Determinants of age at first marriage among Women in Western Uganda

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Background: Early marriage is common in much of the developing world, adolescent and child marriage continues to be a strong social norm, particularly for girls. It is associated with early childbearing, in most cases particularly in the developing world; the main purpose of marriage is to have children. Delayed age at marriage directly affects completed fertility by reducing the number of years available for childbearing. A delayed marriage may affect fertility indirectly due to some contributory factors linked with higher age at marriage, such as women's education, which may relate to family size preferences and use of contraception (Agyei and Mbamanya, 1989, Amin, 1995; Tushabe, 1997, Jensen and Thornton, 2003, Asiimwe, 2008).
In Uganda, marriage is still common among young girls. The median age at first marriage among women is just before 18 years and it has been stable for the past 30 years. Many girls in Uganda marry by age 15 (UBOS/ORC Macro 2001, 2006). According to UBOS/ORC Macro (1995, 2000/01 and 2006), Western Uganda's age at first marriage has been 17.4, 18.2 and 17.3 and Total fertility rate of 6.98, 6.9 and 7.3 respectively. This low age at first marriage leads to high Total fertility rate (TFR) as a reduction in age at first marriage by a year in 2001 led to an increase in total fertility rate from 6.9 to 7.3 in 2006, UBOS/ORC Macro (2001,2006). The high fertility has been an obstacle to the country's development since there is a need to put up more social structures like schools, and health centers to meet the needs of the children produced (UBOS/ORC Macro 2006).
In the effort to increase the age at first marriage, Uganda has tried to intervene by setting the minimum legal age for a woman to get married at 18 years and through emphasis on educating the girl child through a number of educational reforms instituted since 1990 (MoES, 2003). However in Western Uganda, marriages among teenage women are still common. Given the centrality of marriage in an individual's life history and its impact on fertility; and having realized that there is no related study that has been carried out in the Western Region and the socio-economic determinants of age at first marriage in the Western Region are not known, the study was conducted to establish the differentials and determinants of age at first marriage in Western Region.

Methods: The researcher used STATA and SPSS statistical packages for data analysis. At univariate level, frequency distributions were done for age, district distribution, marital status, religion, rural urban residence, and educational level, occupation, and religion and wealth variables.
The life table technique was also employed to compute the median age at first marriage for the different characteristics of women.

At bivariate level, the Log Rank chi-square was used to test for equality of the survival times. The log rank Chi Square was used to test if there is a significant difference between ages at first marriage among women of different socio-economic characteristics.
Age at first marriage was tested with each of the independent variable considered in the model in order to assess whether or not the variations were statistically significant. The level of significance was at 0.05 that is at a confidence interval of 95%.

The Cox's proportional hazard model was used to model the determinants of age at first marriage. The independent variables that were fitted into the model were: education, occupation, religion, district of residence, ethnicity and age/birth cohort of the respondents. At a p-value of 0.05, the researcher chose the socio-economic determinants of age at first marriage among women in Western Uganda.

The researcher also measured the magnitude of the significance by examining the hazard ratio for every unit change in the independent variable.

Findings: The study revealed that the highest number of respondents were aged 15-19 (23.4%) and 76.8% women aged 15-49 were ever married. The majority had attained primary education, 43.9% were Catholics, 36.7 % Protestants and most of them were in the middle wealth index. The study also indicated that most respondents were residing in rural areas (92.8%) and most of them were employed in the Agriculture sector (82.1%).

The median age at fist marriage was 17.36 years. Also, the study shows that age at first marriage varied by education level, occupation, ethnicity, age, district of residence and religion. However, it did not vary by place of residence and wealth index.

Education level, age of the respondent, district of residence and religion were significant determinants of age at first marriage in the region. The findings at multivariate analysis gave the contribution of each factor on age at first marriage (See Appendix 1).

Recommendations: This study has implications for policies and programs that seek to increase women's age at first marriage. It is crucial to continue improving girls and young women access to education in the country, as this is an important avenue for raising the women's age at first marriage and for empowering women and enhancing their participation in market economy. Similarly, it is advisable to target young women, particularly those with no or little education, with information on reproductive health and to provide them with basic life skills to enable them to avoid early marriage. These should include primary school girls. This should be done throughout the country with more emphasis placed on the least developed parts of the country such as those in Western, Northern and the less developed parts of Eastern Uganda. These programs should emphasise the health as well as the economic advantages of delayed marriage and childbearing.

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Table 1 Results of Cox's Proportional hazard model analysis for female's age at first marriage according to female's characteristics

Female's Characteristics	Standard error		P value	Hazard Ratio
Education level				
No education				1.000
Primary education	0.0753	-2.14	**0.037***	0.822
Secondary education	0.1122	-2.44	**0.016***	0.664
Occupation				
Unemployed				1.000
Agriculturalists	0.1634	-1.54	0.134	0.697
Traders	0.1971	-1.24	0.388	0.708
Professionals	0.1321	-2.74	**0.005***	0.436
Labourers	0.2706	-0.73	0.282	0.775
Religion				

Muslims				1.000
Catholics	0.1416	-1.52	0.125	0.751
Protestants	0.1316	-1.90	0.097	0.700
Others	0.1327	-2.15	**0.015***	0.639
District of residence				
Kibale				1.000
Bundibugyo	0.1656	-0.64	0.573	0.887
Hoima	0.1413	-0.56	0.308	0.918
Kabarole	0.1014	-3.04	**0.002***	0.596
Kasese	0.1349	-0.98	0.327	0.857
Masindi	0.1692	-1.10	0.182	0.790
Kamwengye	0.1297	-1.91	0.056	0.704
Kyenjojo	0.0747	-4.69	**0.000***	0.487
Age				
15-29				1.000
30-39	0.0733	-2.29	**0.000***	0.813
40-49	0.0786	-3.06	**0.015***	0.715
Log likelihood	-4041.1			
Chi-square	80.27			
Degrees of freedom	24			
Sample	931			
Censored	216			