To Marry or Not to Marry: How Social Norms Determine a Woman’s Marriage Prospects

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The decline in marriage is a well-documented trend in most of the industrialized 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 to one in twenty, 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% in 1980 to 17% 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, university educated women 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.

These figures make sense intuitively. Highly skilled women are more likely to put off marriage to pursue lucrative careers. By contrast, their lesser-educated peers are more likely to marry since the opportunity cost of not working is relatively lower. It seems then that education and career prospects are responsible for the lower marriage prospects of highly skilled women. However, examining the marriage patterns of women across countries throws up a more complex picture of the marriageability of educated women. Data show that, in recent times, highly educated women in North American, 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 the patterns observed in East Asia and Southern Europe.

Why then is it that highly educated women from some countries are more likely to get married compared to others? The answer may lie in how conservative societies are and the attitudes that people have towards working women.

To understand the marriage prospects of women around the world, we used data from 23 developed countries from 1995 to 2010 to systematically document differences in the gap in marriage rates between skilled and unskilled women across countries, and how the gap evolves over time. We found that while skilled women overall marry at a lower rate than unskilled women, it appears that this gap has been decreasing – in some cases even reversing – in North America, most Nordic countries, and some parts of Western Europe. In contrast, the gap has remained constant or widened in East Asian countries as well as parts of Southern Europe.

To explain the difference in marriage prospects for skilled women relative to unskilled women across developed countries, we propose the idea that the disapproval that men in some societies have towards working women is the key ingredient which lowers marriage prospects faced by skilled women.

We can view caring for the household by doing 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 as compared to their less-educated peers, they are less able to contribute to the household public good (childcare and household chores) as compared to unskilled women. This is because working women have less time to take care of the household. This makes skilled women less attractive as a potential partner in
the marriage market. Nevertheless, as the labour market opportunities of skilled women rise, they become increasingly more attractive as husbands start to value their higher income.

Intuitively, at low wage levels, increases in work due to an increase in the market wage lowers the marriage prospects of skilled women, since the loss in public good consumption is too large relative to the husband’s utility gain from the increase in the wife’s wages. 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. This is because their higher income more than compensates for the loss in utility from providing less of the public good.

This framework can help us to understand how skilled women’s labour market opportunities may impact their marriage prospects in a society with more traditional gender norms and another with more gender-equal norms. In the more traditional society, 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 education levels and the fact that they could be working and earning good incomes. 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.

This model has two main predictions. First, more conservative societies should have lower marriage rates for skilled women relative to unskilled women, and a lower proportion of skilled women. Second, the impact of the increase in a skilled women’s wages on her marriage prospects will depend on how conservative a society is. An increase in wages of skilled women in gender-equal societies tends to make them more attractive as potential spouses compared with skilled women in conservative societies.

We test 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 focus on marriage outcomes of women between the ages of 35 to 44 as this allows us to observe completed first marriage decisions that are likely to involve children. To measure the strength of gender norms across countries, we use data from the Integrated Values Survey (IVS) which gathers data on various social attitudes from a large number of countries. We interpret agreement to the question: “When jobs are scarce, men have more right to a job than women” as expressing the conservative view that it is more important for men to be employed in the labor market relative to women.

We find support for the predictions of the model in the data. First, we show that countries with more conservative gender norms are also countries where educated women marry at an especially low rate compared to less educated women. Our model also predicts that in more gender conservative countries, a lower fraction of women are likely to decide to become skilled as educated women in those countries expect that they will face greater barriers in the marriage market. This is exactly what we find – countries that have more conservative gender norms appear to have lower share of females with a tertiary education relative to males.

Finally, we show that the relationship between the skilled-unskilled gap in marriage rates and skilled women’s labor market opportunities appears to differ markedly across groups of countries in a way that is consistent with the predictions of the model. Increases in labor market opportunities of skilled women is significantly less likely to improve the marriage prospects of skilled women in more conservative countries relative to less 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 toward 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. We can only speculate how long this process would take. However, the fact is that the marriage rate of educated women has caught up to, 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 marriage gap between skilled and unskilled women may be transitory.