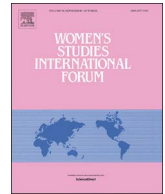




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

# Women's Studies International Forum

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/wsif](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/wsif)

## Unmarried women with closed “windows of opportunity”: Professional women's reasons for not getting married

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Marriage  
Professional woman  
Unmarried women  
Turkey

### ABSTRACT

Studies conducted in many different countries suggest that marriage rates are falling. Factors to explain these trends include higher levels of economic freedom on the part of women, higher rates of divorce and partnering out of wedlock, individualization, and weakening of ties between having and raising children and marriage as an institution. Investigating the reasons for not marrying on the part of women is important in Turkey as a country where the institution of marriage is regarded as the only form of having children in a socially accepted way. The present study focuses on the experience of university graduates and professional women in the age interval of 35–50 who have never married. This qualitative, descriptive study draws upon 20 in-depth interviews to probe the reasons these women did not marry in order to examine whether this decision emerges as an individual solution to some structural problems. More generally, the article explores the contradictions between the socio-economic and cultural distances covered by women and the lack of change in gender roles.

### Introduction

Studies conducted in many different countries suggest that marriage rates are falling. Factors to explain these trends include higher levels of economic freedom on the part of women, higher rates of divorce and partnering out of wedlock, individualization, and weakening of ties between having and raising children and marriage as an institution. The decline of marriage in many Western countries is explained by what some have experienced as the “deinstitutionalization of marriage” (Cherlin, 2004), the “individualization” of intimacy (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2005), or the rise of “pure relationships” (Giddens, 1991). These explanations emphasize how individuals seek the intimacy associated with marriage through a less rigid social arrangement such as cohabitation. Investigating the reasons for not marrying on the part of women is important in Turkey as a country where the institution of marriage is regarded as the only form of having children in a socially accepted way. Under Turkish law, there is no regulation for civil unions and/or registered partnerships. The only union types which are legally accepted by the Turkish Civil Code are “engagement” and “marriage.” Therefore cohabitation agreements do not exist in Turkey, meaning that there is no judicial or legal protection for couples living together outside of wedlock. Like cohabitation, living alone is also scarce in Turkey. Less than 10% of the population was living alone, and nearly half of this population was above the age of 65 (TUİK, 2013). Turkey in this respect is the least “western” country ranked 69 in the Gender-related Development Index (in 2013), with a low level of women in labor force (28%

in 2014), 1% of women never married and a fertility rate of 2.17 (TUİK, 2014) (Table 1).

Parallel to other social, cultural, and economic changes taking place in Turkey, the institution of family is undergoing transformations. The falling rate of marriage and increasing age at first marriage in spite of a growing young population is a remarkable phenomenon in Turkey and an important policy concern. In the last two decades in Turkey, there have been significant improvements in women's access to and retention in education. In addition, it is also possible to observe an increase of women's age at marriage and a change in family patterns; whereas the male was typically the single “bread winner”, double-income families are now socially accepted. One can also observe increasing rates of divorce. However, the impact of these changes remains limited, confined to a relatively narrow group.

National population policies, the extent to which the economic category of “housewife” is common, and women's status in the wage-earning labor force are all effective in constructing cultural discourse about marriage. Societies in which women are economically dependent on their husbands make marriage a norm by assigning the role of motherhood and homemaking to women (Dedeoğlu, 2010; İlkkaracan, 2012). Women's engagement in wage labor starts before marriage in such cultural environments and there is quick withdrawal from the labor force upon marriage (Gündüz-Hoşgör & Smits, 2008). These cultural discourses and ideologies impose upon women the choice of either being a mother and housewife or pursuing a career. Relatively limited employment opportunities, lower wages, and limited availability of

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2017.11.012>

Received 17 November 2016; Received in revised form 17 September 2017; Accepted 25 November 2017  
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**Table 1**  
Interview participants.

Age	Occupation	Who lives with
50	Nutritionist	Living alone (both parents deceased)
42	Representative in a pharmaceutical company	Living with family
36	Agricultural engineer	Living with family
43	Statistician	Living with family
35	Banker	Living with family
39	Doctor	Living with family
44	Lawyer	Living with family
35	Guidance teacher	Living with family
37	Academic	Living with family
39	Banker	Living with family
45	Automation technician	Living alone
45	Doctor	Living with family
44	Television broadcaster	Living with elder sister
45	Academic	Living alone
35	Mechanical engineer	Living with family
49	Academic	Father is deceased, living with mother
50	Academic	Living with family
41	Computer teacher	Father is deceased, living with mother
37	Academic	Living with elder sister
43	Lawyer	Living with elder sister

protected employment continue to force women to get married. The traditional division of labor that sanctifies motherhood is still upheld.

The notion of family in the Turkish setting therefore seems to be institutional, rendering no other alternative union for social reproduction and union formation, since unmarried life in any form is taken as anomaly and thus rejected (Müftüler-Bac, 1999). Only 1% of women in the age group of 45–49 are unmarried, but if the lower age limit is taken as 30, this proportion becomes 9–10% (TSNA, 2013: 104–105). The reasons for not getting married would be a result of a complex interaction between structural, cultural and biographical aspects of life, therefore the present study was interviewed with 20 never married professional women via a qualitatively designed research study conducted in Samsun. Carefully considering all aspects of the issue, it will be meaningful to address unmarried women as a sociological category. Given this, it becomes important to examine what “not getting married” means and whether this decision emerges as an individual solution to some structural problems.

Why is it important to study, sociologically, unmarried women? Any study of the institution of marriage is important in terms of obtaining a deeper understanding of it, its diversification, and the changes (social, economic, political, and demographic) affecting it. The experiences and life patterns of this group of women are particularly important in rapidly changing countries like Turkey. Along with other demographic changes, age at marriage is rising and divorce is increasing. Women now have more access to education and their years in education are getting longer. With such educational backgrounds, women are more inclined toward employment with remuneration. This tendency is slowly rising and it is possible to assert sociologically that there will be more unmarried women in the future. This may also be the sign of some important social changes. However, what has not changed seems to be even more important. Gender roles are still rigid, women's level of participation in wage employment is still low, being married is still the mainstream form of life, and partnering with someone and having a child out of wedlock is still not socially accepted. Given these circumstances, marriage seems socially, culturally, and economically required. Religious teachings and values also support marriage and reject other forms of partnership between men and women. In a society where having children and partners outside of marriage is not approved of, it is important to have an insight into the rationale of women who remain unmarried.

### Changing family patterns

There are changes in the lives of women that can be called a “second demographic transition” (Lesthaeghe & Neels, 2002). Access to contraception, extended education, delay/postponement of marriage, and increased career opportunities are stressed as factors in this revolution. All these changes also affect values attached to family structure, reproduction, and marriage. Higher rates of participation in the labor force and rising levels of education reduce fertility, increase divorce rates, and delay marriage (Smock, 2004:967). Taken together, these factors have been described as contributing to the deinstitutionalization of marriage in Western cultures (Cherlin, 2004:848). These trends are accompanied by increasing tendency to live together outside of traditional marital bonds, remarriage after divorce, and social acceptance of partnerships by persons of same sex, and increasing numbers of single-member households (Blossfeld & Hofmeister, 2006). This transition is in fact extraordinary, transforming the basis of family and marriage from social needs to “emotion and affection” and weakening bonds of family and marriage (Toulemon, Pailhé, & Rossier, 2008).

It is thus possible to claim the existence of two types of fundamental relations in family and gender roles. Social change alters gender roles, especially through changes in business/working life. Changing gender roles in turn influence timing in establishing a family. Secondly, changes in gender roles lead to changes in family structure. The participation of women in the labor force and the importance that they attach to their careers bring changes to household roles. There is now an expectation that men and women should undertake household activities in a balanced manner with division of labor. Along with the increase in single-parent families, there is higher tolerance of such cases. The increase in cases of family dissolution is explained mainly in the light of these economic, social, and cultural transformations (Roopnarine & Gielen, 2005).

There are findings that many women postpone marriage or give up the idea altogether along with increasing economic independence (Gaughan, 2002). Of course, there are other assertions that this situation cannot be explained exclusively on the basis of economic independence (Smoek, 2004). In the 1990s, ways of life alternative to marriage started to emerge in Europe and North America (Seltzer, 2000). There are changes in approaches to work and family, and for younger generations who adapt most successfully to these changes, gender roles and associated expectations change, too. Meanwhile, the feminist literature criticizes modern marriage for setting social limitations. Over the last 40 years, “feminists have infused the study of families with critical analyses of how gendered relationships operate according to how lives are stratified by systems of oppression and privilege” (Allen, Walker, & McCann, 2013:139).

Particularly women with extensive educational background are confronted with various pressures and dilemmas when it comes to decisions about marriage (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2005: 55). When the ideal of “equalitarian marriage” remains unachievable, the alternative of not getting married at all emerges (Gerson, 2002). Having not married is often regarded as missing the age of marriage, mostly about timing associated with having children (Ferguson, 2000). In situations where marriage is the basic form of living together, remaining unmarried has benefits and costs at the same time.

Studies on women who have never married suggest that they are happy in enjoying larger domains of freedom and associate progress in their personal development with their status as single women (Fuller, 2001). On the other hand, DePaulo and Morris (2005) have argued that singles face a particular form of stigma and discrimination, termed singlism.

“Singlism reflects a pervasive ideology of marriage and family, manifested in everyday thoughts, interactions, laws, and social policies that favor couples over singles. The ideology of marriage and family has been described as the unquestioned belief that everyone

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