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.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 The trend of delayed marriages is more prominent among Singapore women as seen in the change in the peak age group for females marrying from 25 to 29 years in 2004 to 30 to 34 years in 2014.4,5 This suggests that while many want to marry, they are not acting on their desire to do so and are getting married later in life. 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. Hence, analysis into the reasons behind this phenomenon of late marriages is required so that the state can better address the situation through introduction or alteration of policies and citizens can better anticipate the future societal trends to make relevant informed decisions.

To understand the roots of this issue, sociological imagination10 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 cultural, societal and economic 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. Among the underlying factors presented in this essay, women’s heightened expectations of their partners is likely to be a strong reason for delayed marriages. This could be attributed to mismatch between the prevailing social norms and changes in the attitudes towards marriage among women.

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”3 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.11 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 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 feminism13 and elevated social-economic statuses among women due to increased job opportunities14 has also contributed to the rapid change in the material conditions of life, leading to women’s expectations of spouses to a more egalitarianistic one.15 However, social norms towards the ideology that wives perform household reponsibilities16 has largely remained unchanged, leading to what William Ogburn describes as a “cultural lag” as there is a mismatch between the material conditions of life and social attitudes.17 The presence of a gender gap in attitudes towards marriages has made women more specific in their preferences in a marriage partner and even so, they are often unconvinced by their prospective spouses’ egalitarian views on their roles in the family.18 This scepticism can be largely attributed to the patriarchal norms19 prevalent in the society and masculine stances adopted by the government.20

The prevailing predominant masculine culture has heavily associated the providence of financial support to masculinity, as seen in the fact that “having lots of money”21 as an important self-identified masculinity attribute among Asian men. This culture has also regard household chores as “women’s work”22 and not a responsibility that should be partaken by men. In addition, government campaigns also show interest in maintaining the social status quo between the sexes and maintained that the primary roles of women is to take care of their families. 23 With increasing expectations among young women for men generations to adopt roles that were previously regarded as “women’s work”22, there is a conflict between such feminist values generally adopted by Singaporean Women and the masculine dominant ideology prevalent in the Singaporean society.24 However, it is unclear the extent of this conflict due to the absence of relevant masculinity studies in the region.25 What is clear is that such social attitudes, coupled with existing social phenomenon such as the presence of work-family conflict26 (which will be further discussed in the later part of the essay), has led to increased selectivity of partners among women. Thus, it is likely that marriages are delayed in order to ensure that their partners’ marriage attitudes are able to resonate with the women’s.

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.27 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.28 As Singapore’s job scene is increasingly competitive due to the presence of foreign talent29, young Singaporeans often have to fulfil a variety of other responsibilities30 to boost their chances of getting the job of their choice. This can reduce the time that youngsters have towards socialising and some even view relationships as a distraction from achieving their goals.31 Working adults may also choose to focus on their careers32 as our culture of economic competitiveness33 pushes both men and women to establish a strong foundation in their careers before considering marriage. This can be attributed to the ideology a “successful” personal life is attained through a strong career and making money34,35, which is a key goal for many Singaporeans.36

The presence of work-life conflict among married women, caused by the differing societal attitudes and personal attitudes towards marriages, can lead to women choosing to focus on their careers as marriage is now less desirable comparatively. While the 2012 Marriage and Parenthood study has also revealed that most women “desired family and employment at the same time”1, the act of balancing both family and employment has proved to be a difficult one. Within the private sphere of families, there is disequilibrium in the designation of household tasks as women are expected to do most of household chores and parenting. 37,22 This leads to the formation of work-family conflict38 as long working hours and high work demands diminishes the emotional capacities of women to cope with 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.39

Even though the physical aspect of household chores and parenting can be outsourced in terms of hiring an external help, work-family conflict may not be eliminated as women are still expected to act as a supervisory role rather than men40. As such, Singapore women are faced with dichotomy as described by Engels41,42: 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. Although some women are comfortable with the idea of giving up their jobs to stay at home, it may not be financially viable due to the rising costs of living43. Thus, marriages become less appealing to women due to high personal costs incurred as work-family conflict is likely to be a source of martial dissatisfaction.44 This leads to late marriages as women may want to delay facing this stressful life of working the “second shift”45.

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.46 Even though there are government policies to tackle the presence of work-family conflict, women mostly remain unconvinced due to the current gender divide in household roles, as seen in the scepticism towards Enhanced Marriage and Parenthood package.47 In addition, housework is often devalued48 due to the notion that household chores is not regarded as “work”.49 As such, women are likely to regard a successful career as important so that they can identify themselves as productive members of the society50 and protect their own self-esteem. 51 Coupled with the fact that Singapore is a materialistic society52, women are likely to harbour negativity towards marriages and child-bearing as Singaporean women are now more materialistic.53,54,55 Hence, women may prefer to earn money to support their affluent lifestyles due to the increased negativity towards marriages.

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 economical 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.56 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 married57, proving that majority of Singaporeans would prefer to move out after marriage. Thus, the application for public housing often served as one of the greatest delay for marriages among young Singaporeans as Build-To-Order HDB flats typically takes 3 years to build58, without taking into account other factors such as waiting periods59 and financial planning. Couples is also under financial pressure to ensure that they have sufficient funds in their CPF accounts to pay for their flat subsequently60 and also are able to pay for other related costs such as renovation costs61 and wedding costs. Indeed, there is huge financial pressure as a “typical” wedding can easily cost a minimum of $50,000 and even up to $130,000.62 Coupled with the need to cope with rising costs of living, such combination of factors are likely to force couples spend time to do financial planning as well as financial preparation before going entering the altar together.

In all, there is indeed a divide between the “want” to marry and the “act” of marrying. It seems unavoidable that young Singaporeans are delaying marriages due to the mixture of many reasons. With delayed adulthood64 already a prevailing trend because of concerns over job securities, other factors presented further delay the timeline of marriages. Among the reasons presented, increased in women’s expectations towards marriages is a strong reason as women are likely to look for spouses who can share household responsibilities and prevent the formation of work-family conflict. Indeed, the trend of dual-income families is expected to continue as consumerism predominates the society65 and the idea of working “dual shifts” will make marriage less appealing to women. Thus, the government will have to review its familialist social policies to help women achieve work-family balance. Otherwise, tensions between the state and the family that can arise due to a dichotomy between individualism and familism, as warned by Hartman66, due to the familialist social policies which marginalises and ‘sacrifices’ women to the welfare of the family.