

## HAPPILY EVER AFTER?

Lora Bulmahn

(1) States have tried to maintain some control over teenage marriages by setting a minimum legal age, but an overwhelming number of marriages still occur in the teen years. Although the high percentage of teenage marriages has declined somewhat in the past years, it nevertheless remains a significant problem in today's society. Despite the high failure rate associated with early marriages, teenagers are "tying the knot" at astounding rates every year. The causes behind young marriages are wide and varying but four prominent reasons seem to cause early marriage: insecurity, romantic notions of love and happiness, pregnancy, or, in many rural settings, traditional practice.

(2) The teenage years are a period of constant change, a transition between childhood and adulthood, as the young person experiences growing responsibilities, higher expectations, and greater independence. Strong ties to parents slowly dissolve and the teenager begins to establish individualized ideals and opinions. The turbulence accompanying these changing emotions and a changing appearance sharply contrasts with the relatively secure and stable previous years. To many teenagers, this is a confusing and scary time. Many, not anxious to face the world alone, desire to regain this lost sense of security with someone else. Through marriage, then, teens think they can escape their growing insecurities and fulfill their desire to be loved and supported.

(3) Romantic illusions of being "happy forever after" also influence and compound the problem of early marriages. Falling in "love" for the first time, many young adults naively believe it means everlasting love and happiness, and soon marry. In fact they are ignorant about what is needed to make a marriage work. Even the "love" they feel for each other can be questioned: young people have often not had enough experience in dating to know whether they are in love or not, and they frequently mistake infatuation for love. These marriages often fail, because neither partner was mature enough or realistic enough upon entering marriage to make it successful.

(4) In some cases, often in rural areas, it is quite common and even acceptable for people to marry at a young age. With less incentive than in urban areas to continue education after high school, rural areas stress the importance of maintaining family tradition and heritage by staying home and working on the family land. This

abrupt switch from the relatively carefree days of high school to workdays of eight or more hours signals the immediate arrival of adulthood. When teens are treated as adults and left little time for social activities, it seems natural that rural marriages proliferate in the brief period after high school is completed.

(5) Pregnancy, unfortunately, remains one of the leading reasons for teenage marriages. The awakening feelings and desires which teens encounter are often disturbing and confusing. Unsure how to respond to these feelings, people may become sexually involved without fully realizing the consequences, and pressure from a partner to "prove" one's love may bring about unplanned pregnancies. Once an unwanted pregnancy occurs, the partners' guilt and confusion can be overwhelming. The possibilities are bleak: while abortion is legal, many girls are not able to go through with it; adoption is often too heartbreaking for the mother; the remaining choice is marriage. While marriage may offer the most socially acceptable solution to the problem, it is not always the most practical one.

(6) Despite statistical evidence proving the astonishingly high rate of divorce among teenage marriages, these marriages are barely declining. The leading cause of early marriages remains pregnancy, followed by other influences such as insecurity, idealistic notions of happiness and love, and traditional patterns. While some early marriages may prove successful and lasting, the majority usually fail, mainly because the young people making them have not had adequate time to grow up and establish their own individuality before attempting to raise a family.