Divide between desire and reality: examining reasons behind late marriages among singles in Singapore

Marriage rates are decreasing1, and our total fertility rates remain one of the lowest in the world.2 The Marriage and Parenthood study in 20123 revealed that majority of singles have the desire to get married (83%) and have two or more children (80%). However, the study has also highlighted shifts in the attitudes of family among the singles, where many are delaying marriages.4 Statistics has shown that the median age for first-time grooms and brides has rose from 29.1 years in 2003 to 30.2 years in 2013 and from 26.6 years to 28.1 years respectively.5 Delayed marriages can become a social issue as the fertility of both men and women declines with increasing age6 and thus they are likely to have lesser children.7 As Singapore is already facing sub-replacement fertility4, late marriages is a cause for concern as it means that Singapore will face a greater societal burden on welfare costs due to increasing ageing population.8

To understand the roots of this issue, sociological imagination9 is required. There is a need to connect the private troubles of single Singaporeans to public issues of delayed marriages. Analysis into the mind-sets of young Singaporeans, both men and women, in terms of economic, cultural and societal aspects can help understand why they are not acting on their desire to get married earlier in life. Recent report reflected shifts in the peak age group for females marrying from 25 to 29 years in 2004 to 30 to 34 years in 2014.10,11 According to the 2012 Marriage and Parenthood Study, the unavailability of suitable partners, wish to focus on studies or work and the lack of money came up as the top three reasons for singles not to get married.3 These three factors will be further broken down to understand the underlying reasons in delayed marriages, with the heightened expectations of women towards marriages as a strong reason for delayed marriages.

The phenomenon of later marriages can also reflect increased in selectivity of spouses due to higher expectations, leading to unavailability of suitable partners. Both man and women may choose to marry later so that they can accumulate a stronger economic role within the family to ensure that they have more say in family matters over their spouses. This can be explained by the conflict approach which inequalities between sexes occur due to the contribution of unequal resources. This shows that marriages are becoming later and less prioritised in the life of young Singaporeans. Studies have also shown that women with more resources tend to place a larger emphasis on their partner’s resources than women with less resources.12 Thus, it may be possible that professional women in serious relationships are likely to push their partners to maintain or pursue a similar or higher economic standing. Women who are looking for suitable partners may become more “choosy” in order to find man with financial compatibility, leading to reduction in possible partner choices.

Increasing societal pressure due to influences of feminism and elevated social-economic statuses among women has also contributed to the change in the expectations of spouses to a more egalitarianistic one. However, the attitudes of men towards marriages has not changed much, leading to a lag. A study conducted among singles also revealed that there is a gender gap13 in attitudes towards marriages. Female respondents are “either (1) not as willing to relinquish their independence and freedom as the males and/or (2) not convinced by their prospective spouses’ egalitarian views on their roles in the family.” Such high expectations can be explained by influences of feminism and changes in the economic situations of young Singaporeans. The reason behind (1) could be due to higher educations received by women, leading to the ability for women to support themselves economically. Post-colonial industrialisation, improvement in education and tightening labour markets14 has led to increased opportunities and encouragement by the government for Singaporeans women to work. Thus, priorities in relationships has shifted from economic support to emotional support, in which man will have to adapt to. The predominant masculine culture has commonly associated the providence of financial support to the maintenance of relationships. A study conducted on Asian men has discovered that “having lots of money”15 is an important masculinity attribute. This can be seen by the expectations of men to pay for expenses incurred during the dating process and also the need to act as income.

Indeed, adopting egalitarian values can be challenging for man, especially among patriarchal norms prevalent in the society and masculine stances adopted by the government.16 This could be due to Government campaigns seems to show interest in maintaining the social status quo between the sexes17 and maintain the primary roles of women is to take care of their families. This shows a conflict between feminist values generally adopted by Singaporean Women and the masculine dominant ideology prevalent in the Singaporean society.18 There are increased expectations for men in the younger generations to adopt roles that were previously regarded as “women’s work”.19 However, it is unclear the extent of this conflict due to the absence of relevant masculinity studies in the region.20 What is certain is that such heightened expectations can lead to delayed marriages. A study on young adults has also revealed that marriage and family formation is hesitated due to fear that they cannot fulfil the demands of marriage and parenthood.21 Even if such values are recognised by men, there are many deterrence to prevent such actions, which can explain why women mostly remain unconvinced (2). This can be supported by the scepticism of the effectiveness of the Enhanced Marriage and Parenthood package, which involved increase in paternity leave to take care of the children, due to the current gender divide in household roles.22

Indeed, existing societal attitudes and goals can also put singles, especially women, off marriages. However, within the families there is disequilibrium in the designation of household tasks as women are expected to do most of household chores.23,19 This leads to a work-family conflict24 as long working hours as well as high work demands can diminish the capacities of mothers to cope with managing both work and household. Scarcity hypothesis, which is the basis of the work-family conflict theory, also supports that individual’s involvement in multiple roles will result in stress and inter-role conflict due to one having limited amount of energy.25 While numerous studies have suggested work-family conflicts are present in both Singaporean man and women, women are more likely to face more difficulties in managing work-family conflicts due to the motherhood mandate present in Asian societies.26

Work-family conflict is also proved to be a source of martial dissatisfaction for professional working women.27 Coupled with a materialistic society28, women are likely to choose to have lesser children, delay their marriages or even not get married. A recent psychological study has suggested that Singaporean women are more materialistic, which in turn leads to increased negativity for marriages and having children. 29,30,31 Hence, this could be a possible reason why women would want to focus on work as they prefer to earn more money to support their own affluent lifestyle.

Reasons behind the wish to focus on study or work can be varied, but the underlying reason could be led by the rising concern over job security.32 Young Singaporeans may choose to focus on their studies so that they can attain better academic results so as to get better jobs. As Singapore’s job scene is competitive due to the presence of foreign talent, young Singaporeans often have to fulfil a variety of other responsibilities in order to boost their chances of getting the job of their choice. Internship during breaks are increasingly common, and most people busied themselves with the organisation of Co-Curricular Activities (CCA) to boost their managerial profile. Our culture of economic competitiveness37 could also push both men and women to establish a strong foundation in their careers before settling down.

Among singles who are considering marriage, most of them cite the need to save up for housing and wedding besides putting careers as their priorities. This serves as a strong economic reason for delayed marriages. Indeed, there is a need to save up as a “typical” wedding can easily cost a minimum of $50,000 and even up to $130,000.33 In addition to this, couples nowadays prefer to buy a home, then wed and have children.34 The application for public housing often served as a delay for marriages among young Singaporeans as a Build-To-Order HDB flat typically takes 3 years to build.35 Coupled with the need to cope with rising costs of living36, this has created the mind-set in Singaporeans that they need to save up before getting married.

In all, it seems unavoidable that young Singaporeans are delaying marriages due to the nature of pre-existing attitudes in society regarding to mind-set of the affordability of marriage-related costs as well as the roles of women during marriage. As Singapore continue to have a strong economic standing in the world, dilemma of managing work and family continues to be a problem. This is especially so when consumerism38 predominates the society and thus supporting living in Singapore requires financial backing. Singaporeans will have to find a balance between “saving face” for men and fully support women’s wants to pursue their careers without the need to feel strains from work-life balance. As suggested by Hartman39,a dichotomy between individualism and familism can lead to the tension between the state and the family, warning also against a familism in social policy that marginalises and ‘sacrifices’ women to the welfare of the family.

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