

The Nexus Between Women's Economic Autonomy and the Escalation of Delayed Marriage and Divorce: An Anthropological and Sociological Analysis

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Abstract :

This research examines the burgeoning socio-structural shift within Algerian society, where the transition from traditional domesticity to female economic agency has precipitated a critical rise in divorce and delayed marriage. Amidst the globalized proliferation of "Gender" as a socio-cultural construct, women have transcended their conventional roles, acquiring a level of financial autonomy that fundamentally reconfigures the patriarchal marital contract. Utilizing a descriptive-analytical framework, this study explores the friction between emerging female leadership-oriented psychographies and the static expectations of traditional masculinity. The findings suggest a significant correlation between professional self-sufficiency and the erosion of marital dependency; as the material necessity for a male provider diminishes, the psychological threshold for entering or maintaining a suboptimal union rises. Consequently, financial independence acts as both a catalyst for female empowerment and a structural disruptor of familial stability, leading to an accelerated trend toward celibacy and marital dissolution.

Keywords: Economic Autonomy; Professional Agency; Marital Dissolution; Delayed Union; Algerian Socio-cultural Dynamics.

Introduction :

In recent decades, Arab societies have undergone radical structural transformations, most notably the escalating participation of women in the labor market. This shift has ignited rigorous debates regarding its repercussions on the institution of marriage. While some scholars argue that female labor force participation bolsters autonomy and contributes to empowerment, others contend it serves as a primary catalyst for the rising rates of divorce and "spinsterhood" (delayed marriage). This paper seeks to examine this problematic through a theoretical lens, drawing upon specialized sociological and psychological literature (Becker, 1981; Oppenheimer, 1997).

Furthermore, the financial independence of working women represents one of the most significant social shifts in contemporary societies; women have emerged as economic agents contributing to both familial and societal development (Bouziane, 2021). This transition has necessitated a reconfiguration of traditional intra-familial roles, causing marital dynamics to be influenced to varying degrees based on the socio-cultural environment (Ben Omar, 2020). In this context, numerous researchers suggest that a woman's access to an independent income enhances self-efficacy and grants her the agency to make pivotal life decisions without total subordination to patriarchal authority (Salem, 2019).

Conversely, this autonomy has also been linked to negative phenomena, such as rising divorce rates resulting from escalated domestic conflicts over authority and expenditure (Marzouq, 2018). It is further associated with increased rates of celibacy, as a segment of professional women now impose more stringent criteria for partner selection, thereby complicating the marriage process (Haddad,

2022). Others maintain that these phenomena are not a direct consequence of women's employment per se, but rather a failure to adapt to the value-based shifts necessitated by this new reality (Qasimi, 2023). Consequently, investigating the nexus between women's financial independence and the proliferation of celibacy and divorce serves as a vital entry point for understanding social transformations in Arab societies.

Research Problematic

Divorce and "spinsterhood" (delayed marriage) stand among the most multifaceted and grave social phenomena today. Both are linked to several variables that drive their increasing rates globally, and specifically within Algeria, including psychological, social, and economic compatibility. Perhaps the most pivotal factor to address is financial independence, which has created a socio-structural rift and a dilemma currently eroding the Algerian social fabric.

This phenomenon is often viewed as an interloper to Algerian culture and the traditional psychography of the individual, governed by specific values, beliefs, and religious frameworks. Algeria underwent a radical shift in its social structure in the late 1970s, followed by a form of intellectual and cultural "colonization" in the early 1990s due to cultural pluralism and the emergence of "gender" as a construct. This facilitated a departure from the stereotypical image of the wife toward the labor market and entrepreneurship.

This shift has granted women a level of financial autonomy that renders the traditional dependency on men obsolete. In the midst of this dual conflict and an increasingly accelerated problematic, it has become imperative to address this subject given its gravity and its negative implications for the individual at the micro-level and society at the macro-level.

Research Objectives

This study is situated within the psychosocial tradition, as it defines the nature of gender relations and the genesis of inter-gender conflict. The objectives are embodied in the following points:

- To elucidate the conceptual framework of variables relevant to the research, such as delayed marriage (spinsterhood) and financial independence.
- To demystify the phenomenon by addressing its various multifaceted dimensions.
- To examine explanatory theories in order to shed light on the nature of the conflict and the core problem.
- To bridge the research gap by emphasizing specific recommendations and proposals intended to clarify the ambiguity surrounding the phenomenon in general and the study's concepts in particular.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is primarily rooted in the scale and position of the phenomenon within society, and the necessity for researchers to analyze and interpret these shifts from a specific, focused perspective. The importance can be summarized as follows:

- Identifying the fundamental pillars centering around the phenomenon under study.
- Providing a scientific contribution to the literature regarding the study variables, specifically within the field of social sciences.
- Serving as a scholarly academic reference for researchers to utilize in subsequent empirical or theoretical studies.

- Highlighting the phenomena of divorce and delayed marriage (attributing a primary cause to women's financial independence) thereby identifying the social and relational fragility of both the individual and society.

1- Conceptual Framework

1-1. Women's Employment

Women's employment is defined as active participation in economic activities in exchange for a wage, thereby granting them independent income and the agency to make life decisions without total reliance on a spouse or family (Becker, 1981). Economic autonomy, in turn, is the individual's capacity to satisfy material needs independently. Meanwhile, delayed marriage (spinsterhood) refers to the postponement of marriage or the voluntary abstention from it, and divorce is defined as the legal and social dissolution of the marital bond (Cherlin, 2004).

Furthermore, women's labor derives its legitimacy from Islamic guidance; it is rooted in sacred texts, as God Almighty says: "*And say, 'Do [as you will], for Allah will see your deeds, and [so, will] His Messenger and the believers.'*" The verse presents a general call and incentive for labor. This is further emphasized in the verse: "*[He] who created death and life to test you [as to] which of you is best in deed*" (Ben Hassi, 2021, p. 98).

1-2. Financial Independence

The term financial independence (derived from the Greek *Autonomos/Autonomie*) refers to an entity that is self-governing through its own laws. In a general sense, financial independence manifests in the financial means and methods placed at one's disposal; it is the cornerstone upon which decentralization is built. It implies that local entities possess their own financial resources, control their sources and collection, and enjoy full freedom in utilizing and allocating these resources as they see fit to achieve local interests (Rabhi & Faitas, 2022, pp. 130–131).

1-3. Delayed Marriage (Spinsterhood)

Linguistically, '*Anasa* (from which "spinsterhood" is derived in Arabic) refers to a maiden who has remained with her family long after reaching maturity, effectively exiting the demographic of "youth" without ever having married (Yahyaoui & Garziz, 2011, p. 253). It is also said that her family "aged her" ('*Annasuha*) by preventing her from marrying until she passed her prime but had not yet reached old age.

Linguistically and terminologically, there is no distinction between men and women regarding this concept; a man is said to have "aged" ('*Anasa*) if he grows old without marrying, and a woman is "aged" if her stay in her parents' home is prolonged beyond the age of marriage. Both are referred to by the term '*Aanis* (celibate/aged).

1-4. Definition of Divorce

Linguistically, divorce (*Talaq*) is derived from the verb *Talaqa* and *Atlaqa*, meaning to leave or distance. In Arabic, *Talaqa* is specifically used for releasing a non-material (legal) bond, while *Atlaqa* is used for releasing a physical bond. Thus, a man *Talaqa* (divorces) his wife, while he *Atlaqa* (releases) a camel from its tether (Saad, 1989, pp. 8–9).

In Latin, divorce is derived from *Divartium*, which stems from *Divertere*, meaning to turn aside or separate. It signifies the division and parting of two individuals who once shared a single path, only for each to take a different direction, distancing them from one another (Kassal, 1986, p. 24).

Terminological Definition: Divorce is the immediate or eventual dissolution of the marital bond and the lifting of the legal restriction established by marriage, whether the divorce is enacted by the individual themselves or through a legal proxy (Al-Rifai, 1983, p. 108).

1-5. Sociological Definition of Divorce

Divorce is a form of family disintegration and the collapse of the domestic unit. It entails the dissolution of the social role structures associated with the family when one or more members fail to fulfill role obligations satisfactorily. This disintegration occurs due to the escalation of irreconcilable differences. Divorce is unique among types of family breakdown as it leads to a definitive legal separation, granting both parties the right to remarry (Kamal, 1986, p. 24).

1-6. Divorce from an Anthropological Perspective

Divorce rituals and regulations vary from one society to another, reflecting the inherent differences between cultures and their belief systems. We find that while some societies view divorce as strictly taboo, others do not perceive it as a problem or a crisis; rather, it is seen as a natural phenomenon experienced by many.

This is evident in the USA, for example. Statistics from the National Social Security Fund indicate that there are 40,000 divorced working women, compared to 7,300 divorced male wage-earners out of a total of 4.6 million.

Furthermore, divorce is frequent among the Tuareg people, where a woman takes pride in her divorce. It is considered a badge of honor, as she often remarries immediately and celebrates the occasion. In Madagascar, the decision to divorce rests with the woman, initiated based on her own desire.

Consequently, divorce is the dissolution of the social and biological bond between a man and a woman who once formed the nucleus of the family, a nucleus within a system of social relations between groups of families and individuals. Once this connection is severed, a whole set of obligations and social relations dissipate (Bouguerra, 2009, pp. 388-392).

2- Theoretical Frameworks

2-1. Systems Approach (*La Systématique*)

This approach emphasizes the role of legal structures and social policies in determining the impact of women's work on marriage. In societies that provide family-supportive laws and work-life balance, women's employment may yield positive outcomes. Conversely, the absence of such policies increases the pressure leading to divorce. Regulatory bodies must manage women's labor through systematic policies that balance professional duties with the specificities of her role as a homemaker. A lack of equilibrium in these mechanisms inevitably leads to increased divorce rates (El Mekkaoui & El Ouafa, 2024).

2-2. The Economic Independence Hypothesis

This hypothesis posits that economic autonomy reduces a woman's reliance on marriage as a form of social and material security. A woman with a stable income may no longer view marriage as an absolute necessity, thereby increasing rates of delayed marriage. Furthermore, independence may empower her to terminate an unsatisfactory marital relationship more easily. Studies suggest that working women may experience a sense of non-dependency and heightened liberation, which can lead to an indifference toward traditional norms. This autonomy can diminish the perceived need for the psychological or material "safety net" provided by a partner (Oppenheimer, 1997).

2-3. The Cultural Approach

This perspective argues that norms and traditions are the primary factors in determining how autonomy affects marriage. In traditional societies, women's work may be viewed as a threat to the

patriarchal structure, fueling conflict. In contrast, "open" cultures view professional work as an integral part of female identity. This approach bifurcates societies: those that prioritize heritage and view the "unrestricted" movement of women as unacceptable, and those that view the professional woman as a hallmark of modernization and "gender" evolution, where women occupy leadership and pioneering roles (Kalmijn, 2011).

2-4. Feminist Theory

This theory views economic independence as a direct result of women entering the labor market to liberate themselves from traditional structures of male subordination. This autonomy reconfigures familial power dynamics, potentially weakening the husband's authority and leading to higher divorce rates. Additionally, being economically self-sufficient makes women less urgent about marriage, leading to a rise in the age of first marriage (Tong, 2009).

2-5. Social Exchange Theory

This theory assumes that relationships are based on a calculus of "costs and rewards." When a woman becomes financially independent, her material need for a man decreases, shifting the balance of power. If she perceives that the relationship no longer provides psychological or social fulfillment, the likelihood of separation increases. In this state, the "social exchange" between genders becomes deficient as the woman becomes largely self-sufficient regarding the services or support a man traditionally provides (Homans, 1961; Blau, 1964).

2-6. Critical Theory

This perspective views economic and social shifts (such as female education and labor) as part of a broader societal restructuring. Women's autonomy is not merely an individual phenomenon but reflects a shift in the societal power structure. These transformations, influenced by globalization and 20th-century social change, create new social patterns and alternative relationship forms (Habermas, 1984).

2-7. Structural Functionalism

This focuses on traditional social roles: the man as breadwinner and the woman as caregiver. Women's entry into the workforce and their subsequent financial independence can disrupt this functional equilibrium, increasing marital strife. This role-diffusion may also lead women to postpone or reject marriage entirely, thus elevating the "spinsterhood" rate (Parsons & Bales, 1955).

2-8. Social Role Theory

This theory posits that society defines specific roles for men and women. Financial autonomy necessitates a redefinition of these roles, often creating conflict with the expectations of the partner and the family. This conflict translates into increased divorce or marriage avoidance. As women participate in traditionally male-dominated or "high-risk" fields (such as the military or security sectors), they become "peers" to men, which can lead to a lack of social acceptance and the subsequent breakdown of the domestic bond (Eagly, 1987).

3- The Working Woman and the Phenomenon of Delayed Marriage

Literature indicates that the entry of women into the labor market has raised their ceiling of expectations regarding a life partner. Women no longer seek marriage solely out of material necessity; instead, many postpone marriage until they find a partner who aligns with their professional and personal ambitions (Hakim, 2003). The pursuit of post-graduate education, career security, and "future-proofing" one's life has rendered marriage a secondary priority, contributing to the steady increase in delayed marriage rates globally and in Algeria specifically.

4- The Working Woman and the Phenomenon of Divorce

Some studies demonstrate that financial independence may increase the probability of divorce in the absence of familial compatibility, as women possess the means to exit unsatisfactory relationships (Cherlin, 2004). However, other research suggests that women's work can alleviate economic burdens on the family, thereby stabilizing the marriage (Kalmijn, 2011). This indicates that the relationship is non-linear and highly complex, governed by various contexts.

From a religious-legal perspective, it is established that God Almighty granted *Qiwamah* (guardianship/maintenance) to men, as stated in the verse: "*Men are the caretakers of women.*" This guardianship is contingent upon specific conditions; if the cause (the man's provision and protection) is absent, the effect (the woman's obligation of obedience and care within that framework) is naturally diminished. If a man fails in his role of maintenance and care, the woman may no longer feel bound by the traditional requirements of *Qiwamah* (Hitala & Nadir, 2024, p. 168).

5- Recommendations

1. **Promoting Interdisciplinary Scientific Research:** Encouraging future studies that address this phenomenon through intersecting lenses (combining economics, sociology, and cultural studies) to provide a deeper, more holistic understanding.
2. **Formulating Balanced Family Policies:** Developing governmental programs that integrate women's economic empowerment with psychosocial support for the family, thereby mitigating tensions within marital life.
3. **Expanding Societal Education:** Launching media and awareness initiatives focused on redefining the concepts of "partnership" within the family, ensuring financial independence is viewed as a supportive factor rather than a threat to the marital bond.
4. **Integrating Cultural Dimensions into Planning:** National policies must account for cultural and religious specificities when addressing women's economic empowerment to avoid friction with established societal values.
5. **Supporting Female Entrepreneurship:** Providing accessible micro-loans and vocational training for women entering the freelance or private sectors, granting them greater flexibility to reconcile familial roles with professional obligations.
6. **Fostering Intergenerational Dialogue:** Establishing regular societal discussion channels between the youth and older generations regarding the socio-economic shifts impacting marriage, thereby narrowing the gap in expectations and perceptions.
7. **Incorporating Psychological Dimensions in Empowerment:** Developing family and psychological counseling programs that assist both men and women in navigating the changes associated with financial autonomy in a balanced, non-confrontational manner.
8. **Conducting International Comparative Studies:** Encouraging research that compares how different societies manage women's financial independence and its repercussions on marriage and divorce, drawing inspiration from successful, locally adaptable models.

Conclusion:

The findings of this study indicate that women's financial independence is no longer merely an economic issue; it has evolved into a complex socio-cultural phenomenon intersecting with family structures and marital patterns. The analysis demonstrates that possessing independent income streams bolsters a woman's capacity for autonomous decision-making, both pre-maritally and within the union, which reflects significantly on her life choices and the power balance with her partner. This transition has fostered two parallel trends: a positive trajectory involving empowerment and a heightened ability to face life's economic challenges, and a negative trajectory manifested in the

rising age of marriage and increased divorce rates. This duality invites a broader debate on the capacity of societies to assimilate the value-based shifts resulting from economic empowerment.

The data extracted reveals that financial independence is not a solitary cause of the phenomena under study; rather, it is a variable that interacts with other factors such as societal culture, gender roles, and traditional heritages regarding marriage. Global economic shifts, the rising cost of living, and the changing aspirations of newer generations all contribute to the reconfiguration of marriage as a foundation for stability. Consequently, viewing financial independence through a reductive, unilateral lens obscures the macro-dimensions of the phenomenon and diminishes the potential for formulating comprehensive solutions.

This study further asserts that financial independence can be transformed into a lever for familial development if channeled through an integrated system of policies that support family cohesion and balance individual rights with shared responsibilities. Here, the pivotal role of the state, societal institutions, and the media emerges in reproducing a social discourse capable of harmonizing the gains of economic empowerment with the requirements of marital stability. The fundamental conclusion is that the challenge lies not in financial independence itself, but in how it is integrated into a broader social project that balances modernity with cultural values, and individual freedom of choice with the stability of familial relations.

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