

**Abstract**

**Delayed Marriage and Development:  
The Case of Burmese Care Workers in Singapore**

Mika TOYOTA

Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, Singapore

A trend towards increasing numbers of delayed and non-marriages have been observed throughout East and Southeast Asian countries in the last three decades of the twentieth century, and Myanmar is not an exception. Myanmar's recent demographic data (Fertility and Reproductive Health Survey 2001) shows that the proportion of those never married has increased over the years for both males and females. The percentage of never-married women age 45-49 has doubled from 5.9 percent in 1983 to 11.8 percent in 2001 while never-married men age 45-49 has risen from 3.8 percent in 1983 to 5.7 percent in 2001. Whereas the total marital fertility rate (TMFR) is 4.9 births per married women the total fertility rate (TFR) of women aged 15-49 is 2.4 births per women due to the extremely high proportion of unmarried women who contribute negligible births.

The trend towards delayed marriage resembles what is happening in countries such as Japan, Thailand and Singapore with a higher percentage of women remaining single in urban areas and among the educated. The percentage of tertiary-educated females remaining single is 41.3 percent at age 35-44 and 34.1 per cent at age 45-54. The case of Myanmar poses a challenge to the existing understanding of the relationship between the phenomena of delayed and non-marriage and the level of socio-economic development of the country. In other Asian countries such as Japan, Singapore and Hong Kong, the trend of delayed marriage was experienced along with rapid socio-economic development. However, in the case of Myanmar, it has been experienced in parallel to a serious stagnation of socio-economic development. Furthermore the trend of delayed marriage is pervasive not only among the educated but also the less educated low income groups in rural areas in Myanmar. For example, 14.1 per cent of females with only primary education at age 35-44 remained single.

What caused the sharp rise in the percentage of delayed and never-married women in Myanmar? This paper aims to examine the relationship between socio-economic development and gender ideology in Myanmar. The paper seeks to explore the reasons why delayed marriages became a significant phenomenon in Myanmar and how these educated single females negotiate their gender roles in relation to their families and communities. The findings are derived from the primary data on perceptions relating to marriage and family life collected specifically among the skilled, unmarried female migrant workers from Myanmar working in Singapore as care workers (January - February 2006).