

Ask: NUS Economists

Why more women in East Asia are not marrying

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For The Straits Times

Q Why are more women, especially in East Asia, not marrying? Are social norms a factor?

A The decline in marriage is a well-documented trend in most of the industrialised world.

In East Asia, the proportion of single women aged 35 to 39 has increased considerably, reaching about one in five in Hong Kong and Japan by the mid- to late-2000s, compared with one in 20, at most, in 1970.

Similar patterns have been observed in Singapore, where the proportion of women between the ages of 35 and 39 who are single has risen steadily from 8.5 per cent in 1980 to 17 per cent in 2015.

The retreat from marriage appears to be especially pronounced among the highly educated. In Singapore, in 2015, among women aged 30 to 39, those who were university educated were twice as likely to remain single as compared to their peers with secondary school qualifications or less.

The same can also be said for many parts of East Asia and Southern Europe. In these

countries, the declines in marriage rates have been accompanied by a steady rise in the age at first marriage and declines in fertility.

From these patterns, one might conjecture that education and career considerations are largely responsible for the lower marriage prospects of educated women. Relative to their less-educated peers, highly skilled women have greater incentive to put off marriage to pursue lucrative careers.

However, examining the marriage patterns of women across countries throws up a more complex picture of the marriageability of educated women.

Data shows that, in recent times, highly educated women in North America, most Nordic countries and parts of Western Europe are, in fact, more likely to get married than their less-educated peers.

These patterns are in stark contrast to those observed in East Asia and Southern Europe.

To explain these contrasting experiences across countries, in a recent study, my co-authors and I proposed the idea that the disapproval that men in some societies have towards working women is the key ingredient that lowers the marriage prospects of skilled women.

We can view tasks such as household chores and child rearing as contributing to the overall well-being of the household. Since educated women are more likely to work in the labour market as compared to their less-educated peers, they devote less time to the household public good. This may make skilled women less attractive as potential partners in the marriage market to men who value wives who perform these household tasks.

Nevertheless, as the labour market opportunities of skilled women rise, they become increasingly more attractive as husbands start to value their higher income.

Intuitively, when women's wages are low, increases in work due to an increase in the market wage lowers the marriage prospects of skilled women, since husbands value the increase in their wives' wages by less than the disutility incurred as women spend less time in the household (on household chores and childcare).

When the market wage is high enough, further increases in market wages make skilled working women more attractive as spouses compared to unskilled non-working women who earn less, as their higher income more

than compensates for the decline in household well-being resulting from their lower time spent on household work.

This framework can help us to understand how skilled women's labour market opportunities may impact their marriage prospects in societies that differ in terms of their conservatism.

In more traditional societies, husbands place a lower importance on their wives' careers and earnings. They prefer that their wives stay at home and take care of their families regardless of their earning potential. In other words, in societies with more conservative norms, women need to make a lot more in their jobs to compensate a husband for the disutility of a working wife.

We tested the predictions of the model using data on marriage rates by education for 23 countries in four time periods – 1995, 2000, 2005 and 2010. We measured the strength of gender norms across countries, using responses to the following question from the Integrated Values Survey: "When jobs are scarce, men have more right to a job than women."

We found support for the predictions of the model in the data. First, we showed that countries with more conservative gender norms were also countries where educated women marry at an especially low rate compared to less educated women.

Moreover, we found that a lower fraction of women completed tertiary education in more gender-conservative countries. This response was in line with educated women expecting to face greater barriers in the marriage market in these countries.

Finally, we showed that the relationship between the skilled-unskilled gap in marriage rates and skilled women's labour market opportunities appeared to differ markedly across groups of countries in a way that was consistent with the predictions of the model. Specifically, we found that increases in skilled women's wages improved their marriage prospects more so in liberal countries (where husbands value their wives' careers more) than in conservative countries.

What does this analysis imply about the expected long-run trends of the marriage prospects of highly educated women in gender-conservative countries such as those in East Asia and Southern Europe?

The lower marriage rates among highly educated women are likely to translate into a decline in fertility among them. This will exacerbate already low fertility rates in these parts of the world. Moreover, as recent studies suggest that children of working and educated mothers tend to develop more liberal attitudes, lower fertility among these groups could further dampen the shift towards more progressive gender norms.

However, our analysis suggests a silver lining. Regardless of slowly changing norms, better job opportunities for skilled women in conservative societies should ultimately result in improving their marriage market prospects as their higher earning power will eventually work to offset the disutility from having a working wife.

We can only speculate how long this process would take. However, the fact is that the marriage rate of educated women has caught up with, and in some cases surpassed, that of less educated women in more gender-equal countries. This should give East Asian and Southern European countries hope that the marriage gap between skilled and unskilled women may be transitory.

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