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

The Marriage and Parenthood study in 20121 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 timing of the formation of a nuclear family which many are delaying marriages.2 Statistics from this study showed 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.3 Other reports reflected shifts in the peak age group for females marrying from 25 to 29 years in 2004 to 30 to 34 years in 20144,5, showing the decision in delaying marriages is more prominent among women in Singapore.

Delayed marriages can become a social issue as the fertility of both men and women declines with increasing age6 and thus couples are likely to have lesser children.7 As Singapore is already facing prolonged low fertility rates8 to the extent of sub-replacement fertility2, late marriages is a cause for concern as it means that Singapore will face a greater socioeconomic burden due to increasing ageing population9. There will be a reduction in labour force and increase in welfare costs. This is especially so when families are expected to take care of the elderly members in their household10, and thus as more couples have lesser or even no children, the shift of the welfare will fall to the government.

To understand the roots of this issue, sociological imagination11 is required. There is a need to connect the private troubles of single Singaporeans to public issue 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. According to the 2012 Marriage and Parenthood Study, the unavailability of suitable partners, the 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.1 These three factors can 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 be largely attributed to the increased selectivity of spouses due to higher expectations, accounting for the unavailability of suitable partners. Both men and women who are looking for suitable partners may became more “choosy” in order to find partners with financial compatibility, leading to reduction in possible partner choices. This is especially so when there is increasing evidence that dual-income are essential in maintenance of middle-class life.12 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.13 Thus, it may be possible that professional women are likely to push their partners to maintain or pursue a similar or higher economic standing before setting down.

Among women who are keen to form families, there is also an obsession to finding the “right one”. Indeed, 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. 14 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 gap15 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.” The reason behind (1) could be due to higher educations received by women, leading to the ability for women to support themselves economically. Such increased expectations can be explained by influences of feminism16 and changes in the economic situations of young Singaporeans. Thus, women’s priorities in relationships has shifted from economic support to emotional support, in which man will have to adapt to. The prevailing 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”17 is an important self-identified 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 main income provider.

Indeed, adopting egalitarian values can be challenging for man, especially due to the patriarchal norms prevalent in the society and masculine stances adopted by the government.18 Government campaigns seem to show interest in maintaining the social status quo between the sexes19 and 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.20 There are increased expectations for men in the younger generations to adopt roles that were previously regarded as “women’s work”.21 However, it is unclear the extent of this conflict due to the absence of relevant masculinity studies in the region.22 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 Enhanced Marriage and Parenthood package due to the current gender divide in household roles.23 This is especially so when there is a prevailing work-family conflict24, especially among women, which will be further discussed in the later part of the essay. Thus, it is possible that women would want to delay their marriages in order to ensure that their partners are able to resonate with the women’s needs and cope with the sharing of household duties.

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.25 Younger Singaporeans studying in tertiary institutions may choose to focus on their studies so that they can attain better academic results so as to get better jobs.26 As Singapore’s job scene is competitive due to the presence of foreign talent27,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 common28, and most people busied themselves with the organisation of Co-Curricular Activities (CCA) to boost their managerial profile. Working adults may also choose to focus on their careers29, perhaps due to the socioeconomic conditions locally. Our culture of economic competitiveness30 could push both men and women to establish a strong foundation in their careers before settling down. This can be attributed to the ideology that the attainment of a “successful” personal life is through a strong career and making money.31,32

Existing societal attitudes and goals can also put singles, especially women to delay marriages and focus on their careers. Post-colonial industrialisation, improvement in education and tightening labour markets33 has led to increased opportunities and encouragement by the government for Singaporeans women to work. However, within the private sphere of families there is disequilibrium in the designation of household tasks as women are expected to do most of household chores34,21. This leads to a work-family conflict35 as long working hours and 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.36 The 2012 marriage and parenthood study has also revealed that most women “desired family and employment at the same time”.1 Thus, Singapore women are faced with dichotomy as described by Engels37,38: if they work, they are unable to fulfil their household duties fully; but if they stay at home, they will have to give up the idea of generating their own income independent of men. Even if women are comfortable with the idea of giving up their jobs for a homemaker, it is difficult to do so due to the high opportunity costs associated with the rising costs of living39. Hence, the inconsistency of gender inequality in the private sphere of the family and the gender equality of work in the public sphere can cause women to prioritise career over marriages, leading to late marriages as they want to delay the need to face this role.

Although the problem of work-family conflict cannot be ruled out as exclusively a women’s issue due to numerous studies suggesting 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.40 Work-family conflict is also proved to be a source of martial dissatisfaction for professional working women,41 which can make marriages less appealing to women. Even though the physical aspect of household chores can be outsourced in terms of hiring an external help, women are still expected to act as a supervisory role

This prevailing work-family conflict, coupled with a materialistic society42 can lead to women delaying marriages. This is because a recent psychological study has suggested that Singaporean women are more materialistic, which in turn leads to increased negativity for marriages and having children.43,44,45  Thus, there is increase desirability among women to earn money to support their own affluent lifestyle. Hence, the combination of such factors can be why women would want to focus on work as marriages has become less appealing due to the high personal costs and lower personal benefit associated.

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. Marriage in Singapore often entails a complex fixed financial and social timeline as couples nowadays prefer to buy a home, then wed and have children.46 Recent statistics in 2014 has shown only 1 in 4 young Singaporeans wants to live with either set of parents after he or she gets married47, proving that majority of Singaporeans would prefer to move out after marriage. 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 build48, without taking into account other factors such as waiting period49 and financial planning. Couples would also have to ensure that they have sufficient funds in their CPF accounts to pay for their flat subsequently50 and also are able to pay for other related costs such as renovation costs51 and wedding costs. Indeed, there is a need to save up as a “typical” wedding can easily cost a minimum of $50,000 and even up to $130,000.52 Coupled with the need to cope with rising costs of living53, such combined mixtures of factors are likely to force couples spend time for financial planning before going entering the altar.

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, the trend of dual income families is expected to continue as consumerism predominates the society54. 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. Discussions with young adults has also revealed that family formation is hesitated due to fear that they cannot fulfil the high demands of marriage and parenthood55, further proving this point. As suggested by Hartman56,a dichotomy between individualism and familism can lead to the tension between the state and the family, which should be resolved to better adapt to existing societal conditions.

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