

**MENA WORKING PAPER SERIES**

**MARRIAGE PATTERNS IN PALESTINE**

*by Yara Jarallah, Birzeit University, Palestine*

**M**arriage patterns in Palestine are unique compared with other countries in the region.<sup>1</sup> Although most countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are experiencing an increase in the age at marriage, early marriage in Palestine continues to be relatively high. About one in 10 Palestinian women ages 15 to 19 is married, although there are inter-regional differences (see Table 1). Yet, an increasing number of women are delaying marriage and remaining single—also about one in 10 Palestinian women between ages 35 and 39 has not been married at all. In a society that favors marriage and children, it is essential to understand and address the needs of single women.

Since families seem to heavily influence a woman’s decision to marry, policies should be geared toward discouraging early marriage by:

- Raising awareness of the problems of early marriage for women.
- Encouraging education and providing incentives for families with limited financial resources to keep their daughters in school by subsidizing the cost.
- Changing attitudes by reducing the ongoing messages in support of early marriage and drawing on the successful examples of established single women.

Other policies should address legal reforms, such as equal benefits for women and men at work, social allowances for single women who don’t work, expanding self-generating projects specifically for uneducated single women, and establishing homes for single elderly women.

**Why Ramallah?**

Ramallah, located in the center of the West Bank, was selected as the site of this qualitative study because, unlike other regions in the north and south, Ramallah has relatively high percentages of both women who married early and those who are single. In 1997, more than 20 percent of married women ages 15 to 49 living in Ramallah were married before reaching the age of 18, and at the same time around 15 percent of its women ages 35 to 49 had never been married.<sup>2</sup>

Contrary to expectations, this study showed no major differences between Ramallah city and the selected surrounding villages with respect to women’s age at marriage, thus confirming the importance of regional differences as opposed to the rural-urban ones in the Palestinian context. Even though

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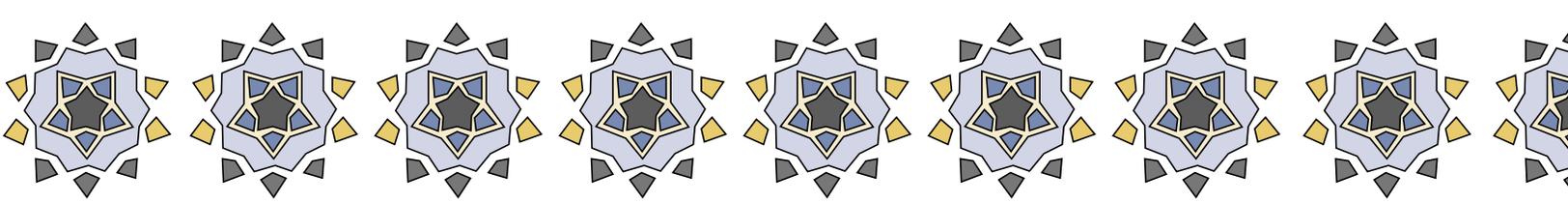
*Table 1*

**INDICATORS OF MARRIAGE PATTERNS IN PALESTINE, 2006**

	<b>Percent of women ages 15 to 19 who have been ever-married</b>	<b>Percent of women ages 35 to 39 who have never been married</b>
Palestine	9	11
Gaza	11	9
West Bank	7	11

**NOTE:** Palestine refers to the Palestinian population living in Gaza and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem.

**SOURCE:** Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, *Palestinian Family Health Survey, 2006, Final Report* (December 2007).



*Table 2*  
**CHARACTERISTICS OF WOMEN IN THE STUDY**

	<b>Number of women interviewed (total=26)</b>
<b>Marital status</b>	
Single	15
Married	11
<b>Locality</b>	
Rural	10
Urban	16
<b>Age</b>	
25-29	6
30-34	7
35-39	6
40-44	7
<b>Age of marriage</b>	
13-15	3
16-19	8
<b>Education</b>	
Secondary & less	10
Diploma & bachelor's	10
Higher education	6
<b>Socioeconomic status</b>	
Excellent	2
Very good	12
Good/medium	11
Bad	1

Ramallah may be the exception rather than the rule when it comes to its marriage patterns, this study still provides insight into Palestinian marriage patterns that need special policy actions. Table 2 describes the characteristics of women in the study.

### **What Are the Major Factors That Underlie Marriage?**

Family seems to be the underlying factor that shapes marriage decisions: whether ultimately leading to an early marriage or delaying it. In a context like Palestine, and the Arab countries at large, the family forms the center of individuals' lives and affects decisions including marriage. This factor, however, cannot be isolated from the larger societal and political context of the country. In a situation characterized by ongoing occupation, instability, mobility restrictions, and increasing unemployment and poverty, it is no doubt that people have established coping and defense mechanisms to deal and live with those realities. And a person's family is where the social interactions first take place. These interactions affect decisions, including decisions about education and marriage.<sup>3</sup>

### **For Early Marriage**

The family and parents are usually responsible for their children throughout their early adults' lives, and marriage is a family and an individual matter in Arab countries, including Palestine. Some parents' lack of awareness, ignorance, and low education seem to affect the upbringing methods and values given to children:

"My family did not stop me from getting married. They said if you want to marry then do so. They should have insisted that I continue my education first as I was still young. This is what the parents should do."

—30-year-old woman married at 19

Difficult financial situations have forced many women to resort to marriage as a way to escape poverty:

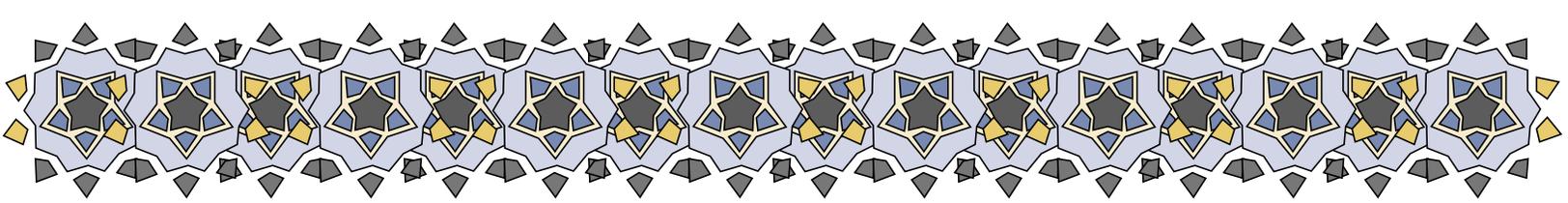
"We were eight daughters and lived in poverty. My father's situation was very very difficult; there was no work for him. If I was more aware and mature I wouldn't have gotten married at 13.5 but my family's financial situation forced me to. It was very very difficult with my mother's sickness as well. I thought I would ease their financial situation by getting married, but I suffered."

—42-year-old woman married at 13.5

Many women in the study blamed their parents for consenting to their early marriages. These women described themselves as immature and too young to make their own informed decisions:

"Believe me; till this day I blame my mother for not insisting that I continue my education [the woman did not finish high school]. She took better care of my younger sister [who continued higher education] because she felt guilty towards me. Believe me; it's really hard without continuing your education."

—35-year-old woman married at 18



Some women have described their dreams for education and work being shattered and taken away by their families consenting to their marriage, especially if they were the eldest among their other siblings, a situation that seems to have victimized them:

“Injustice, injustice. I only had one year left to finish high school. I was clever and very good at school, and never failed a class, but this was all my parents’ fault. It was my father who wanted to marry me off. When his sister (my aunt) came to ask for my hand in marriage, he didn’t want to turn her down so he sacrificed me so as not to upset her. I was the victim of the family as I was the eldest and all my other siblings have all gotten university degrees. I always feel inferior when I am with them. I will never forgive my uncle who pressured my father to accept this.”  
—30-year-old woman married at 17

### **For Delayed Marriage**

The family and parents have a major influence on delays of marriages as well, whether encouraging their daughters to continue education or setting standards and rules for potential marriage partners for their daughters.<sup>4</sup> A single woman in her early 30s describes how her parents encouraged her to continue her education. And because of her own ambitions and thirst for knowledge, she earned her Ph.D.:

“Upbringing of parents and their encouragement ... They always told me we want you to continue your education to be able to become independent and support yourself in the society.”  
—33-year-old single woman

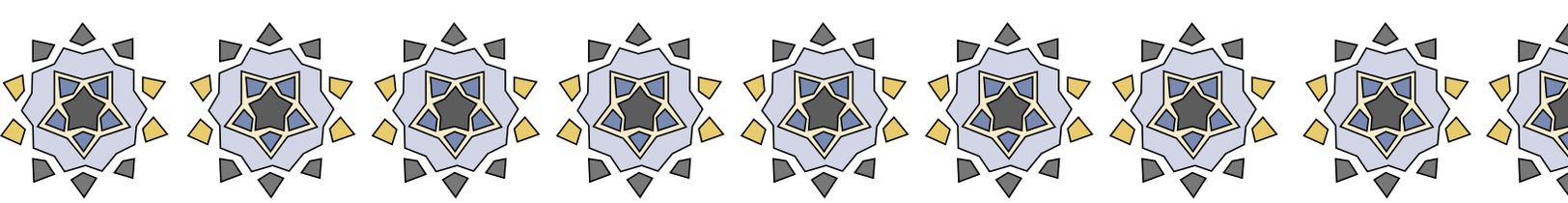
Sometimes the parents’ standards for potential marriage partners seems to deviate from the women’s perceived standards, and when the parents have a strong influence on women, it may indeed cause a delay in their marriage. This is clearly shown in the quote of a 33-year-old single woman who blames her mother:

“Parents have major influence. I for one am a lot influenced by my mother when it comes to marriage, and she does not really help in this matter. A lot of times I say it might be her fault that I am not married still, perhaps if my father was still alive it might be different ... Both of them should be present to advise you.”  
—33-year-old single woman

A rising awareness toward education, mainly coming from the political situation, seems to have affected families and individuals’ decisions to pursue education and to delay marriage as well.<sup>5</sup> This is clearly explained in the quote below:

“The availability of the university made people more aware of its benefits. Also, the current economic and political situation that the country experiences made families more accepting of girls’ education and thus increasing the age at marriage. It not mainly education per se but rather the difficult political situation and the resulting difficult economic situation which made guys prefer marrying educated women so that they can help them. This was especially made clear in the beginning of the second Intifada when many people, especially men, could not reach their work (especially daily laborers). It was during the Intifada that women were the ones providing for their families, so people were made aware of this fact and thus more acceptable of education and work for women.”  
—42-year-old single woman

Women have also spoken of special cases where a woman’s order among her siblings would affect her delay in marriage. When she is the eldest in a family with either one of the parents—typically the father—dead, she must rise to the responsibility and become the provider of the



family.<sup>6</sup> Also, in situations when all her other siblings are married and she is the youngest, she is left to take care of her elderly ill parents.

## What Are the Consequences of an Early Marriage and Singlehood?

### **Early Marriage**

Women in the study have expressed the difficulties they faced in not being able to continue education in light of family commitments and jobs. Indeed, early marriage is one reason that girls leave school. Having lost education opportunities, they find it more difficult to escape the vicious cycle of low education, high fertility, and poverty:<sup>7</sup>

“It was a major mistake that I married young. I could not continue my university education, it was really difficult to go back to university afterwards as I had to work and help financially ... I could have secured a better future for my children and would have had a wider perspective that I would not be as tired as I am now.”  
—30-year-old woman married at 19

Other women have also spoken of being deprived of childhood and youth—missing out on single life. They place their hopes in their children, and consider it extremely important to educate their children. They also have spoken on their earlier marriage periods when they did not feel like individuals, and were scared and didn’t know how to deal with children because they were so young themselves:

“Being married at 14 and starting to have children then is too too early. It’s unfair to raise a child when you are yourself one and are equally in need of guidance and support ... I didn’t feel any feeling of motherhood with my first-born; I even feel that I was unfair with him as I was careless and ignorant of my food intake and diet. When he was born I used to spend long hours at night just staring at him, being very scared he was sleeping all this long.”  
—35-year-old woman married at 14

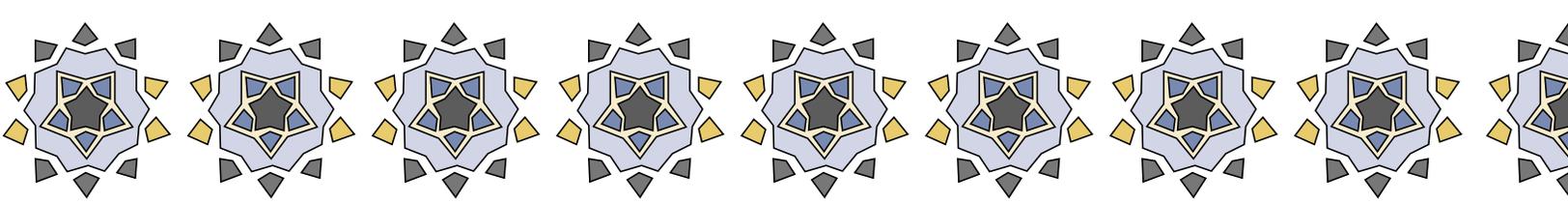
### **Singlehood**

There is more of an appreciation for the role of single educated women than for the role of single uneducated women who are usually alienated and have no choice.<sup>8</sup> But still, single educated women mentioned having always been challenged by a society that has no established societal roles for them despite their high educational levels:

“I don’t know. It seems tough for me as a single woman to live, because I always have to, always going to be challenged by norms of the society but I also enjoy challenging them in a nonconfrontational way. I enjoy creating spaces and I know we can do that.”  
—38-year-old single woman

They speak of having to fight a society that gives a value to a woman as a wife and mother, but not as an individual:<sup>9</sup>

“In our society a woman’s value or worth is that of her husband and kids, she as an individual comes as second best no matter what she has, and is not perceived as an individual on her own. Marriage in our society is therefore a basic thing. People have idolized it and you see the parents continuously worried not to be able to marry off their daughters. My father died telling me you are a cross on our shoulders (as a burden), since I was single.”  
—42-year-old single woman



Women have also spoken of the need to be creative and to find ways to maintain their status and live in a society that considers them deviants:<sup>10</sup>

“You have to always be on your toes, if you want to live well, you always have to think and be innovative about yourself, about your space, about your friends. It’s really creating things for yourself. There is nothing there that you can utilize, you have to create for yourself social structures to fit in.”  
—38-year-old single woman

The situation is worse for single uneducated women as their parents and families expect more from them. Since they have no established lives or careers of their own, these single women are expected to care for their families and do household chores:<sup>11</sup>

“There are social restrictions and high expectations from you as a single woman; there is an indirect commitment towards your family. Everything is expected from you as if you are there for the service of the family. If someone gets sick you should take care of this person. If your mother dies, you should take care of your father. And what bothers even more is that you don’t need someone to keep telling you this, but the society overwhelms you, places a big burden over your shoulders and hurts you with their talks.” —42-year-old single woman

Financial security in old age is another fear for single women because this security is structured around family and children. Also, loneliness and lack of a partner’s support was another major consequence of singlehood expressed by all single women. Older single women had experienced these consequences, as had young single women who were the last among their siblings and had lost their parents. The other young single women said that they expected to face the loneliness later in their life.

### **Curbing Early Marriage**

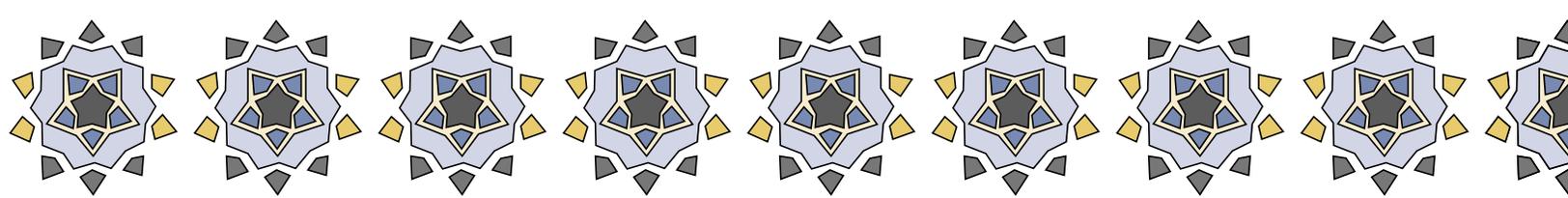
With family as the main underlying factor for early marriage, efforts should be geared toward educating parents on the negative consequences of early marriage and the importance for girls to continue their education. Even though most parents are aware of the value of education for their daughters (even before their sons in some cases), many parents are still forced to marry their daughters off because of limited financial resources that in part are due to the ongoing difficult political situation and its accompanying unemployment and poverty.

Marrying off their daughters is a coping mechanism for some families regardless of what the law says.<sup>12</sup> Families with very limited financial resources may resort to several means of forging their daughters’ actual age. (The unemployed father of one of the women interviewed had forged her birth certificate to 16 instead of 13 in order to marry her off.) Providing incentives to families, especially financial ones, to keep their daughters in school are more successful in accelerating the decrease in early age at marriage.<sup>13</sup>

### **Addressing the Needs of Single Women**

Because there are many societal restrictions and pressures on single women, with marriage perceived as a women’s only place to achieve a status within society, the needs of single women must be addressed by:<sup>14</sup>

- Raising awareness and changing attitudes about singlehood by reaching out to families through various channels, including the media, and presenting examples of successful single women.<sup>15</sup> Although still confined to the higher classes, such examples are gaining wider acceptance and reducing the impact of a general belief that women should be married in their early twenties.



- Implementing legal reforms to change the current personal status law governed by Shariah to include certain benefits to women such as workplace benefits similar to those that men receive and social allowances for single women who don't have income—social allowances are currently only given to married individuals (particularly to husbands).<sup>16</sup> Morocco's good example can be replicated elsewhere according to each country's specific context. Morocco adopted an entirely new family law in January 2002 that is consistent with the spirit of Islam, yet is based on equal rights for both men and women.<sup>17</sup>
- Creating and expanding self-generating projects and credit loans specifically for single uneducated women to help them support themselves and become financially independent.
- Securing alternative housing arrangements for single women whose parents are deceased, and who could or would no longer live in their familial home. An alternative arrangement would be homes where single women live together. Such arrangements can provide social support for single women and reduce their feelings of loneliness.

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<sup>1</sup> Hoda Rashad, Magued Osman, and Farzaneh Roudi-Fahimi, *Marriage in the Arab World* (Washington, DC: Population Reference Bureau, 2005); Jocelyn DeJong and Golda El-Khoury, "Reproductive Health of Arab Young People," *British Medical Journal* 333, no. 7573 (2006): 849-51; and Hanan Halabi, "Profile of Single Women in Palestine," *Review of Women's Studies* 4 (2007): 27-46.

<sup>2</sup> Lisa Taraki and Rita Giacaman, "Modernity Aborted and Reborn," in *Living Palestine: Family Survival, Resistance, and Mobility Under Occupation*, ed. Lisa Taraki (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2006): 1-50.

<sup>3</sup> Penny Johnson, "Living Together in a Nation in Fragments," in *Living Palestine: Family Survival, Resistance, and Mobility Under Occupation*, ed. Lisa Taraki (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2006): 51-102; Marwan Khawaja and Sara Randall, "Intifada, Palestinian Fertility and Women's Education," *Genus* 62 (2006): 21-51; and Rashad, Osman, and Roudi-Fahimi, *Marriage in the Arab World*.

<sup>4</sup> Penny Johnson, "Palestinian Single Women: Agency, Choice, Responsibility," *Review of Women's Studies* 4 (2007): 47-64.

<sup>5</sup> Nasra Shah, "Women's Socioeconomic Characteristics and Marital Patterns in a Rapidly Developing Muslim Society, Kuwait," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 35, no. 2 (2004): 163-83.

<sup>6</sup> Johnson, "Palestinian Single Women: Agency, Choice, Responsibility."

<sup>7</sup> Rashad, Osman, and Roudi-Fahimi, *Marriage in the Arab World*.

<sup>8</sup> Women's Affairs Center, *Choice and Power: A Discussion of Early Marriage in the Gaza Strip* (Gaza: Women's Affairs Center, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> Rashad, Osman, and Roudi-Fahimi, *Marriage in the Arab World*.

<sup>10</sup> Halabi, "Profile of Single Women in Palestine."

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<sup>11</sup> Johnson, "Palestinian Single Women: Agency, Choice, Responsibility."

<sup>12</sup> Weiguo Zhang, "Dynamics of Marriage Change in Chinese Rural Society in Transition: A Study of a Northern Chinese Village," *Population Studies* 54, no. 1 (2000): 57-69; and Lynn Welchman, *Islamic Family Laws: Text and Practice in Palestine* (Jerusalem: Women's Center for Legal Aid and Counseling, 1999).

<sup>13</sup> Women's Affairs Center, *Choice and Power*.

<sup>14</sup> Shah, "Women's Socioeconomic Characteristics and Marital Patterns in a Rapidly Developing Muslim Society, Kuwait."

<sup>15</sup> Gaven Jones, "Delayed Marriage and Very Low Fertility in Pacific Asia," *Population and Development Review* 33, no. 3 (2007): 453-78.

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<sup>17</sup> Valentine M. Moghadam and Farzaneh Roudi-Fahimi, *Reforming Family Laws to Promote Progress in the Middle East and North Africa* (Washington, DC: Population Reference Bureau, 2005).

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