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GLOBAL GENDER INEQUALITY AND MARRIAGE AGE DYNAMICS

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Abstract

Marriage is a uniquely human phenomenon which has been adopted by nearly every culture and has been linked to a variety of outcomes including fertility, longevity, and standard of living. Despite the diversity in marriage practices globally, there appear to be some universal properties, including the fact that women tend to marry at earlier ages relative to men. However, the age at which women marry and the age-gap between spouses varies by country. Scholars speculate that these two features of marriage are driven by gender inequality. While this is likely true, gender inequality is a multifaceted construct, and it is unclear which facet of gender inequality is most closely associated with the marriage dynamics. Here, I seek to understand how particular dimensions of gender inequality impact female age at marriage and the spousal age gap, using variables that have been identified as relevant by previous research, including: female education, economic independence, and maternal age. To do so, I extracted country-level data from open-source archives (United Nations and World Bank) spanning 134 countries in five-year intervals between 1990 and 2015. After controlling for year of analysis and repeated measures on countries, Generalized Estimating Equation Modeling reveals the following: 1) age at marriage is positively associated with female estimated years schooling and labor participation and negatively associated with adolescent birth rate 2) spousal age gap is negatively associated with female estimated years schooling and labor participation and positively associated with adolescent birth rate. Taken together, our results reveal that a constellation of inequality factors impact female marriage dynamics. We speculate that education may have greater importance than all other variables as it can lead to increased labor participation and reproductive autonomy. Our analyses indicate a relationship between gender inequality and female marital autonomy at global scales.