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Sociocultural determinants of contraceptive method choice in Goa and Kerala, India <i>Dr. T. Rajaretnam</i>	1
Violence against women and its impact on women's lives - Some observations from Bangladesh <i>Dr. M.E. Khan, Dr. U. Rob and Mr. S.M. Hossain</i>	12
Determinants of female age at first marriage in Tamil Nadu - An analysis of NFHS data <i>Mrs. J. Sheela and Dr. N. Audinarayana</i>	25
Five per cent post-survey check of the National Family Health Survey in Bihar <i>Dr. R.J. Yadav and Dr. Padam Singh</i>	33
Estimation of couple protection rate <i>Dr. S. Mukerjee</i>	38
Correlates of marital postponement in Sri Lanka <i>Prof. W. Indralal De Silva</i>	42
Some observations on fecundity from the desert regions of Rajasthan State <i>Dr. K.N. Misra and Dr. T. Ramnath</i>	51
Contraceptive behaviour of married adolescents in Bangladesh: Evidence from Bangladesh DHS, 1993-94 <i>Dr. Nazneen Chowdhury and Ms. Fahmida Sultana</i>	56
IUD(Cu-T) retention rates in three districts of Tamil Nadu <i>Mr. Muniappan P. and Mr. Somasundaram M.</i>	61
Some aspects of population growth of the primitive tribes of Madhya Pradesh <i>Dr. G.D. Pandey and Mr. R.S. Tiwary</i>	66
Article Abstracts	73
Resources	78
Some FPAI Publications and Audio-visuals	82
Instructions to authors	83

CORRELATES OF MARITAL POSTPONEMENT IN SRI LANKA

PROF. W. INDRALAL DE SILVA

INTRODUCTION

The postponement of marriage contributes substantially towards a reduction in the level of fertility by shortening the total reproductive span of the female which, in turn, due to a cumulative effect, influences the size of individual families as well as the population growth rate of the country.¹ In many developing countries experiencing significant falls in fertility, especially in Asia, reductions in proportions married have often coincided with or, as in the case of Sri Lanka, preceded falls in marital fertility.^{2,3}

In Sri Lanka, during the present century female age at marriage has increased almost by seven years. The delay in marriage and its impact on the birth rate have led Krik⁴ to refer to Sri Lanka as "the Ireland of Asia". Caldwell et al⁵ identified Sri Lanka as the leader in Third World Asia's change in marriage patterns. By the mid-1970s, Sri Lankan females were marrying not at puberty but a decade later.

Unlike in the West, where marriage is not necessarily the precursor of childbearing or the responsibility of running a household, in Sri Lanka, procreation is

almost entirely within marriage. Hence, any upward or downward trend in nuptiality would influence the fertility of Sri Lankan women.

This paper examines nuptiality trends and factors in Sri Lanka by using the published data of the population censuses from 1946 to 1981, the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) of 1987 and 1993, and labour force and educational statistics. It should be noted that the 1981 population census was the latest of such a series in Sri Lanka; neither was the scheduled population census of 1991 conducted nor any future date fixed for such an activity.

TRENDS IN NUPTIALITY

Although Sri Lanka is noted for its trend of universal and early marriage of females, marriage is now very late and may no longer be called universal.¹⁰ As observed in the 1993 Sri Lanka Demographic and Health Survey, nine per cent and five per cent of females respectively in the age groups 40-44 and 45-49 years were never married, and the general trend clearly shows an upward movement of these proportions (Table 1).

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