

Socio-Religious and Socio-Cultural Perspectives of Delayed Marriage

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ABSTRACT

Marriage is a social institution that is highly regarded but is in decline due to the impact of modernity. Marriage, meaning the institution regulating sex, reproduction, and family life (Brake, 2012) has generated much controversy in the contemporary world because of considerable variation in its meaning and practices. In this paper, we examine family and marriage as well as the interconnectedness between them from Western, cultural and religious context with reference to Islam. We discuss how modernity and modernization have impacted timing of marriage. Also, we discuss how the meaning of marriage has been redefined in the 21st century leading to changing marital practices such as delayed marriage. We provide explanation of delayed marriage using sociological theories. Furthermore, we provide understanding of delayed marriage from both cultural and Islamic perspectives. We then conclude that most cultures of the world as well as the religion of Islam vision of marriage and family are intolerant of delayed marriage.

Keywords: Delayed marriage, family, Islam, modernity, modernization

INTRODUCTION

Marriage remains an important institution laying the foundation of a family which is the bedrock of a society and an ideal, even though it is delayed due to modernity (Kelani, 2014). Modernity is the shift in the philosophy of the West about the world due to the breakthrough of science and technology which transformed traditional society of the past to modern society as it is found today in the West. This shift in the philosophical base totally undermined the super structure, of which marriage institution is one, of Western societies. In the world today, modernity and modernization have untied the leash on the connotation of marriage and this has given way to various alternatives to marriage such as cohabitation, single parenthood, gay and lesbian marriage and delayed marriage. Generally, the trend in the age of first marriage in contemporary societies among the educated is on the rise, for the reasons of long stay in school, career pursuit, urbanization, exposure to mass media and so on (Kelani, 2014).

Zarinah Mahari (2011) concludes that socio-economic growth especially in education has a great connection to development and modernisation process that leads to the rising number of women delaying marriage. According to the Current Population Survey (2011) nowadays, both men and women are marrying later than they did in the past. Figure 1 below presents the median age at first marriage in the United States between 1960-2011. There are two lines indicated by red and blue colours. The blue trend line shows the median age for men and the red trend line presents the median age for women. According to the lines, the median age at first marriage rose from 22.8 in 1960 to almost 29 years for men and from 20.3 to almost 27 years for women in 2011.

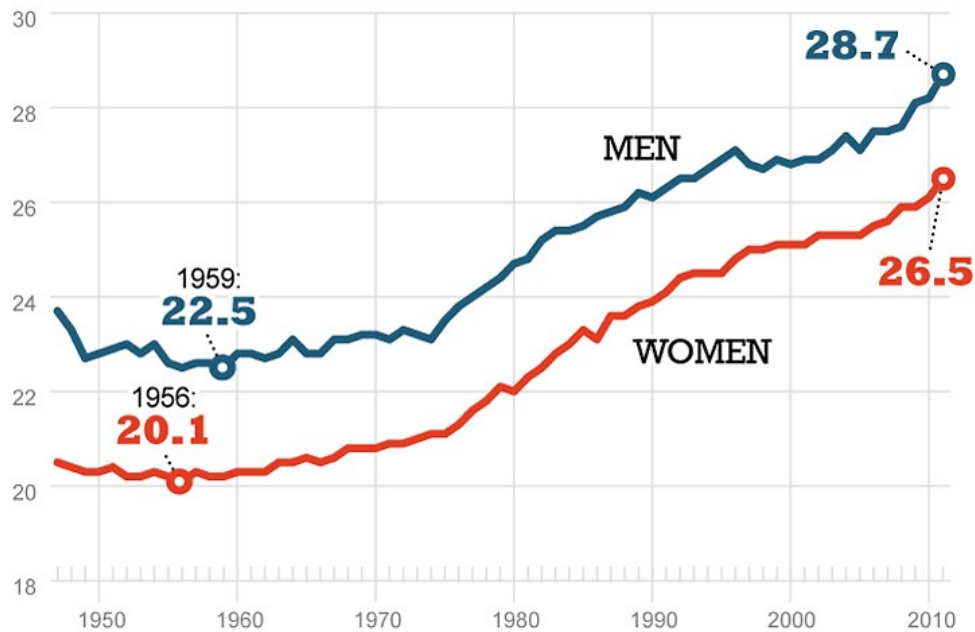


Figure 1: The Median Age at First Marriage in United States between 1960- 2011.

Source: U.S Census Bureau Current Population survey (2011).

Adapted from www.familyfacts.org

LITERATURE REVIEW

Family as an Outcome of Marriage

Family is a fundamental social institution and it is the basic reproductive unit of the society which performs many socio-cultural roles as well. The roles that a family plays in the society cannot be over-emphasized and most importantly, it is committed to the socialization of children who are the products of the institution, thereby promoting stability in the society. Lippman and Bradford describe the family as a core social institution that occupies a central place in the lives of men, women, and children around the world. It is: a) a source of support and sometimes an obstacle, to individual and collective achievements; b) a unit of economic production and consumption; c) an emotional haven that can sometimes be a source of emotional strain; and d) a vehicle for extending care giving and culture across the generation for better and for worse (Lippman and Bradford in World Family Map Project, 2013).

The family is the oldest of all human institutions, and entire civilizations have flourished or disappeared depending on the situation as to whether family life was strong or weak (Maqsood, 2001). Murdock (1949) defined the family as a social group characterized by common residence, economic cooperation and reproduction. It includes adults of both sexes, at least two of whom maintain a socially approved sexual relationship, and one or more children, own or adopted, of the sexually cohabiting adults. Malinowski (1927) gave the definition of family mapped onto i) a bounded set of people who recognize each other and are distinguishable from other groups, ii) a definite physical space, a hearth and home; and iii) a particular set of emotions, family love. Anthony Giddens (2009) regarded family as a group of individuals related to one another by blood ties, marriage or adoption, who form an economic unit, the adult members of which are responsible for the upbringing of children.

From religious point of view, Confucianism looks at family with a focus of their own ethics, which holds that a basic moral principle, *xiushen* (self-improvement), can be pursued only

within the confines of the family (Asia Demography, 2011). Hammudah (1993: 19) regarded it as “a special kind of structure whose principles are related to one another through blood ties and/or marital relationship, and whose relatedness is of such a nature as to entail ‘mutual expectations’ that are prescribed by law, and internalized by the individual”.

Family is basically an outcome of marriage and in the traditional society, marriage was regarded to be the union of two opposite sexes of two different families divinely enjoined for the support of procreation and stability of the society. Marriage has been studied by many researchers including the philosopher, sociologist, social psychologist and the anthropologist. There has been a continuing argument regarding the definition and universality of marriage and no one has been able to come up with a faultless definition of marriage (Tokuhiko, 2004). The famous American anthropologist, Murdock, stresses the interpersonal aspect of marriage by saying that “marriage exists only when the economic and the sexual are united into one relationship” (Murdock, 1949:8). Goodenough (1970:4) highlights the contractual or legal aspects of marriage by defining it as “a contractual union of a man and a woman and invests sexual privilege, economic cooperation, cohabitation, the production of children and responsibility of the children’s care, socialization and education. Most philosophers refer to ‘Marriage’ as a legal contract and civil status, a religious rite, and a social practice, all of which vary by legal jurisdiction, religious doctrine, and culture (Brake, 2012). These definitions have been criticized on being too narrow and not universal enough to give a clear definition of marriage which fits into every culture.

According to Giddens (2009), marriage normally forms the basis for family of procreation—that is, it is expected that the married couples will produce and bring up children. World Family Map Project (2013: 14) mention that “in many societies, marriage has played an important role in providing a stable context for bearing and rearing children, and for integrating fathers into the lives of their children”. Furthermore, Morgan (2005) states that there is no record of societies without marriage and families; all societies that have survived have been built on marriage. In addition, Dhimi and Sheik (2000) assert that the Muslim family is a divinely inspired institution, with marriage at its core point.

However, the purpose of marriage varies from one individual to another and from one society to another and recently it has gone through some tremendous changes. Some young people enter into marriage because of religious reasons; others marry in response to social or societal pressure or for numerous other reasons. Tepperman (cited in Quah, 2009), suggests that marriage is considered an important life event for two reasons: first—the personal motive—which is to secure a keel for the emotional life of individuals and second, the social motive—to ensuring the socio-economic stability and progress of family, kin and community (Quah, 2009).

Among the Yorubas in Nigeria, marriage is very important because of the belief that continuity in the human race can only be ensured through procreation and marriage is an ideal setting for procreation to take place. According to Olugboye (2004), the primary purpose of marriage is sustaining the Yoruba race through legitimate and responsible procreation. In other words, both personal and collective immortality are salient ambitions that are pursued vigorously by the Yoruba, through bearing children, especially sons (Mbiti, 1969).

In Muslim societies, marriage is an obligation on every Muslim who has the economic capability because it is considered a religious duty prescribed by the Holy Qur’an. Hammudah (2008:52) puts it that “the normal, natural course of behaviour for a Muslim is to establish a conjugal family of procreation”.

Changing Views about Marriage and Marital Practices

Marriage is universal in almost all societies (Morgan, 2005), however, its practice varies in the 21st century. History shows considerable variation in marital practices: polygyny has been widely practiced; some societies have approved extra-marital sex and, arguably, recognized same-sex marriages, and religious or civil officiation has not always been the norm (Coontz, 2006). Brake notes that while the contemporary Western ideal marriage involves a relationship of love, friendship, or companionship, marriage system historically functioned primarily as an economic and political unit which creates kinship bonds, control inheritance, and share resources and labour, some ancients and medieval discouraged 'excessive' love in marriage. According to Coontz, the context of 'love reunion' in marriage dates popularly to the 18th century. Servaty (2011) argues that the definition of marriage has not changed but the practices of marriage have, such as ceremonies, gender roles and values.

People's notions about marriage are often shaped by the superiority of the worldview prevalent in a given environment. The concept of marriage in the 21st century is differently understood among different people based on their dispositions to Western values and ideas. With the emergence of modernity in the Western society, the traditional conceptual idea of marriage has been continually redefined. This is evidenced by visible changes in marriage structures and patterns; homosexuality is on the rise, cohabitation is adopted with gusto, and increasing numbers of people are marrying late in life. In the traditional societies of the world, marriage was understood to be the union of two opposite sexes of different families divinely enjoined for the support of procreation and stability in the society. Therefore, it can safely be said that marriage is divinely instituted and so is heterosexual. To some people especially in the West, marriage need not be between the opposite sexes but may also be between the same sexes. According to Giddens (2009), marriage is more heterosexual than homosexual for some and in some societies, same sex marriage is tolerated.

More people in the West agree that marriage is not necessary to lead a satisfying life (Kaufmann, 2007). In contrast, some researchers testify to the benefits of marriage as Hollos and Whitehouse (2008) mentioned that marriage is a highly significant position for women wanting to "become modern". In comparison to their unmarried counterparts, married adults are happier (Lee & Bulanda, 2005; Weinke & Hill, 2009), less depressed (Frech & William, 2007; Liu & Umberson, 2008), and wealthier (Hirschl et al., 2006), and they live longer (Henretta, 2007; Manzoli et al., 2007; Kaplan & Richard, 2006; Williams & Debra, 2004; Murray, 2000). Soons et al., (2009); Stack & Eshleman (1998), show that married persons are advantaged over unmarried persons in virtually every nation that has been studied, at least in terms of psychological well-being.

In Islam, marriage is a divine institution and it has many benefits which are beyond this world. "It aims at taming the strong sexual urge, to make one's body and mind chaste and for large scale propagation of the human race" (Zafeeruddin Miftahi, 1997:50). "Sex is capable of impelling individuals, reckless of consequences while under its spell, toward behaviour which may imperil or disrupt the cooperative relationships upon which social life depends" (Murdock, 1965:60). Hammudah (2008) argues that although sex can be sublimated more than other drives, the result of modern clinical research suggests that "excessive sexual deprivation produces personality maladjustments that hinder satisfactory relationships and endanger the mental health and efficiency of society" (Murdock, 1965:260-1). Apart from the worldly benefits, marriage is considered a helping factor in attaining spiritual perfection; it prevents Muslims from getting into sins and also enhances the value of their acts of worship (Rizvi, 1997). Marriage has been interpreted by some Muslim jurists to mean a religious duty as well as a social necessity (Kelani, 2014). Unfortunately, the benefits of marriage are now

contextually lost with such a view that do not see marriage as necessary and meritorious rather it is regarded as a kind of 'choice'.

Western studies reveal several changes in marital behavioural patterns underlying the decline in the marriage rate including an increase in the proportion of people who spend their lives without marrying (Schoen & Canudis-Romo, 2005); the increasing prevalence of cohabitation as a substitute of marriage (Seltzer, 2004); and the increasing average age at marriage (Kalmijn, 2004). As is the case for life time non-marriage, much of this is driven by the increase in cohabitation which now precedes marriage for more than half of all couples who eventually marry, thus delaying marriage (Smock & Manning, 2004). Beck and Beck-Gernshem (1995:2) also argue that "women and men are currently compulsive on the search for the right way to live trying out cohabitation, divorce or contractual marriage, struggle to coordinate family and career, love and marriage, new motherhood and fatherhood, friendship and acquaintances. This movement is underway and there is no stopping it."

Theories on Delayed Marriage

Scholars have used many theories to explain the reason individuals marry and those factors that influence the timing of marriage. From the structural-functional perspective, society is seen as a complex system whose parts work together to promote solidarity and stability. Marriage is an important social institution which performs essential functions including; sexual gratification and regulation, division of labour between sex, economic production, companionship and procreation. Therefore, getting married is an acceptable social norm. This view is supported by institutional theories which emphasize that marriage, like the family as a whole, is supported by "a structure of norms, values, laws, and a wide range of social pressures" (Goode, 1982: 11). This explains the reason that marriage has endured in the United States in spite of the sudden financial downturn (Modell, 1986) and continues to be popular as an ideal for young Americans (National Marriage Project, 2000).

Structural-Functional perspective thus explains how well a particular marriage alternative performs a basic marriage function. On this premise, people may delay marriage but may be involved in pre-marital relationships or in others to satisfy their personal needs for affection, companionship and sexual gratification. Furthermore, in the case that people have delayed marriage until after their reproductive years, they may opt for artificial reproduction if they desire to fulfill procreation which is one of the functions of marriage. This perspective on marriage is faulted on the fact that not all marital behaviours are good and not all are healthy to the growth of the society. Marital behaviour such as delayed marriage and non-marriage have negative implications which rather than bring stability to the society, it disrupts the equilibrium of the society which goes against the spirit of Islam of which its overall goals is to establish a peaceful atmosphere conducive for people to serve the purpose of creation.

The main idea of this theory assumes that behaviour is fundamentally self-interested and that interactions with others are sought primarily to maximize costs. In this regard, people marry because the rewards of marriage outweighs the costs of being single. Working on this premise Gary Becker (1981), introduced the economic theory of marriage in which she did not see marriage as an emotive arrangement rather a rational one between couples who are better off as a single economic entity rather than a separate entity. Becker drew an analogy of single men with traders in international trade where symbolic relationships exist. Each party has something different to offer while they stand to 'gain' from each other thereby creating mutual dependence. She however, argues that "the gain from marriage is reduced by a rise in the earnings and labor force participation of women and by a fall in fertility because a sexual division of labor becomes less advantageous" (Becker, 1981: 248). "This perspective

has been criticized based on the fact that it assumes human nature that is unrealistically rational and even cynical at heart about the roles of love and responsibilities” (Lamana & Riedmann, 2011: 37).

The main idea behind these theories is that two groups who are not equal usually have conflicting values and agendas, and this causes them to compete against one another. This constant competition between groups is the basis for the dynamic nature of society. In this context, it describes the behaviour patterns such as unequal division of labour in terms of power that exists between husbands and wives in marriage (Lamana & Riedmann, 2011). Feminism has sprung up from conflict theories, but unlike Marxists they see the exploitation of women by men as the most important source of exploitation, rather than that of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie. It explains the oppression of women and related patterns of subordination based on gender discrimination in wages, sexual harassment, marital rape and other sexual and physical violence against women” (Lamana & Riedmann, 2011: 34). Origin of marriage has been linked with this theory by some sociologists who studied marriage from this perspective. To them, marriage originated from ancient exercises of force and as continuing to contribute to the exploitation of women. This caused the feminists concerns because of the effects it has on women's life chances. Continuing disadvantage accruing to women in marriage has been widely documented, and to some feminists, inequality undergirds gender (rival accounts place greater emphasis on sexual objectification or workplace discrimination). Wives, whether full time housewives or not, carry out more house chores than husbands and this makes them less competitive at work place (Brake, 2012). Women, given the role of childcare and at the same time constrained to work in a paid job, challenge them and as a result they could not compete at workplace (Maushart, 2001). Card (1996) pointed out that when there is a spouse career conflict, married women often choose part-time work or forego her job and focus on childrearing because they are paid less than men thereby making women economically dependent on men. This makes women “vulnerable by marriage”; economic dependence and dependence on marriage for benefits such as health insurance foster power inequality and make exit difficult and in turn facilitate abuse. Feminists in the 21st century whose attention is turned to marriage are concerned with the spousal abuse (Posner & Silbaugh, 1996), the gendered division of labour in marriage, and the effects of marriage on women's economic opportunities and power. Building on the gender inequalities and power differentials within marriage, women now require autonomy and power and this has given way to changing perception and expectations about marriage among educated women who place much emphasis on egalitarian relationships in marriage (Tokuhiro, 2004). Consequently, unconventional marital behaviours are emerging among which are delayed marriage and non-marriage. As Lamanna and Riedmann (2005) rightly observes that one of the increase in economic independence of women is a rising likeness for untary singlehood.

This perspective on marriage is criticized based on the fact that, women are not in any way oppressed in Islam, although some Muslim men maltreat their wives. Oppression of women dates back to the *jahiliyyah* period (the period before the advent of Qura’an, women were subjugated during this period.) in Islam. Islam forbids inhumane treatment of women and during the time of the prophet (P.B.U.H), women enjoyed considerable fair treatment. Spousal roles have been clearly defined in the Holy Qur’an, thus, there is no cause for gender inequality in Islam as gender inequality was never present in the first place.

Cross-cultural Perspectives of Delayed Marriage

There are values built across generations and individuals in different societies have different expectations and perceptions of marriage influenced by cultural traditions (Tokuhiro, 2004).

Traditionally, adulthood is defined by three states; financial independence, marriage, and starting a family (Chao & Gardner, 2007). However, today's young adults are delaying marriage and parenthood, even when they have the means to do so. Many people view delayed marriage as an alien phenomenon which threatens the norm of the society thus is undesirable (Kelani, 2014). For instance in Asian societies, social norms and community and family structures have not yet adapted to the high proportion remaining single in their 30's and 40's (Jones, 2010). Social stigma is cast on such women as it indicates that a woman has fallen short of the expectation of her, the revered role of a wife as it is expected that she should be married when she comes of age. Failure to do this brings about disparage remarks on her; she is pitied, ridiculed, stigmatized and labelled with different names as Cargan and Melko (1982:22) assert that "since marriage is a social norm, remaining unmarried or choosing against marriage leads to stereotypes, biases and discriminations". In the case of the Japanese, unflattering terms like '*Kurisumasi keru*', meaning 'Christmas cake' (Cherry in Quah, 2009) are used to refer to an unmarried person. In Indonesia, the situation of being single may be more difficult, because a place has not been provided for single adults in the community and family. "A single woman is often perceived as an 'old maid who could not get a man because she is unattractive, handicapped or incompetent, or a 'city single' who does not want a man because she is highly educated, ambitious, single minded, determined, active and career minded person" (Situmorang, 2005:4). Similarly, in Vietnam, while "non-marriage has become more acceptable, single women are far from being accepted and integrated into their families and communities" (Belanger & Hong, 2002:90).

The Yorubas believe that marriage is one of the characteristics of a mature person and to be unmarried is perceived to be a feature of childhood, irrespective of the individual's age. To them, it is abnormal for a man or a woman to still remain single at age thirty-five and above unmarried adults are viewed as unserious or as having some problems (Oderinde, 2013).

Islamic Perspective on Delayed Marriage

As a complete way of life, Islam does not recognized any marital behaviour apart from the one described by the Qur'an. Any other forms of marital behaviour will mean innovation and every innovation is a sin which leads to the path of social destruction (Kelani, 2014). Islam attaches great importance to the health and moderation of the social structure, and works to establish general peace and well being of the society, as such, great emphasis is placed on moral value. This core value shapes the Muslim ethos. The most outstanding core value is chastity as many verses of the Holy Qur'an regard immorality as a grave sin which Muslims are enjoined to stay away from. Islam therefore advocates marriage in order to maintain psychological, social and emotional balance of individuals.

Marriage in Islam encompasses those ways and manners which Prophet (P.B.U.H) prescribed and practiced during his lifetime. These practices begin by observing those etiquettes of pre-marital relationships. Unfortunately, the core Western values have eroded the younger generation of Muslims (Zine, 2008). Islam places the responsibilities of children on parents, one of which is to marry off their children at an appropriate time. Nowadays, arranged marriage is gradually phasing out among Muslims and children are left on their own to choose their marriage partners by themselves. However, this has made Muslims embraced the Western idea of 'dating' which results in free mixing between opposite sexes. Coulture (2011) observes that dating has challenged and hindered the long known arranged marriage. The permissive Western culture accommodates different types of pre-marital relationship including dating. Dating is a socially constructed (Western) institution (Adelman & Kil, 2007) that emerged during the twentieth century (Feinstein & Arden, 1973). It is a romantic relationship between two individuals who are not married (Carlson, cited in Jackson, 1999).

“Since the mid-1920s, dating in the United States has been a universal custom..... [and] the dominant script for how young people would be sexually intimate and form relationship” (Bogle, 2008:14). Dating in the context of the West is not compatible with Islamic beliefs due to the fear that it will lead to pre-marital sex (Kopp, 2002). Pre-marital sex and experimental living (cohabitation) are discouraged in Islam.

Apart from this, a proper timing of marriage is encouraged, although Islam does not specifically prescribe any particular age of marriage, it usually encourages any initiative to marry at an early age or when there is a capability and ‘desire to marry’. Desire to marry is governed by the physiological, psychological and spiritual development of the person. Once an individual has reached the age of puberty and there is maturity, marriage should be encouraged.

CONCLUSION

We can conclude from the foregoing that both religion and culture support marriage. However, they do not accept delayed marriage. As a holistic way of life, Islam has made marriage a prerequisite or foundation of family in order to secure happiness for individual and peace in the society. In Islam, delayed marriage is not encouraged because it leads to missing those benefits which are obtainable by early marriage and in general, it has negative effects amongst which is fornication and adultery. Furthermore, in the contemporary time, criteria for selecting a marriage partner are materialistic in nature. Values and expectations of spouses are supposed to be based on correct Islamic criteria prescribed by the Qur’an and *Sunnah* (recommended acts of the Prophet). Among the reasons that people marry; such as piety, wealth, beauty and status, Muslims have been advised to marry for the reason of piety and consider the material things less, as this is what can save people from delaying marriage as well as ensure a blissful marriage.

Many cultures are intolerant of delayed marriage, this may be due to the perceived negative implications it has on the particular individual and the society at large. Individual who delays marriage above thirty years may likely experience many problems among which is infertility as it is believed and proven medically that fertility start to diminish at around late twenties. Regarding the implication on the society, delaying marriage to above thirty years may result in immoral sexual behaviours in the society such as cohabitation, pre-marital sex and having multiple sexual partners which in turn aids abortion and the transmission of various sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS.

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