

WHY ARE YOU STILL SINGLE? SOCIAL STIGMA AND THE MISSED OPPORTUNITY NARRATIVE SURROUNDING DELAYED MARRIAGE IN WOMEN

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the social stigma and “missed opportunity narrative” surrounding delayed marriage among women. The research focuses on eight unmarried women aged 30–42 years to understand how society perceives and responds to female singlehood beyond the expected marriage age. Using a phenomenological approach and semi-structured interviews, the study examines women’s lived experiences of social pressure, family expectations, gender inequality, and emotional responses. The findings reveal that marriage is still widely seen as a key indicator of a woman’s success, while unmarried women often face continuous questioning, stigma, and judgment. Society frequently constructs the idea that women who delay marriage have “missed their chance” in life. Family pressure and gendered double standards further strengthen this narrative. Participants reported emotional stress, self-doubt, and social discomfort due to repeated societal expectations. However, the study also found that many women actively resist these pressures by focusing on personal growth, careers, independence, and emotional wellbeing. They challenge the belief that marriage is the only path to fulfillment. The study concludes that delayed marriage should not be interpreted as failure but as part of changing social realities where women are increasingly exercising autonomy in life choices. The research highlights the need to challenge traditional gender norms and promote more inclusive understandings of womanhood and success.

INTRODUCTION

Marriage has long been regarded as one of the most important social institutions across cultures and societies. It is commonly associated with emotional companionship, social legitimacy, family formation, and adulthood. For women in particular, marriage often functions not merely as a personal decision but as a cultural expectation deeply tied to identity, morality, and social

acceptance. In many societies, women are socialized from childhood to view marriage as a natural and necessary milestone of life. As a result, women who remain unmarried beyond socially acceptable ages frequently encounter social scrutiny, stigma, and judgment.

The question “Why are you still single?” may appear casual or harmless on the surface, yet it

often reflects deeply embedded societal assumptions about gender, success, and femininity. Such questioning implies that marriage is the expected destination for all women and that remaining single beyond a certain age requires explanation or justification. Women with delayed marriages are therefore often positioned within a “missed opportunity narrative,” where society assumes they have failed to achieve a socially desirable life outcome.

The “missed opportunity narrative” refers to the social belief that unmarried women have somehow lost their chance at happiness, stability, motherhood, or emotional fulfillment because they did not marry within culturally prescribed timelines. This narrative frames delayed marriage not as a legitimate personal path but as evidence of poor choices, unrealistic expectations, excessive independence, or diminished desirability. Consequently, unmarried women may experience social pity, exclusion, pressure, or assumptions that they are incomplete and unfulfilled.

In patriarchal societies, the stigma surrounding delayed marriage becomes even more intense because women’s social value is often strongly linked to relational roles such as wifehood and motherhood. Marriage is frequently considered proof of successful femininity, while singlehood may be interpreted as social failure. Women who remain unmarried beyond expected ages may therefore face intrusive questioning, family anxiety, social gossip, and subtle or direct forms of discrimination.

Despite significant social changes in recent decades, marriage continues to hold symbolic importance in defining women’s identities. Women today are increasingly pursuing higher education, professional careers, financial independence, and personal growth. Many are prioritizing emotional compatibility, self-development, and autonomy before marriage. However, societal attitudes have not always evolved at the same pace as these changing realities. While women are encouraged to become educated and economically independent, they are simultaneously expected to fulfill traditional marital timelines. This contradiction

places many women in difficult positions where their achievements are acknowledged, yet their unmarried status remains socially problematic.

In many cultures, delayed marriage among women is viewed differently from delayed marriage among men. Unmarried men are often described as career-focused, independent, or selective, whereas unmarried women are more likely to be labeled as “too choosy,” “difficult,” “unlucky,” or “left behind.” Such gendered double standards reveal how patriarchal structures continue to regulate women’s personal lives more strictly than men’s. Women’s worth is frequently measured not only through individual success but also through their ability to fulfill socially prescribed gender roles.

The social stigma attached to delayed marriage affects women in multiple ways. Many unmarried women experience emotional exhaustion from repeated questioning by relatives, friends, colleagues, and even strangers. Family gatherings and social events may become uncomfortable spaces where women are constantly reminded of their marital status. Questions regarding marriage are often accompanied by assumptions that unmarried women are lonely, emotionally dissatisfied, or incomplete. These interactions may lead to feelings of anxiety, self-doubt, frustration, and social isolation.

Families play a major role in reinforcing marriage expectations. Parents may worry about their daughters’ futures, social reputation, or ability to find suitable partners as they age. In some cases, family members unintentionally intensify pressure by comparing unmarried women with married siblings or peers. Women may feel emotionally burdened by the belief that they are disappointing their families or failing to meet social expectations. Even when women themselves are content with their lives, constant societal reminders may create internal conflict and emotional distress.

Media and popular culture also contribute significantly to the construction of the “missed opportunity narrative.” Television dramas, films, advertisements, and social media frequently portray unmarried women as incomplete, unhappy, desperate, or regretful. Female

characters are often shown achieving “true happiness” only through romantic relationships or marriage. Women who remain single are commonly represented as emotionally unstable, lonely, overly ambitious, or incapable of maintaining relationships. These portrayals reinforce the belief that marriage is essential for female fulfillment and that delayed marriage inevitably leads to regret.

Social media has further intensified these pressures by creating continuous visibility of socially approved life milestones. Engagements, weddings, pregnancies, and family celebrations dominate online spaces, making marriage appear as a universal measure of success and happiness. Women who remain unmarried may compare themselves with peers and feel socially excluded or left behind. The pressure to conform to societal timelines therefore becomes increasingly visible and emotionally powerful in digital spaces. At the same time, broader social transformations are challenging traditional ideas surrounding marriage and womanhood. Many women today are actively redefining success and fulfillment beyond marital status. They seek meaningful careers, emotional wellbeing, independence, and self-respect rather than entering marriages solely to satisfy social expectations. Some women consciously delay marriage because they prioritize education, financial stability, or personal growth, while others reject unequal relationship dynamics and patriarchal marital structures. For many women, remaining single may represent agency and self-determination rather than failure.

However, society often struggles to accept alternative life paths for women. Female autonomy may be celebrated in education and employment but questioned when it affects traditional expectations regarding marriage. Women who delay marriage therefore occupy a socially complex position where they are simultaneously admired for their accomplishments and criticized for their unmarried status. This contradiction reveals the persistence of deeply rooted cultural beliefs linking femininity to marriage.

The experiences of unmarried women with delayed marriages cannot be understood solely as

personal experiences; they are shaped by broader social, cultural, and institutional forces. Feminist scholars argue that patriarchal societies maintain control over women by defining acceptable forms of femininity and adulthood. Marriage functions as a mechanism through which women gain social legitimacy, while unmarried women may be viewed as deviating from social norms. Such expectations are reinforced through family structures, religious interpretations, media narratives, and everyday social interactions.

The concept of stigma is particularly relevant in understanding these experiences. According to sociological perspectives, stigma emerges when individuals possess characteristics that society considers undesirable or deviant. In the case of delayed marriage, unmarried women may experience both overt and subtle forms of stigmatization. They may be pitied, excluded from certain social conversations, or treated as emotionally incomplete. Over time, repeated exposure to such attitudes can shape women’s self-perceptions and emotional wellbeing.

Nevertheless, many unmarried women resist and challenge these social narratives. Rather than accepting the assumption that marriage defines their worth, they actively construct alternative identities based on personal achievement, emotional health, friendships, spirituality, creativity, and independence. Their experiences demonstrate that fulfillment and happiness cannot be reduced to marital status alone.

Qualitative research is particularly valuable for exploring these issues because it focuses on lived experiences, meanings, and personal interpretations. Unlike quantitative approaches that emphasize numerical patterns, qualitative inquiry allows women to express their emotions, struggles, coping strategies, and perspectives in their own voices. Through in-depth exploration of experiences, qualitative studies reveal the complexity of social stigma and the ways women negotiate identity within restrictive cultural frameworks.

This qualitative article seeks to examine how society perpetuates the “missed opportunity narrative” surrounding delayed marriage among women. It explores the experiences of unmarried

women who navigate social judgment, family pressure, and cultural expectations while attempting to define their lives on their own terms. By focusing on women's voices and lived realities, the study aims to challenge stereotypical assumptions surrounding singlehood and contribute to broader discussions about gender, identity, autonomy, and social change.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to understanding how cultural narratives surrounding marriage continue to shape women's lives despite changing social conditions. It highlights the need to recognize diverse life choices and move beyond narrow definitions of feminine success. Delayed marriage should not be viewed as evidence of failure or lost opportunity but as one of many valid ways women navigate adulthood and personal fulfillment in contemporary society.

Marriage has historically occupied a central place within social structures and cultural traditions across societies. It is commonly regarded as a symbol of adulthood, stability, emotional fulfillment, and social legitimacy. For women especially, marriage has long been connected to ideals of femininity, morality, and social worth. As a result, women who remain unmarried beyond socially acceptable ages often experience stigmatization and social questioning. Existing literature on delayed marriage demonstrates that societal expectations surrounding marriage continue to shape women's identities, emotional wellbeing, and social experiences despite changing social realities.

Feminist scholars have extensively discussed the ways patriarchal societies define women primarily through relational and domestic roles. Simone de Beauvoir argued that women have historically been positioned as the "Other," whose identities are constructed in relation to men and family structures. According to feminist theory, marriage functions not only as a personal relationship but also as a social institution that regulates gender roles and reinforces unequal power dynamics. Women are therefore often expected to prioritize marriage and motherhood over individual aspirations.

Similarly, Betty Friedan highlighted how women's fulfillment has traditionally been associated with domestic life and family responsibilities. Women who do not conform to these expectations may be viewed as socially incomplete or deviant. Contemporary feminist perspectives argue that although women's educational and professional opportunities have expanded, societal attitudes regarding marriage continue to reflect traditional patriarchal norms. The concept of social stigma provides another important framework for understanding delayed marriage among women. Erving Goffman defined stigma as a socially discrediting attribute that reduces individuals from a "whole and usual person" to someone viewed negatively by society. In the context of delayed marriage, unmarried women may experience stigma because they deviate from socially accepted timelines of marriage and family formation. Society often labels unmarried women as lonely, undesirable, emotionally unstable, or excessively career-oriented.

Research suggests that marital status significantly influences social perceptions of women. Studies indicate that married women are frequently viewed as more mature, responsible, and socially successful compared to unmarried women. Single women, particularly those above thirty, may encounter pity, intrusive questioning, and assumptions that something is "wrong" with them. Such societal reactions reinforce the belief that marriage is a necessary component of female identity and success.

Several researchers have examined the phenomenon of delayed marriage in relation to changing economic and educational patterns. Increased access to higher education and professional opportunities has contributed to shifts in women's marital timing across many societies. Women are increasingly prioritizing career development, financial independence, and personal growth before marriage. However, while structural realities have changed, cultural expectations surrounding marriage have remained relatively rigid.

Studies conducted in South Asian societies demonstrate that delayed marriage among

women is often associated with family pressure and social anxiety. Families may fear social judgment, reduced marriage prospects with age, and concerns about women's future security. Parents often experience societal pressure themselves and may transfer this anxiety onto daughters through repeated discussions regarding marriage. Women therefore not only manage personal decisions but also navigate collective family expectations.

Research further indicates that women experience delayed marriage differently from men due to gendered social norms. Unmarried men are often described positively as independent, ambitious, or selective, whereas unmarried women are more likely to be criticized for being "too choosy," "too career-focused," or "difficult." These double standards reflect broader patriarchal attitudes that continue to regulate women's bodies, choices, and timelines more strictly than men's.

Media representations also play a significant role in shaping attitudes toward unmarried women. Literature on media and gender suggests that television dramas, films, and advertisements often portray unmarried women as unhappy, lonely, emotionally unstable, or incomplete. Romantic relationships and marriage are frequently presented as the ultimate sources of female happiness and fulfillment. Women who prioritize careers or personal autonomy over marriage are sometimes depicted as regretful or emotionally dissatisfied later in life.

Social media has intensified these cultural pressures by creating continuous exposure to socially approved milestones such as engagements, weddings, pregnancies, and family life. Scholars argue that online comparison culture contributes to feelings of exclusion and inadequacy among unmarried women. The visibility of peers' marital achievements may reinforce perceptions that women who remain single have somehow fallen behind socially.

Psychological literature also highlights the emotional consequences of delayed marriage stigma. Studies show that unmarried women may experience stress, anxiety, loneliness, low self-esteem, and emotional exhaustion due to

constant societal questioning and judgment. Repeated exposure to stigmatizing attitudes can lead women to internalize negative beliefs about themselves. Some women begin to perceive their unmarried status as personal failure despite being professionally or personally fulfilled.

However, recent research also demonstrates growing resistance among women toward traditional marital expectations. Many women increasingly reject the idea that marriage alone defines success or happiness. Instead, they emphasize autonomy, emotional wellbeing, meaningful careers, friendships, spirituality, and personal growth. Scholars argue that contemporary women are redefining fulfillment beyond conventional gender roles and challenging narrow cultural definitions of womanhood.

The concept of singlehood itself has evolved significantly in modern societies. Earlier literature often framed single women through deficit-based perspectives that emphasized loneliness or incompleteness. More recent studies, however, view singlehood as a complex and diverse social identity rather than merely the absence of marriage. Researchers emphasize that unmarried women's experiences vary depending on cultural context, social class, education, family structures, and personal choices.

Qualitative studies on unmarried women reveal that many participants experience conflicting emotions regarding marriage and social expectations. While some women express frustration toward societal pressure, others describe feelings of guilt or fear regarding aging and future loneliness. At the same time, many women report satisfaction with their independence and actively resist pressure to enter incompatible or unhappy marriages merely to meet social expectations.

Within South Asian and collectivist societies, marriage remains deeply tied to family honor, social reputation, and cultural continuity. Consequently, unmarried women may experience stronger social surveillance compared to women in more individualistic societies. Marriage is not viewed solely as an individual matter but as a family and community responsibility. Women

who delay marriage therefore often face collective pressure from relatives, neighbors, and social networks.

Despite increasing scholarly attention to delayed marriage, there remains limited qualitative research focusing specifically on the “missed opportunity narrative” experienced by unmarried women. Much of the existing literature discusses marriage trends, demographic changes, or psychological wellbeing without deeply exploring how women themselves interpret and negotiate societal assumptions surrounding delayed marriage.

This study contributes to existing literature by focusing specifically on women’s lived experiences of stigma, social pressure, and identity negotiation. Through a qualitative approach, the study seeks to provide deeper insight into how unmarried women understand societal attitudes toward delayed marriage and how they resist or redefine dominant narratives regarding womanhood and fulfillment.

The literature overall suggests that delayed marriage among women is not simply a personal life event but a socially constructed phenomenon shaped by gender norms, cultural values, family expectations, and institutional structures. The persistence of the “missed opportunity narrative” demonstrates how deeply marriage remains connected to societal understandings of femininity and success. At the same time, changing social realities indicate growing tensions between traditional expectations and contemporary women’s aspirations for autonomy and self-definition.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses several key ideas to understand how women in Pakistan challenge traditional expectations about empowerment, marriage, and their role in society. These ideas come from different theories that focus on gender, culture, and change.

Cultural Theory: How Society Shapes Women's Roles

Cultural theory explains how the traditions, beliefs, and values of society create "cultural scripts" that define what is expected from women. These cultural scripts often define women’s roles in marriage and the family, limiting their freedom and opportunities. The idea of habitus (from Bourdieu) tells us that these cultural norms are deeply ingrained in people’s behavior, so women might not even question them until they begin to experience change. The framework helps us see how women are beginning to challenge these norms and redefine what it means to be empowered, particularly when it comes to marriage and independence.

Social Constructivism

Social constructionism explains that our understanding of the world, including ideas like marriage and empowerment, is shaped by society, culture, and our environment. It shows that concepts such as gender roles, responsibilities, and expectations in marriage are not natural or fixed but are created through social interactions with family, friends, media, and the community. This theory highlights that society plays a big role in defining what marriage means and how women are expected to behave within it. For single Pakistani women, these societal ideas about marriage and empowerment influence their choices. Instead of following traditional roles, many choose alternative paths to achieve empowerment, such as focusing on their careers and independence.

Giddens’ Structuration Theory

The basis of the theory of Structuration involves the identification of the relationship between the individuals and the social forces that act upon us. In Giddens’ theory of Structuration he tries to balance the role that actors play with their limited choice of position in history and in the social fabric they find themselves. In his theory, Giddens proposes that people do not have entire preference of their actions and their knowledge is restricted; nonetheless, they are the elements that

recreate the social structure and produces social change (Craib, 1992).

Giddens' theory of structuration explains that while society has rules and norms that influence how people act, individuals also have the power to change those rules. In the case of Pakistani women, even though they face pressure to conform to traditional roles, they are not passive. They are actively pushing against these norms and, through their actions, changing how society views their roles and capabilities. For example, single women might face pressure to get married, but when they choose to focus on their independence and careers, they show they are not just following society's rules. Instead, they are reshaping these expectations. This theory shows that people are not powerless they can act to create change while still being influenced by society.

Rationale of the Study

In many societies, marriage is still considered a very important milestone in a woman's life. People often expect women to get married by a certain age, and if they do not, they start facing questions like "Why are you still single?" or "What is the delay?" Although these questions may sound normal, they actually reflect strong social expectations and pressure.

Because of these expectations, women who remain unmarried for longer than what society considers "normal" often face judgment and criticism. People may assume that they have missed their chance for marriage or that something is wrong with them. This creates a common social belief that delayed marriage is a kind of "missed opportunity" in a woman's life.

The main purpose of this study is to better understand this issue from the perspective of the women themselves. Earlier research has focused on statistics about marriage age and trends, but very few studies have explored how women personally experience this social pressure and stigma in their everyday lives.

Another reason for this study is the strong influence of family and society. Even though many women today are educated, financially independent, and working, they are still expected

to marry at a certain stage of life. This creates a conflict between modern life choices and traditional expectations, which can lead to stress and emotional pressure.

There is also a clear difference in how society treats unmarried men and unmarried women. Unmarried men are often seen as focused on their careers or waiting for the right time, while unmarried women are more likely to be judged negatively. This shows that marriage expectations are still unequal for men and women.

This issue is important because social pressure about marriage can affect women emotionally. Some women may feel stressed, judged, or questioned about their worth, while others may struggle to explain or justify their single status. Understanding these experiences is important to see how deeply society influences women's self-image and wellbeing.

At the same time, society is changing. Many women now delay marriage for education, career goals, personal growth, or to find a compatible partner. However, traditional thinking has not fully adjusted to these changes, which creates tension between modern lifestyles and old cultural beliefs.

This study is also important because it challenges the idea that marriage is the only measure of a woman's success or happiness. Women can live fulfilling and meaningful lives even if they are not married. Their value should not be judged only by their marital status.

In the end, this research aims to highlight the real experiences of unmarried women and give them a voice. It helps us understand how they deal with social pressure and how they interpret society's expectations. This will provide a clearer and more realistic understanding of delayed marriage in today's world.

Methodology

Research Design

A qualitative research design was used in which semi structured interviews were taken. Due to interviewing techniques, reflexive thematic analysis was used to generate the findings. Reflexive thematic analysis is the method of identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or

themes, in this case, within the reviewed studies (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Here are 6 steps of reflexive thematic analysis;

- Familiarizing with datasets,
- generating initial codes,
- making categories,
- searching and reviewing themes,
- defining and naming themes,
- and producing the report theoretically (Clark et al., 2019).

Participants

A reflexive thematic analysis was used among 8 women. The study is purely based on the qualitative method.

Criteria

Inclusion Criteria

In current study sample was 8 women. Women aged 30-42 will be included as well as data will be taken from educated women.

Exclusion Criteria

In this study the participants below age 30 and uneducated women will not be included.

Sample and Sampling Technique

The study used a purposive sampling technique, meaning participants were selected intentionally because they had experience related to the topic. The study included 8 unmarried women (Sample 8) who were:

- Between the ages of 30 to 42 years
- Never married
- Educated and working or professionally engaged
- Living in a social environment where marriage expectations are strong
- Willing to share their personal experiences

These women were selected because they were more likely to have experienced social pressure and questions about delayed marriage.

Data Collection Method

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Open-ended questions and participants were free to talk about their

experiences in detail. Each interview lasted about 45 to 70 minutes. The interviews were conducted in a private and comfortable environment so that participants could speak freely without fear or hesitation.

Some main topics discussed during interviews included:

- Experiences of being single in society
- Family expectations about marriage
- Questions and comments from relatives or society
- Emotional feelings related to delayed marriage
- Pressure or judgment faced in daily life
- Personal views about marriage and single life

With permission from participants, interviews were recorded and later written in text form for analysis.

Procedure

1. ***Informed Consent.*** Informed consent was obtained from empowered women before initiating interviews, ensuring their willingness to participate.
2. ***Confidentiality.*** Women were briefed on the confidentiality of their provided information, and the research aim and purpose were explained.
3. ***Interview Details.*** Prior to interviews, participants were informed about the estimated duration (35 to 45 minutes) and the recording of the session.
4. ***Interview Format.*** Semi structured interviews with open ended questions were conducted, and the sessions were transcribed for analysis.
5. ***Gratitude.*** The researcher expressed gratitude to participants after the completion of each interview.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical care was followed throughout the study:

- Participants joined the study voluntarily
- They were informed about the purpose of the research
- They could refuse or stop the interview at any time

- Their names and identities were kept confidential
- Sensitive questions were handled carefully to avoid emotional discomfort
- Data was used only for research purposes

Results

The interviews have provided significant details of themes, sub-themes, and codes. The results of this study show that society places a lot of pressure on women when it comes to marriage. All the participants shared that people often see marriage as the main sign of a woman's success, and because of this, their education, job, and personal achievements are often ignored. They also reported that they frequently face questions like "Why are you still single?" which they feel are

more judgmental than caring. Family members were also mentioned as a source of pressure, as parents and relatives often worry about their marriage and compare them with others who are already married. The women also felt that society treats unmarried men and women differently, where men are seen in a more positive way but women are more likely to be judged. Many participants said that society makes them feel like they have "missed a chance" in life by not getting married earlier, which sometimes leads to stress, self-doubt, and emotional pressure. However, despite all this, most of the women also showed strength by focusing on their careers, personal growth, and independence, and by trying not to let social pressure define their happiness or self-worth.

Table 1
Reflexive Thematic Analysis (N=8)

Major Themes	Sub-Themes	Codes
Marriage as a Measure of Success	Social definition of "successful woman"	Marriage = success, unmarried = incomplete, social validation through marriage, achievements ignored, "status depends on marriage"
	Value of women reduced to marital status	"Still single = problem", respect increases after marriage, identity linked to wifhood, motherhood expectation
Social Questioning and Stigma	Intrusive questioning	"Why are you still single?", repeated marriage questions, uncomfortable social talks, curiosity turning into judgment
	Social labeling and assumptions	Something is wrong, too selective, unlucky in relationships, "left behind", pity-based attitude
Family Pressure and Emotional Burden	Parental concern and expectations	Parents worried about age, pressure to settle, emotional reminders, marriage discussions at home
	Comparison with others	Comparison with cousins/siblings, "everyone else is married", family embarrassment, social reputation pressure
Gendered Standards	Double Unequal expectations for men and women	Single men seen as independent, single women judged, men given more time, women's age monitored closely
	Patriarchal norms in marriage timing	Early marriage expectation for women, "biological clock" pressure, gender role enforcement
Missed Opportunity Narrative	Society framing singlehood as failure	"You missed your chance", regret discourse, late marriage seen as loss, reduced marriage prospects belief
	Internalization of social messages	Self-doubt, questioning life choices, feeling left behind, emotional comparison with peers

Major Themes	Sub-Themes	Codes
Emotional Impact of Delayed Marriage Stigma	Psychological stress	Anxiety, frustration, emotional exhaustion, pressure-related sadness, social discomfort
	Identity conflict	Struggle between self-choice and social approval, confusion about life path, feeling incomplete at times
Coping and Resistance Strategies	Positive reframing of single life	Independence, self-growth, career focus, self-contentment, "better single than unhappy marriage"
	Ignoring or managing social pressure	Avoiding marriage talk, emotional distancing, selective communication, ignoring criticism
	Support systems	Friends support, workplace confidence, emotional strength from peers

Table 1: Shows major themes with sub-themes and relevant codes

The table presents the major findings of this study in a clear and organized way by grouping the data into major themes, sub-themes, and codes. It helps to show how the experiences of the 8 unmarried women are connected to different social and emotional aspects of delayed marriage. The first main theme shows that marriage is still widely seen as the main measure of a woman's success, where being unmarried is often linked with being incomplete or less valued. The second theme highlights the constant social questioning and stigma faced by women, especially through repeated comments like "Why are you still single?" which reflect judgment rather than curiosity. The third theme focuses on family pressure, where emotional concern, comparisons with others, and expectations about marriage create stress for women. The fourth theme shows clear gender inequality, as unmarried men are generally viewed more positively than unmarried women, reflecting double standards in society. The fifth theme explains the "missed opportunity narrative," where society makes women feel they have lost an important chance in life by delaying marriage. The sixth theme highlights the emotional impact, including stress, self-doubt, and emotional burden caused by continuous social pressure. Finally, the seventh theme shows coping and resistance strategies, where women try to manage pressure by focusing on their careers, personal

growth, independence, and by challenging the idea that marriage is the only path to a successful life. Overall, the table summarizes how social expectations deeply influence women's experiences of delayed marriage, while also showing their resilience and ability to redefine their own identities.

Major Theme 1: Marriage as a Measure of Success

This theme explains that society still sees a woman's success mainly through marriage. Even if a woman is educated, working, and independent, her value is often judged by whether she is married or not.

Social definition of success for women

Society believes that a "successful woman" is one who is married. Other achievements like education or job are considered secondary.

- Marriage = success: Society directly links marriage with achievement.
- Unmarried = incomplete: Single women are seen as "not fully complete."

"People think a woman is only successful when she gets married." (P2)

Ignoring women's achievements

Women's education, job, and success are often ignored if they are not married.

- Achievements ignored: Career success is not appreciated.
- Identity linked to marriage: Woman's identity is reduced to wife/mother role.

“Even after my degree and job, people still ask when I will marry.” (P6)

Major Theme 2: Social Questioning and Stigma

This theme shows how unmarried women are constantly questioned and judged in social settings.

Intrusive Questioning

People repeatedly ask personal questions about marriage without respecting privacy.

- “Why are you still single?”: Common repeated question.
- Repetitive questioning: Same topic in every gathering.
“Every meeting starts with questions about my marriage.” (P3)

Social Labeling

Society puts labels on unmarried women based on assumptions.

- Too selective: People think she is too picky.
- Something wrong assumption: Society assumes a hidden problem.

“They talk like I have a defect because I am single.” (P5)

Major Theme 3: Family Pressure and Emotional Burden

Family love and concern often turns into emotional pressure for unmarried women.

Parental concern

Parents worry about daughters’ marriage due to social pressure.

- Parental worry: Concern about age and future.
- Marriage discussions at home: Frequent talks about marriage.

“My parents don’t force me, but I can feel their worry.” (P4)

Comparison with others

Women are compared with married relatives.

- Comparison with cousins: Social comparison increases pressure.
- Feeling behind: Women feel left behind in life.

“They always compare me with my married cousins.” (P8)

Major Theme 4: Gendered Double Standards

Society treats unmarried men and women differently.

Different expectations

Men are allowed more time to marry, but women are not.

- Men are independent: Single men seen positively.
- Women judged early: Women judged quickly.

“A single man is focused, but a single woman is questioned.” (P2)

Patriarchal control

Society controls women’s marriage timing more strictly.

- Age pressure: Women face age-based pressure.
- Unequal judgment: Women judged more harshly.

“Men are given time, women are rushed.” (P6)

Major Theme 5: Missed Opportunity Narrative

Society makes women feel they have “lost a chance” by not marrying early.

“Too late” belief

People believe marriage becomes difficult after a certain age.

- Missed chance: Society says opportunity is gone.

- Reduced prospects: Age seen as barrier.

“They say it’s too late for me now.” (P5)

Social regret framing

Society assumes women will regret being single.

- Regret narrative: Assumption of future regret.

- Left behind feeling: Women feel socially delayed.

“They make me feel like I lost something important.” (P7)

Major Theme 6: Emotional Stress and Self-Doubt

Continuous pressure affects women emotionally.

Psychological stress

Repeated questions cause mental pressure.

- Anxiety: Feeling worried and stressed.
- Emotional exhaustion: Tired of constant pressure.

“It becomes mentally exhausting.” (P1)

Self-questioning

Women sometimes doubt their own decisions.

- Self-doubt: Questioning life choices.
- Feeling incomplete: Internalized social pressure.

“Sometimes I start doubting myself.” (P6)

Major Theme 7: Coping and Resistance Strategies

Women try to handle pressure in positive ways.

Self-growth focus

Women focus on career and personal development.

- Career focus: Job and education priority.
- Self-development: Personal growth mindset.

“I focus on my career, not society.” (P2)

Resistance to pressure

Women reject the idea that marriage defines success.

- Ignoring comments: Not reacting to judgment.
- Independence: Valuing self-choice.

“I would rather stay single than be unhappy in marriage.” (P8)

Discussion

The findings of this qualitative study provide important insight into how society constructs and reinforces the “missed opportunity narrative” surrounding delayed marriage among women. Based on interviews with eight unmarried women aged 30–42 years, the study highlights how social expectations, family pressure, gender norms, and cultural beliefs shape women’s lived experiences of singlehood. The discussion below connects these findings with broader social meanings, existing literature, and theoretical understanding, while also interpreting the emotional and social implications of delayed marriage stigma.

Marriage as a Social Measure of Women’s worth

One of the strongest findings of this study is that marriage continues to be seen as a key measure of a woman’s success. Despite participants being educated, employed, and financially independent, their unmarried status remained the most visible and socially significant aspect of their identity. This reflects deeply rooted cultural norms where women are still primarily valued through marital and familial roles.

This finding is consistent with feminist understandings of gender roles, where women’s identities are often shaped through relationships rather than individual achievements. In many societies, womanhood is still strongly associated with wifehood and motherhood. As a result, personal achievements such as education, career development, or financial independence are often seen as secondary or insufficient if a woman is not married.

The participants’ experiences show that this social mindset is not only abstract but actively experienced in everyday interactions. When society repeatedly prioritizes marriage over all other achievements, it sends a clear message: a woman’s value is incomplete without marriage. This reinforces the idea that delayed marriage is not simply a personal life choice but a socially interpreted “lack.”

Social Stigma and Everyday Interaction

Another key finding is the presence of constant social questioning and stigma. Women repeatedly faced questions such as “Why are you still single?” which, although often presented casually, carried strong judgmental undertones. These interactions show how stigma operates not only through formal discrimination but also through everyday conversations.

This supports sociological ideas that stigma is produced and maintained through repeated social interactions. In this study, unmarried women were not directly excluded from society, but they were continuously reminded of their “difference” through comments, questions, and assumptions. Over time, such interactions contribute to emotional discomfort and self-awareness of being socially evaluated.

Importantly, stigma in this context is subtle but persistent. It does not always appear as open criticism; instead, it is expressed through curiosity, concern, or advice that reinforces the idea that singlehood is a problem that needs explanation or correction. This makes the stigma more difficult to challenge, as it is often disguised as social concern.

Family Pressure as Emotional Social Control

The findings also show that family plays a major role in reinforcing marriage expectations. Even when families are supportive and caring, their concern about delayed marriage creates emotional pressure for women. Parents' worries about age, social reputation, and future security often translate into repeated discussions about marriage.

This highlights how family systems function as agents of social control. In collectivist contexts, individual decisions are often closely linked with family honor and social standing. Therefore, unmarried women may not only feel personal pressure but also emotional responsibility toward their families.

Participants described feelings of guilt, especially when they could sense their parents' anxiety. This emotional burden is significant because it shows that social expectations are not only external but also internalized within family relationships. Even without direct force, the constant presence of concern shapes women's emotional experiences and life decisions.

Gender Inequality in Marriage Expectations

A very important finding of this study is the clear presence of gendered double standards. Participants consistently observed that unmarried men are treated more positively compared to unmarried women. While men are often seen as independent or career-focused, women are judged more critically and expected to marry earlier.

This reflects broader patriarchal structures where women's life timelines are more strictly regulated than men's. Men are given more flexibility in terms of age and marriage decisions, while

women's marital status becomes a key marker of social approval.

This gender difference is not only social but also deeply cultural. It reflects long-standing beliefs that women's primary role is within family life, whereas men are associated with financial responsibility and public life. As a result, unmarried women experience more surveillance and judgment than unmarried men.

This inequality reinforces the idea that delayed marriage is not simply a neutral life stage but a gendered experience shaped by power relations and social expectations.

The "Missed Opportunity Narrative" as a Social Construction

One of the most significant contributions of this study is the identification of the "missed opportunity narrative." Participants reported that society often makes them feel that they have lost an important chance in life by not marrying earlier.

This narrative is socially constructed rather than based on individual reality. It is created through repeated messages such as "you are getting late," "your chances are decreasing," or "you should not wait too long." Over time, these messages create a belief that happiness and stability are tied to early marriage.

The impact of this narrative is twofold. First, it creates external pressure by shaping how society interacts with unmarried women. Second, it may also become internalized; leading some women to question their own decisions or feel that they are "behind" in life.

However, it is important to note that this narrative does not reflect the lived reality of all participants. Many women challenged this belief and rejected the idea that marriage has a fixed timeline. This indicates that the "missed opportunity narrative" is powerful but not universally accepted.

Emotional Consequences of Social Pressure

The study also found that delayed marriage stigma has emotional and psychological effects on women. Participants reported feelings of stress,

anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and self-doubt due to continuous questioning and comparison. These emotional responses are not surprising given the repetitive and socially embedded nature of the pressure. When women are constantly reminded that their life is “incomplete” without marriage, it can affect their self-perception and emotional wellbeing.

However, the intensity of emotional impact varied among participants. Some women experienced temporary discomfort, while others reported deeper emotional reflection and occasional self-questioning. This variation suggests that individual resilience, family support, and personal confidence play an important role in how women manage social pressure.

Resistance, Agency, and Reframing of Singlehood

Despite the pressure, an equally important finding is the presence of resistance among participants. Many women actively challenged societal expectations by redefining what success and happiness mean for them. Instead of accepting marriage as the only goal, they emphasized independence, career development, emotional stability, and personal growth.

This resistance shows that women are not passive recipients of social norms. Rather, they actively negotiate and reinterpret cultural expectations. Some participants explicitly stated that they would prefer to remain single than enter an unhappy or unsuitable marriage, highlighting a shift in priorities from social approval to personal wellbeing.

This finding aligns with contemporary social changes where women are increasingly asserting autonomy in life decisions. Education, employment, and financial independence have expanded women’s choices, allowing them to challenge traditional norms more openly than in the past.

Changing Social Context and Ongoing Tensions

The findings also reflect a broader social contradiction. On one hand, society encourages women to become educated, independent, and successful. On the other hand, it still expects

them to marry within traditional timelines. This creates a tension between modern values and traditional expectations.

This contradiction is central to understanding the experiences of delayed marriage. Women are caught between two competing narratives: one that promotes independence and self-development, and another that prioritizes marriage as the ultimate life goal.

As a result, unmarried women often navigate a complex social space where their achievements are recognized but still considered incomplete without marriage. This dual expectation contributes significantly to the persistence of the “missed opportunity narrative.”

Overall, the findings demonstrate that delayed marriage among women is not simply a personal or family issue but a socially constructed phenomenon shaped by cultural norms, gender expectations, and institutional beliefs. Society continues to define women’s success largely through marriage, leading to stigma, pressure, and emotional burden for unmarried women.

However, the study also highlights important signs of change. Women are increasingly questioning traditional norms and redefining success in terms of autonomy, self-respect, and personal fulfillment. This suggests that while the “missed opportunity narrative” remains powerful, it is also being challenged by evolving social realities.

Conclusion

This qualitative study explored how society constructs and maintains the “missed opportunity narrative” around delayed marriage among women. Based on the experiences of eight unmarried women aged 30–42 years, the study shows that marriage is still considered a key measure of a woman’s success in many social settings. Despite being educated, independent, and professionally active, the participants felt that their value was still largely judged through their marital status.

The findings clearly show that unmarried women face continuous social questioning, stigma, and pressure. Questions such as “Why are you still single?” reflect deep cultural expectations rather

than simple curiosity. Family members, relatives, and wider society all play a role in reinforcing the belief that marriage should happen within a specific age range. When this does not happen, women are often seen as having “missed an opportunity” in life.

The study also highlights strong gender differences in how singlehood is viewed. Unmarried men are generally seen in a more positive light, while unmarried women are more likely to face judgment and concern. This shows that marriage expectations are still deeply shaped by patriarchal thinking.

Emotionally, this pressure affects many women. Some experience stress, anxiety, self-doubt, and emotional exhaustion due to repeated questioning and social comparison. However, the findings also show an important positive aspect: many women resist these pressures and redefine their lives in their own way. They focus on education, careers, personal growth, independence, and emotional wellbeing rather than accepting marriage as the only measure of success.

Overall, the study concludes that delayed marriage among women should not be seen as a failure or missed opportunity. Instead, it should be understood as part of changing social realities where women are making more independent life choices. Society needs to move beyond narrow definitions of womanhood and recognize that fulfillment can exist both within and outside marriage.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. For Society

- Society should stop linking a woman’s value only with marriage.
- Unmarried women should be respected for their choices and achievements.
- People should avoid intrusive questions about marriage, such as “Why are you still single?”

2. For Families

- Families should support women emotionally rather than pressure them.
- Parents should focus on their daughters’ happiness, not just marital status.
- Comparisons with married relatives should be avoided as they create emotional stress.

3. For Media

- Media should present more positive and realistic images of single women.
- Television dramas and films should avoid showing unmarried women as unhappy or incomplete.
- Different life paths for women should be shown as normal and acceptable.

4. For Educational Institutions

- Universities and schools should raise awareness about gender equality and social stigma.
- Discussions about marriage pressure and women’s autonomy should be included in sociology and gender studies courses.

5. For Future Research

- Future studies should include larger and more diverse samples (rural, urban, different age groups).
- Comparative studies between married and unmarried women can provide deeper insight.
- Research should also explore men’s experiences of delayed marriage for better understanding of gender differences.

Conceptual Framework

This study is based on the idea that society creates pressure around marriage, which shapes how unmarried women experience and respond to delayed marriage.

1. Independent Factors (What creates pressure)

These are the social forces that influence women’s experiences:

- Social expectations of marriage
- Family pressure and concern
- Gender norms and patriarchy

- Cultural belief that marriage = success
- Social comparison with married women
- Age-based expectations (“ideal marriage age”)

2. Central Phenomenon (Main Issue)

Delayed Marriage in Women

This refers to women who remain unmarried beyond the socially expected age, often becoming the focus of social attention and judgment.

3. Social Interpretation (Missed Opportunity Narrative)

This is the key idea created by society:

- “She has missed her chance”
- “It is too late now”
- “Something must be wrong”
- “Marriage prospects are decreasing”

This narrative turns delayed marriage into a social problem instead of a personal choice

4. Outcomes (Effects on Women)

Emotional Effects:

- Stress
- Anxiety
- Self-doubt
- Emotional exhaustion

Social Effects:

- Constant questioning
- Stigma and labeling
- Feeling judged in gatherings
- Reduced social comfort

5. Coping and Resistance (Women’s Response)

Women respond in different ways:

- Focusing on career and education
- Emotional independence
- Ignoring social pressure
- Reframing single life positively
- Rejecting marriage-centered success

Visual Representation

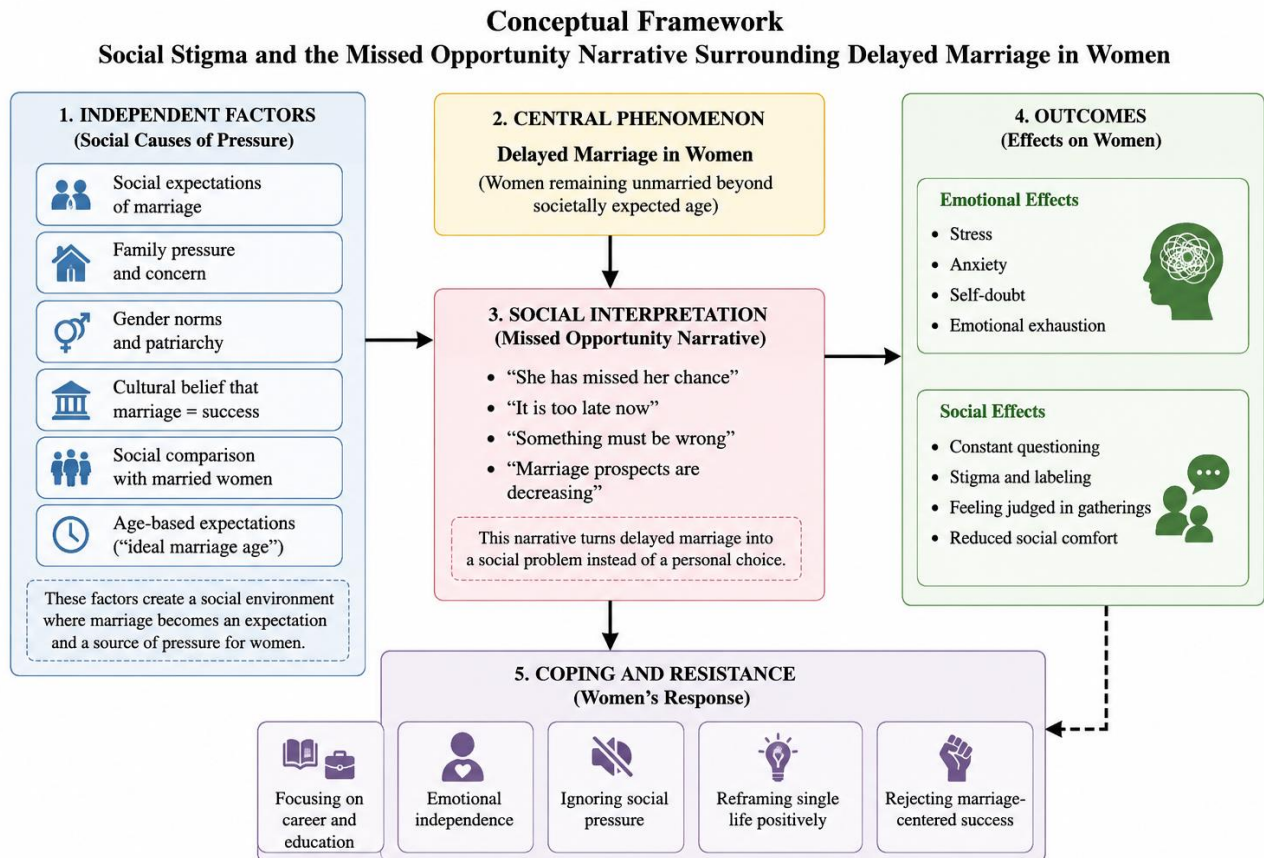


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Social Stigma and the Missed Opportunity Narrative Surrounding Delayed Marriage in Women

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