

Postponement of marriage and delayed childbearing in MENA countries with special focus on Iran

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Low age at marriage and early childbearing have traditionally been the main features of the family in the MENA region. However, countries in the region have experienced phenomenal changes in the social and economic aspects influencing family formation and childbearing in recent decades. The rise of education among women has led to changes in the transition to marriage and delayed childbearing. With the social prohibition of cohabitation and ex-nuptiality, fertility is likely to decline further. Despite contextual similarities, family forms, and partnerships vary across the region. Among the MENA countries, Iran has experienced a sharpest fertility decline and fertility has been around or below-replacement level since the early 2000s. Iran's TFR in 2022 was around 1.7 children per woman, and childlessness and infertility have been on the rise recently.

This paper aims to study the trends and patterns of marriage and childbearing in the MENA countries, but the main focus will be on Iran for a deeper analysis. We will first, review fertility transition along with social, economic, and cultural transformations in the MENA countries. Second, using the 2017 Iran Fertility Transition Survey and various censuses, we will examine changes in proportion of never married by age across cohorts and investigate the shifts in the proportions of unmarried across age groups and the likely increase in lifetime nonmarriage (i.e. by age 40). Third, looking at the mean ages at marriage, we will explore the decline in early marriage and the increasing share of those who marry after ages 25 and 30 and above. Fourth, we will analyse the interval between marriage and first birth, and subsequent birth intervals. Finally, the impacts of increased level of women's education and economic insecurity on later marriage and delayed childbearing along with their consequences and prospects for the MENA region and Iran are discussed.