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More S'pore women may skip marriage. Are gender relations behind this?

Marriage is becoming less attractive for women and this has implications for Singapore's birth rates.

Kalpna Vignehsa

In Singapore, the standard narrative has long been that fewer people are having children because fewer people want children. However, a recent analysis from Singapore's Department of Statistics (DOS) shows that falling birth rates now result primarily from increasing rates of singlehood, rather than from couples choosing to be child-free.

Data that my colleagues and I collected in the Singapore Perspectives 2024 (SP2024) survey helps to explain what is going on. It found that 40 per cent of women between 21 and 34 years old do not foresee themselves getting married.

This group is 17 percentage points less interested in marriage and 12 percentage points less hopeful for children than their male peers. This decoupling of marriage and parenthood is meaningful because most children in Singapore are born to married parents, and cultural

norms and public policy strongly encourage this.

Yet, the data seems to be saying that, for more young women than young men, their stumbling block to marriage is gender relations, rather than the childrearing that often goes along with it.

What aspect of gender relations between men and women is making marriage significantly less attractive for women than men? This – and not the skewed notion that women are somehow solely responsible for a falling total fertility rate – is what we need to understand and address.

GENDER RELATIONS FOR HIGHLY EDUCATED WOMEN

Singaporean women are increasingly able to access equal opportunities in employment and have eclipsed men in attaining higher education. As a result, many young, unmarried women are well-positioned to reach whatever professional and personal development they desire.

Research on dating in Singapore from the 2010s shows that many Singaporeans have long held

permissive attitudes towards premarital sex, even if the country's policy on housing allocation means that unmarried cohabitation remains unusual.

The SP2024 survey found that 74 per cent of young women and 64 per cent of young men agree that it is not necessary to get married, even though 60 per cent of women and 77 per cent of men still foresee marriage in the future. One way to understand these results is that while marriage continues to be desirable, it is no longer central to the identity of Singaporean youth.

This trend is also likely affected by an increased usage of dating apps to meet romantic partners. Research participants have

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shared that these apps have widened the pool of potential partners and created a more casual approach to relationships.

Indeed, those who were interested in serious relationships reported more success when they quickly moved from communicating with people they matched with on a platform into a real-life setting.

This greater access to casual relationships may also provide the backdrop for the disparity in interest in marriage between the sexes, and the decoupling of marriage and parenthood by some women. Men, who have a longer fertile window, may hold onto their desire to marry and parent even if they put it off in favour of more casual dating because they don't face the fertility time pressure that women do. Meanwhile, since marriage is no longer an economic and social necessity for women, it stands to reason that if they do not find a suitable partner while they are younger, they may choose to stay single. Some even choose to independently raise children.

The story gets more complicated when women partner up with men. According to the Ipsos-United Women Singapore study from November 2020, even though nine in 10 Singaporeans agree that domestic

labour can be equally shared by spouses, it is still divided in a largely gendered way.

Cleaning, cooking and childrearing are predominantly the woman's responsibility, and duties that require greater physical strength and technical know-how, such as repairs, are the man's. What this means is that women tend to be responsible for duties that require regular attention, leaving them with less time than men to attend to other priorities.

In couples, there is also a significant gap between how much housework women think they do (43 per cent) versus what their partners think they do (24 per cent). This suggests that alongside greater family responsibilities, women are likely to feel like their contributions are unseen and undervalued.

Finally, in recent research done across eight societies in East and South-east Asia, National University of Singapore associate professor Vincent Chua and colleagues found that a mismatch between commonly held egalitarian gender ideology and traditional practice around household labour negatively affects the subjective well-being of professional women. This is most pronounced in South Korea, whose society features the greatest mismatch due to its highly patriarchal norms, but is also manifest in the other societies measured, including Singapore.

Taken together and backed by numerous points of anecdotal evidence, the picture that emerges is one of young professional women deciding that remaining single is the rational choice, even if they would be open to having children.

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

It can be tempting to view 21st-century gender relations as a zero-sum game. Women may see men as the historical beneficiaries of gender injustice who fail to pull

their weight and fully adjust to the new egalitarian norms. Men may see women increasingly outperforming them and being celebrated while they are left to adjust to a rapidly changing world with little or no sympathy. However, this is a trap that leads to mutual suspicion and resentment.

If men and women, instead, see themselves as part of an interconnected whole, then equality is likely to feel like a must-have. Our economic prowess is also contingent on contributions from both sexes and we rightly balk if equal responsibility is not equally valued at work. So, why not seek to be equally valued on the home front?

With this, men would equally benefit from being the givers of care. Opening oneself to all facets of caring for our homes and children is deeply meaningful. Even if care work is undervalued, and the market institutes an altruism penalty, individuals can still lead the way by embracing its undeniable value.

UN-GENDERING THE FINAL FRONTIER

But how? The un-gendering of home life is multifaceted and must be tackled at the home level, office level, and policy level.

With family duties, to render the invisible, visible – that is, the research, planning, contingencies, coordinating and executing – is not an easy task. Couples need to frankly discuss how each partner is contributing and acknowledge unseen contributions. This clarity can help them broach how to more evenly share responsibilities. Difficult conversations and sacrifices may be necessary, as with taking turns leaning in to the family. However, as a unit, they will be better placed to thrive.

Workplaces need to question whether their employees are paying a parenthood penalty. Distraught women have written in, telling me about bosses citing taking parental leave as a reason for not giving good appraisals or promotions. With such penalties in place, men will likely resist more evenly sharing home duties. A national logic of unrelenting economic efficiency sometimes blinds us to the individual trade-offs that ultimately have societal repercussions.

Public policies also play a vital role in shaping practice. As equal contributors to their children, fathers and mothers should have equal amounts of parental leave with the flexibility to accommodate unique circumstances and the biological realities of giving birth. The use-it-or-lose-it system, popularised by the Nordics, links maternity leave to compulsorily using an equivalent amount of paternity leave. This negates fathers needing to assess if their careers will be jeopardised and provides a strong cultural nudge towards their embrace of being equally involved at home, which studies have time and again shown to have overwhelmingly positive effects.

Staying single is a valid personal choice that must be respected. But if we sidestep the work outlined, we should be prepared to see falling marriage rates as being driven by the rational choice of an increasingly educated people.

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