, and secularism and, particularly for the young who are engaged in *Sighe*, the postponing of parenthood and, indeed, of adulthood.

Keywords: Cohabitation, Temporary Marriage, Remarriage, Polygamy, Iran, Family.

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Historically, families in Iran have been the centers of production and reproduction. The extended patriarchal family has provided social and economic support for members of all ages, including married children [1, 2]. Families have been the primary units for organizing nearly all of the social activities of life, including production, consumption, education, socialization, reproduction, leisure, and living arrangements. Establishing, maintaining, and continuing family units have been encouraged through a strong set of ideals about family morality integrated with Islamic values and pre-Islamic religion. Historically, within this idealized family morality, marriage has been essentially universal, age at marriage has generally been quite low, and marriage contracts have been included and protected by members of extended families and by the legal and religious community. In this paper, we review the recent trend in registered

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marriages and provide an insight into non-registered marriages which are referred to as temporary marriages or *Sighe* marriages, using data collected in a large urban area in a western province of Iran.

1.1. The Trend in Registered Marriage

In Iran, the law requires that marriages must be registered in notary public offices (*Mahzar*). These offices are required to send a monthly report of their record to the provincial offices of the Civil Registration System. In turn, all these records are sent to the office of Civil Registration System in the capital city of Tehran where they are organized and published annually. For legal purposes, the detailed information about each marriage and circumstances and conditions of the husband and wife are available in the local notary office unless the marriage is not permanent and is not required to be legally registered. Utilizing this source of data, we review the trend in registered marriages in recent decades.

Over the past three decades, there has been a significant transformation in the demography of Iran. A major part of this transformation has been the evolving patterns of fertility behavior and speedy transition to replacement level fertility across rural and urban areas [2]. The United Nations Population Division described the Iranian fertility transition as the largest percentage change in the world between 1975-1980 and 2005-2010 [3]. An important aspect of this process of swift fertility decline is the evolving patterns of union formation. Age at marriage for both males and females has increased significantly during this period and both the number and rate of recorded permanent marriages have declined markedly (Table 1). For example, between 2010 and 2014, the number of registered marriages declined about 18% and the estimated rate of marriage declined from 11.8 to 9.1 per 1000 population. This emerging trend is at odds with the strong conventional emphasis on transition to marriage as part of the traditional fundamentals of adulthood and social identity for young men and women.

Table 1. Number and rate of marriage in Iran, 2010-2014.

Year	Numbers	% change	Population	Rate of Marriage
2010	891627	-	7.5E+07	11.9
2011	874792	-1.9	7.6E+07	11.5
2012	829968	-5.1	7.7E+07	10.7
2013	774513	-6.7	7.9E+07	9.9
2014	724324	-6.5	8E+07	9.1
2010-2014 changes	-18.8			-23.5
Mean age of marriage	1986	1996	2006	2011
Male	23.6	25.6	26.2	26.7
Female	19.8	22.4	23.2	23.4
Source: Calculated from Statistical Center of Iran, 2014 [26]				

It is important to recognize that there have been strong governmental and non-governmental (*i.e.* charity organization) efforts that not only advocate traditional marriage but also offer financial supporting to young men and women in establishing permanent family unions. Still, there are declines in both traditional marriage numbers and rates. In an attempt to understand these declines, Salehi-Isfahani and his colleagues used extensive survey and census data to examine the causes of marriage decline in the context of “growing up and transition to adulthood in Iran” [4, 5]. Salehi-Isfahani relates the decline in marriage to a number of factors, an important one being the bulging youth population which has been growing at a rate of five percent per year and has resulted in difficulty for young people in finding employment. Another factor to which change is attributed is the lack of quality education that provides skills needed for employment. Specifically, what he referred to is not simply the low quality of education in Iran but also a mismatch between what students learn in schools and what employers need, a mismatch which limits the employment opportunity. The decline in public sector jobs is also cited as one more factor that again limits employment opportunities. Another important factor suggested as contributing to declining marriage in Iran is a marriage market squeeze caused by the shortage of eligible men. Gholipour and Fazanegan [6] analyzed provincial and individual-level data from an economic perspective and concluded that housing costs are a major deterrent to marriage and hence an important explanation of the decline of marriage is the limited access to affordable housing for those age groups in which, marriage takes place traditionally. Azad-Armaky and his colleagues [7] suggest that these economic obstacles and overall economic insecurity, particularly with respect to jobs and lack of long-term stability, are the reasons why

young men and women avoid traditional permanent marriages requiring long-term commitments and may instead pursue temporary relationship through *Sighe*, which removes the requirements for more extensive traditional economic ceremonies and obligations.

1.2. Temporary Marriage

Sighe is a temporary marriage that is sanctioned by the Shia sect of Islam, which is the dominant religion in Iran practiced by 96 percent of the population. That *Sighe* be considered as a legal union, it is generally expected to include certain agreements, the elements of which defined by religious scholars (*Foghaha*) vary. For example, the contemporary religious authority and the highest ranking political leader in the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Khamenei, stated the conditions of temporary marriage (*Sighe*) in his Book of Directions (*Fathwas*) as following:

- Temporary marriage must include a marriage contract;
- There must be a clear statement of the duration of the temporary marriage contract;
- The amount of *Mahr* (money or property given to the woman) must be clearly stated at the time the marriage contract is set forth;
- If it is desired that the union continues beyond the contracted period, the contract must be renewed. If it is not renewed, the woman must separate from the man and wait for a required period of three months and 10 days before she marries again. (This is to ascertain if she is pregnant, presumably with the man with whom she had the temporary marriage contract).
- In case the female is a virgin at the inception of the contract, the permission of the father is strongly recommended, but not required.

That recording needs not to take place (and one may assume that neither the existence of nor the elements of a contract can be known) and can be seen in the comments of other religious leaders, such as Ayatollah Rafsanjani, who served as the president in the Islamic Republic for two terms, who expressed less restrictive conditions for temporary marriage (quoted in Haeri [8]):

Ayatollah Rafsanjani suggested that young men and women who might feel shy about going to a *mullah* to register their temporary marriage need not do so. They could agree among themselves (*i.e.*, have a private contract) “to be together for a month or two.” If the performance of the marriage ceremony in Arabic is difficult, he suggested, “the young couple can recite the formula in Persian and in the absence of a *mullah* or other witnesses.”

While Ayatollah Rafsanjani was a pioneer, in the 1990s, in his public expression of easing of the conditions of temporary marriage, especially in stating the acceptability of private and verbal contract between consenting males and female, other religious leaders have expressed a similar point of view.

Temporary marriage (*Sighe*) is not new in Iran. There is a long history of such unions among the Shia population of Iran especially among merchants and long-distance travelers [9]. However, since the establishment of the Islamic Republic and, in particular, since public advocacy for temporary marriage in the 1980s and 1990s to deal with widowhood and other consequences of the Iran-Iraq war, feminist social science discourse on the origin, interpretation, and social consequence of temporary marriage has increased [8, 10 - 15]. Along with the statements of religious leaders and the increased feminist discourse about this issue, there is increasing casual observation and anecdotal evidence pointing to the increasing use of temporary marriage arrangements as a religiously permitted source of intimacy, companionship, and sexual satisfaction [7, 16 - 18].

While lay people and social scientists speculate about the number of temporary marriages, as noted above, there is not a legal requirement to register these marriages. Therefore, registries may provide information about couples who have established recorded *Sighe* unions, but there are no reliable national or regional data on the number of non-recorded *Sighe* unions, the content of any contractual agreements made, or the characteristics of couples in terminal marriages. Of particular interest is whether people in terminal marriages in Iran are primarily young couples living in non-recorded marriages who are essentially following the cohabitation patterns that have emerged in Western societies since the 1970s [19]. In this paper, in order to begin to shed some light on these questions, we explore the data collected from a purposive sample of couples in one large urban area in Iran.

2. DATA AND METHOD

The data from this study were collected from the large urban area of Kermanshah with a population of 850 thousand

in western Iran. The city represents other provincial capitals in Iran in terms of the size and urban amenities. The population of the city is diverse and is heavily Kurdish in ethnicity. The target population for our research was couples who were engaged in temporary marriages as of 2013.

We reasoned that, despite legal support and religious permission, couples engaged in temporary marriage would be considered to be in violation of historically pervasive societal norms about the sanctity of legal marriage and parenthood. Because of this, we reasoned that they would be unlikely to talk about their marriages except to close family members and friends and thus not easily identifiable in the population. As a result, collecting data, particularly through probability sampling, from this population has been very challenging. Because of such difficulties, for this research, we contacted informants in different settings - government offices, businesses, hospitals, higher education institutions, recreational facilities - to identify target couples in their settings and to ask people known to be in a temporary union if they would give consent to meet with trained research staff members. In an initial contact, people agreeing to such a meeting, met with a member of the research staff who explained the purpose of the study, obtained consent for participation, and arranged a date and time for an interview. The subsequent interviews lasting about one hour were conducted by graduate students who had been trained as interviewers. Through this procedure, we were able to collect data from 27 couples engaged in temporary unrecorded marriages in 2013. There is no doubt that this is a small dataset and in no way a representative sample of couples in temporary marriage in Iran. Hence, any statistical conclusion from the results should be viewed as illustrative and with caution in terms of generalization.

3. RESULTS

The data were analyzed by SPSS version 24. The age distribution of the couples studied had a wide range: for husbands, it was between 20 and 63; for wives, between 18 and 48. The mean age of men was 40 years; for women, it was 32 years (Table 2). The duration of marriage ranged from 1 to 27 years; the average was about nine years. The age and duration of temporary marriage point to the diversity of the population engaged in temporary marriages and perhaps the variation in reasons for choosing this union option. These couples were not all young cohabiting individuals avoiding permanent marriage because of economic or housing constraints. Furthermore, when asked about the duration of their marriage, couples referred to how long they had been married and did not discuss any specific duration about which they had set forth a contract or agreement for *Sighe*.

Table 2. Socio-demographic description of the sample couples.

Age	Male (%)	Female (%)
18-29	11.1	37
30-39	44.4	37
40-49	18.5	25.9
50 and above	25.9	0
	100	100
Mean	40.5	32.4
Duration of union (Years)		
5-Jan	55.6	
6 and more	44.4	
	100	
Mean	8.9	
Pre-Union status		
Never-married	59.3	74.1
Divorced from permanent marriage	14.8	18.5
Widow	3.7	7.4
Married (polygamy)	22.2	0
	100	100
Education		
Less than high school	29.7	55.6
High school	40.7	22.2
Some college	29.6	22.2

Age	Male (%)	Female (%)
	100	100
Residential background		
Urban	40.7	40.7
Rural	59.3	59.3
	100	100
Circumstances of meeting		
Within family	40.7	
Within neighborhood	25.9	
Education Institution, work place, parks and restaurants	33.4	
	100	
Total number of couples	27	

Based on the marital status of men before entering *Sighe* union, the couples in this sample can be divided into three groups: those who were never married; those who were divorced or widowed; and those who were concurrently married to a permanent wife. The men in this third group were thus polygamous on entering their current temporary marriage. Twenty percent (6) of the sample was in this polygamous state. Such a polygamous state is permitted by religious code and law in Iran, but it is specified that such arrangements demonstrate economic reasons and require permission of the first wife. While we do not have supportive data from this sample, it is possible that men defined as polygamous in our sample were using non-contractual *Sighe* unions in order to avoid meeting the required economic conditions or, more importantly, the consent of the first wife. While we did not obtain such information, it is also possible that women living in a non-recorded *Sighe* relationship with a married man might be unhappy with the temporary situation. While it is important to note that children from this kind of union (*i.e.*, the one in which the male is in a polygamous state) have the same legal status as children of the permanent wife; a *Sighe* wife does not have the social prestige of a permanent wife and does not share the same privileges.

The women who are engaged in polygamous marriages are much younger than their husbands. Five of these women were 35 years old or younger. On the other hand, four of their husbands were 52 years or older at the time of the study. Hence, at least based on this limited data, temporary marriage continues to provide an avenue of the temporary union for pleasure, companionship, or other personal reasons for older men who continue to keep their original household and permanent wife separate from their *Sighe* arrangement. While *Sighe* relationships have been traditionally and societally accepted in the Iranian culture, in the past, women who have been involved in temporary marriages with legally married men have been young widows or divorcees and/or were financially destitute. However, from our limited sample, it seems that in contemporary circumstances, young never-married women are willing to enter into this kind of union. Among the six women in the polygamous union through temporary marriage, half (3) never married previously.

Another group in our sample of couples consisted of men who had been divorced and widowed and now pursued temporary rather than permanent contractual marriage. Three of these men had formed unions with women who were themselves divorced, while two were in relationships with never-married women. It should be noted that traditionally it has been easier for divorced men to pursue young never-married women either for permanent marriages or *Sighe* unions. However, this was less true of divorced and young widowed women who, because of the scarcity of possible partners, had less chance to enter in permanent marital unions, and were thus, likely to stay unmarried the rest of their lives. It is speculated that with greater support of temporary marriage by religious authorities, especially during the 1980s and 1990s as the Iranian society was faced with a growing number of young widows following the war with Iraq, widowed and divorced women have been more likely to pursue unions through temporary marriages rather than accepting the alternative of living alone and being dependent on immediate or extended family. Hence, it is not surprising that the seven divorced or widowed women in our sample are either in temporary marriage relationships with previously divorced or widowed men or they are in *Sighe* relationship as second wives.

The third group of couples consists of men and women who have never been married before but have chosen to form a union through *Sighe*. Sixteen couples, 60% of the sample - and thus the majority, were in this category (Table 3). These couples had met in large family gatherings, educational institutions, workplace, and/or in recreational locations such as parks. They were almost all young adults and their age distribution appears similar to the age distribution of

couples living in the permanent marital union. The average for women was 34 and for men, it was 38, resulting in an average difference of four years. The mean duration of the union for this group was 12 years. Both men and women among this group of couples had predominantly urban backgrounds. The majority of men had a high school or college education. All the women had some education but, on average, they had less education than their partners. Men with a high level of education were married to women with the highest level of education. Overall, this group seems similar to the cohabiting young adult populations in Western countries.

Table 3. Socio-demographic characteristics of couples with no previous marriages.

Age	Men (%)	Women (%)
18-29	18.8	31.3
30-39	43.8	31.3
40-49	37.5	37.5
	100	100
Mean duration of union	12 years	
Education		
Below high school diploma	43.8	68.8
High school diploma or college	56.2	31.2
	100	100
Residential background		
Urban	56.3	62.5
Rural	43.8	37.5
Circumstances of meeting		
Within family	62.5	
Within neighborhood	6.3	
Education Institution, work place, parks and restaurants	31.2	
	100	
Total number of couples	16	

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our findings are limited by the nature of a purposive non-probability sample from an urban area in Western Iran. We also did not have any sample couples who have been engaged in temporary marriages that have been dissolved. Despite these limitations, our results suggest that couples in our sample were living in committed relationships that were nevertheless non-binding. They provided no evidence that they view their situations as “one night stands” or as relationships that are arranged for “temporary pleasure” -- nor can their relationships be described simply as “legal prostitution.” The most striking aspect of our findings is the continuity and the length of *Sighe* unions in almost all of the 27 cases we interviewed.

We observed three distinct patterns among our sample couples. These three groups were divided based on age and *pre-Sighe* union marital status. There is a distinct traditional pattern in which older men with established families seek *Sighe* unions with younger wives. This pattern has existed and is as old as the existence of the rule of *Sighe*. This pattern may suggest that married men seek pleasure through practicing *Sighe*, but it does not suggest “legal prostitution” asserted by some scholars. The second pattern appears more a matter of convenience for both men and women who have exited from their permanent marriage through divorce or widowhood. Having gone through permanent marriages in their young adulthood and now in their middle ages, they may be seeking companionship and a sexual partner but wish to avoid the detailed ceremonies and practices of permanent marriages for the second time, thus preferring a *Sighe* marriage. Still, continuity is evident in this as in other groups.

The third pattern observed in our sample involves young, never-married adults who chose a *Sighe* relationship, thus acting out of individual choice. While marriage has long marked the transition to adulthood in Iran, these couples chose to at least delay the traditional transition to adulthood (*i.e.*, legal permanent marriage) by pursuing higher education and/or economic success while entering a non-contractual relationship with non-specified termination plans. It is

possible that these couples consider an intimate, romantic, sexual relationship as part of their experiences in their transition to adulthood. In any case, they are contravening the conventional linear approach from education to job to a lifetime permanent marriage. This, thus, represents a new attitude, particularly among young women, toward marriage [20].

It is possible that economic constraints have created the conditions for the development of this new attitude and approach, but there are also indications that a paradigm shift in the perception of adulthood has played a major role in the emergence of this new pattern. As recent as the 1970s, the transition to adulthood was mainly through marriage and parenthood, particularly for women. In reality, there did not exist a stage between childhood and adulthood when the majority of women were married before age 18 and had up to six or seven births by age 30. Similarly, a young male was not considered an adult until he was married and was a father, parenthood being the most important mark of adulthood. Yet, in studies with data collected in the late 1980s and 1990s among adolescents, there emerged signs that traditional attitudes toward marriage and adulthood were changing [20 - 22]. These studies suggested that young women and men - but most particularly women - wanted to approach marriage with love and mutual understanding and not simply as an adulthood destination. They also began to emphasize their right to engage in other activities such as higher education and the pursuit of a career. Such perceptions are, in Iran as, throughout much of the world, indications of the strive towards individualism, autonomy, and self-actualization [22]. To conclude about this cultural and value change as:

“...these days everybody wants to find her or his own way. Society allows this variation and people do not interfere in your affairs. So, we like to experience other ways and other approaches. It is our individual decision” [23].

Although there are solid data on the declining trend of permanent marriage, the data on the number of and trends in cohabitation unions based on *Sighe* do not exist. Ahamadi and colleagues estimate that 9% of young adults in urban areas participate in cohabitation and 25% are acceptant of such unions [24]. However, such estimates are based on small selective samples of university students. Popular women's publications such as *mehrkhane* [25] report much higher numbers of *Sighe* unions based on interviews with members of the clergy who are involved in reading and pronouncing *Sighe* between men and women. Regardless, any expression of numbers of cohabiting couples is hypothetical and requires more systematic data collection by the Office of Vital Registration System or a national survey which includes all marriages. There is also a need for more in-depth data from a larger number of young cohabiting adults about their perceptions and attitudes regarding individualism and pursuit of adult goals, including marriage and childrearing. We hypothesize that such data will support assumptions that there has been a somewhat marked expansion of young adult interest in an adulthood that involves the pursuit of education, economic opportunity, and sexual satisfaction, perhaps through healthy *Sighe* cohabiting relationships, and - yes - ultimately marriage and parenthood.

ETHICS APPROVAL AND CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

Not applicable.

HUMAN AND ANIMAL RIGHTS

No Animals/Humans were used for studies that are base of this research.

CONSENT FOR PUBLICATION

Not applicable.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest, financial or otherwise.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We acknowledge the generous support of Provincial Office of Civil Registration in Kermanshah for data collection related to non-registered marriages.

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