

*FIELD REPORT FROM MOROCCO*

*Adapted from the broadcast audio segment; use the audio player to listen to the story in its entirety.*

At 11:45pm on a Sunday night, an elaborately dressed crowd of 250 Moroccans has gathered outside a wedding hall in what looks like a strip mall on the outskirts of the city of Salé.

Mohammed Mahloofi is the proud father of the groom. He is beaming with joy as he's now married off the last of his eight children.

"I have three sons that I have already married. This will be the last one. I have married four daughters as well in the same place."

It's possible that deep down, some of his joy is the fact that he and his family don't have to pay for any more weddings.

"Everything is getting really expensive. The rent is really high."

Tonight's celebration cost around \$7,200. While that might seem like a bargain to fathers of the bride in the U.S., that number exceeds the average annual wage in Morocco. Studies show that marriage costs in Arab countries like Morocco can range from four to ten times per capita income.

But, as Mr. Mahloofi says, it's not just the cost of the wedding itself.

"People will not accept to eat just anything or to live just anywhere. Marriage has just become really, really hard for someone who has a limited salary."

In Morocco, economic conditions are causing a delay in marriage and shifts in social and sexual customs. In the past, a couple could move into a modest apartment with hand-me-down furniture. A young man today is expected to have a good job, a nice apartment and a sizable dowry already to go before popping the question.

A generation ago, the average age of a Moroccan man on his wedding day was 24. Today, it's 32.

In the past, the notion of asking a woman to help with the finances would be unthinkable. But as housing prices continue to rise faster than wages, young men are exploring this option.

Jowad is 34 years old and uneducated. He sells fish in the port and struggles to get his finances in order. He is under tremendous pressure. His girlfriend's family doesn't approve of him and they have been trying to set her up with someone more financially endowed.

He is confronting the painful reality that his girlfriend can only wait another year before she'll have to relent to family and social pressure and marry someone else. Jowad estimates it will cost about \$40,000 to buy and furnish an apartment and pay for the wedding. He's not sure he is going to make the deadline, so he runs the risk of losing his sweetheart. On top of that, he is still struggling to achieve something else: adulthood.

"My father is always telling me all the time, 'Without a wife, you are always weak in my eyes.' In our community – in our society – if you are married, you are an important person. If you are like hanging out in the streets with your friends, you mean nothing in your society."

That state of nothingness is referred to as 'waithood'. It's a term coined by the Middle East Youth Initiative and based on research by American University Professor Diane Singerman. She explains there are various factors for this phenomena.

"Between the ages of 15 and 25 or 15 and 30, they are trying to become adults. Becoming an adult is very much associated with being married and setting yourself up as an independent householder. But until they solve the schooling dilemma and the job dilemma and the housing dilemma, which is part of getting married, they are in this adolescent limbo."

This period of waithood can last 10 to 15 years or more, when a generation ago, it might have only been a couple of years. It adds to the cocktail of political, social and economic stresses young Arab's face. In the economic circumstances in Arab countries like Morocco, marriage isn't just a gateway to adulthood

and full membership in society. Unlike the west where premarital relations and cohabitation are common, in the Arab world, marriage is the gateway to legitimate sex.

Diane Singerman notes that "Sexuality is very much tied and sort of housed in marriage. You have young people who are not supposed to really have anything to do with members of the opposite sex, unless it really has to do with marriage. Dating officially starts in many communities after you get engaged, not before you get engaged."

That was less of a problem decades ago when most people got married in their late teens or early twenties. Abdessamad Dialmy, a Sociologist in Rabat, explains the dilemma.

"We can observe sociologically sexual explosion in Morocco, a lot of premarital sex, a lot of non-marital sex, emergence and visibility of homosexuality and lesbianism, a lot of emergence of prostitution also."

Predictably, this growth of liberalism in changing sexual behaviors has caused a backlash among religious conservatives. They've mobilized and created a parallel movement spreading conservative values and practices in Moroccan society. But there is another unintended consequence of delayed marriage that could be a long-term benefit.

Economic conditions are contributing to delayed marriage which reduces birth rates and ideally relieves some of the pressure caused by the youth bulge. While it might not be happening for the right reasons, delayed marriage does have an upside. But that's cold comfort to the young man struggling to find a job, buy a house and get married.

*– Reported by Sean Carberry for America Abroad*