Divide between desire and reality: Examining the economical and sociological reasons behind late marriages among singles in Singapore

It is common knowledge that Singapore is facing challenges in family issues. Marriage rates was decreasing1, and our total fertility rates remain as 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%). This shows that the government is successful in engraining the formation of a nuclear family as an important milestone in life among Singaporeans. However, the study has also highlighted shifts in the attitudes of family among the singles. Many are delaying marriages.4 Statistics has shown that the median age for first-time grooms and brides has risen from 29.1 years in 2003 to 30.2 years in 2013 and from 26.6 years to 28.1 years respectively.5 Recent report proved shifts in the peak age group for females marrying from 25 to 29 years in 2004 to 30 to 34 years in 2014.6,7 Thus, while it may appear that Singaporeans have the values of pro-family, this does not seem to appear reflected in their choices.

To understand the roots of this issue, sociological imagination8 is required. There is a need to connect the private troubles of single Singaporeans to public issue of delayed marriages. Analysis into the mindset of young Singaporeans in terms of current economical and societal environment 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, 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 Among singles who are considering marriage, most of them cite the need to save up for housing and wedding as well as the putting careers as their priorities. Indeed, there is a need to save up as a “typical” wedding can easily cost a minimum of $50,000 and even up to $130,000.9 Coupled with the need to cope with rising costs of living10, this has created the mind-set in Singaporeans that they do need to save up before getting married.

Our cultural of economic competitiveness11 could also push both men and women to establish a strong foundation in their careers before settling down. 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. 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 before getting married. 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.

Discussions with young adults has also revealed that family formation is hesitated due to fears from fulfilling the demands of marriage and parenthood.13 Indeed, existing societal attitudes and goals can also put singles, especially women, off marriages. 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. However, the disequilibrium in the designation of household tasks can lead to work-family conflict15 as women are expected to do most of household chores and parenting.16,17 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.18 Thus, work demands can diminish the emotional capacities of mothers to cope with managing both work and household.

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.19 This can be supported by the scepticism of Enhanced Marriage and Parenthood package due to the current gender divide in household roles.20 Work-family conflict is also proved to be a source of martial dissatisfaction for professional working women.21 Coupled with a materialistic society22, 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. 23,24,25 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.

Increasing societal pressure due to influences of feminism and elevated social-economic statuses among women has also led to increased expectations for men in the younger generations to adopt roles that were previously regarded as “women’s work”.17 As women receive higher educations, priorities in relationships has shifted from economic support to emotional support. This can be challenging for man, especially due to the patriarchal norms prevalent in the society and masculine stances adopted by the government.26 Government campaigns seem to show interest in maintaining the social status quo between the sexes27 and maintain the primary roles of women is to take care of their families. This shows a conflict between feminist values and the masculine dominant ideology.28 Singaporeans will have to find a balance between “saving face” for men and support women’s wants to pursue their careers without feeling strains.

In all, it seems unavoidable that young Singaporeans are delaying marriages due to the nature of pre-existing attitudes in society regarding to mindset of the affordability of marriage-related costs as well as the gender roles during marriage. As the proportion of dual-income families is increasing, the society’s expectations are also changing to accommodate the needs of families.29

**(999 words)**

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