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Family formation: Socio-cultural differentials in age at first marriage in Sri Lanka

Dr. W. Indralal De Silva

Introduction

Family formation, in terms of marital frequency and timing, among different socio-cultural groups, is one of the important fertility influencing variables. Fertility decline in Sri Lanka has been strongly associated with a shift from early marriage to late marriage. Fernando¹ has ascribed almost all of Sri Lanka's fertility decline between 1963 and 1970 to a change in female age at marriage while Alam and Cleland² have attributed 59 per cent of the fertility decline between 1963 and 1971 and 46 per cent of the decline between 1971 and 1975 to marriage changes. However, marriage transition has not been the same for all socio-cultural groups: if some groups lagged behind, it would be difficult to reach the target of replacement level fertility target (a total fertility rate of 2.1) by the year 2000.

The Sri Lankan Government regards population growth as one of the crucial factors for its economic development, and therefore, in the population policy statement issued in 1991 it has set itself a replacement level fertility target, which would result in

a stable population by the middle of the next century.³ Since the number of women entering the reproductive ages in Sri Lanka during the present decade will be much larger than that during the previous decades, an examination of the socio-cultural differences in age at first marriage will be useful for policy planners to monitor family formation and fertility trends in Sri Lanka.

Data and Methods

The data used in this study come from the Sri Lanka Contraceptive Prevalence Survey (SLCPS) of 1982. The SLCPS was the last survey to cover the whole country.⁴ Because of the civil war in the Northern and Eastern provinces, which constitute about 14 per cent of the population, these areas were not included in any subsequent survey. Therefore, this survey provides rich information about the marriage patterns of the ethnic and religious groups of the entire country. The basis of the SLCPS was multistage probability sampling. The total sample size was 4500. The respondents were

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