Psychosocial Sources of Feminine Identity in Delaying Marriage

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ABSTRACT

As a notion and perception that one has in terms of his/her abilities and values, identity is the fundamental context for personal views and attitudes; therefore, it affects individual's behavior, expectations, and decisions. Accordingly, the decision for marriage and accepting the marital functions or to postpone them can be studied in terms of identification. Due to the fact that present-day evolutions have provided women with various educational opportunities, this issue has created a complex range of interaction among feminine identity, and marriage, that has been dealt with in the present study. The method of this research was qualitative and it was conducted as a case study. The subjects (unmarried women beyond the usual age for marriage) were selected through purposive sampling and they participated in semi-structured personal interviews. The findings were analyzed, categorized, and conceptualized by interpretive analysis based on grounded theory of Glaser and Strauss. Results suggest that present-day socio-cultural evolutions influence the formation of identity in young women. Their perceptions of identity have inclined toward personal elements and woman's rights instead of relying on the relational and familial elements. Marriage is introduced as a personal decision which is possible only after getting a job and becoming financially independent. Participants mentioned to education, job, and family formation respectively as prior functions of adolescence. Change in time, the tendency to attend society, avoiding the difficult duties of motherhood, and the long period of formal education are the reasons mentioned for postponing marriage.

KEYWORDS: Psychosocial Sources, Feminine Identity, Delay in Marriage

1. INTRODUCTION

Marriage is a long-standing and pervasive tradition worldwide that answers to human's main needs. Marriage has become essential due to its provision of the highest level of intimacy in emotional and sexual relationship [1]. Therefore, it can be said that marriage is the most important event in adolescence and youth and it affects all aspects of life till the end of life.

Although, in some cultures, spouse selection occurs following close relationships of the individual with the opposite sex, most young individuals of other cultures choose their spouse traditionally and with commitment. Therefore, as the bond of man and woman and the foundation of the most important social institution, marriage is a phenomenon that can be interpreted in individual and social terms. Beliefs, values, attitudes, expectations, mental abilities, and past personal and familial experiences are the individual factors affecting marriage and its success directly or indirectly. As for the social aspect, cultural norms, social values, customs, religion, laws, economic factors, and international events are taken into account.

Decision for the time of getting married has been challenged by socioeconomic evolutions, opportunities for public education, prolonged academic periods, changes in attitudes toward traditional gender-roles, and more active presence of women in society. In addition, increasing development of the means of communication and the international and cross-cultural communications in light of globalization has made the structure of the human interactions very complicated. This complexity has created noticeable changes in individuals' life style, expectations, and decisions. In this context, the family natural functioning is disrupted by the increase in the age of getting married, spinsterhood, and cohabitation without legal commitment. These problems may also lead to sexual and social corruption. Therefore, examination of these factors is quite essential and paves the way for deeper understanding of delaying marriage. The present paper has dealt with analysis of psychosocial sources of feminine identity in delaying marriage.

2. Theoretical Foundations

Youth is an important period for deciding on occupation and marriage. Development in cognitive and emotional aspects creates the necessary context for these decisions. William Perry [2] and Labouvie-Vief [3]

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believe that development of cognitive abilities from formal operations stage(in adolescents) to post-formal thought stage (in young adults) provides the individual with flexibility, commitment, and responsibility. Affected by these abilities, the individual considers all possible solutions and limitations in order to make a decision. Therefore, in deciding for marriage, s/he thinks more flexibly and acts more realistically. In addition, having passed the identity crisis, the individuals come to know themselves and their abilities and values and to commit their personal beliefs and ideology and they finally organize their integrated identity [4].

According to Erikson [5], with the onset of adulthood, young people can share their identity with another person (spouse) and establish an intimate relationship with the other person without assimilating into that person. Erikson believes that failure to establish such a bond result in a kind of narcissism which Erikson calls it youth crisis [5]. He argues that an individual who has successfully solved his/her past crises is of more readiness to share his/her identity with the other person (spouse). Additionally, Erikson believes that the relationship between identity and intimacy in men is different from that of women. In men, an integrated identity is the basis for achieving intimacy. Women can cope with their identity crisis issues through the intimacy resulting from interpersonal relationships (with husband) because, in light of the ethics of care, they meld intrapersonal and interpersonal identity together [6]. Therefore, for women, the intimacy in marriage is a way to achieve commitment and responsibility.

In perspective of sociology, marriage, as the basis for formation of family and society, is affected by comprehensive system of human society, religion, and education. Therefore, delaying marriage is viewed, especially in Modernization Theory, as a phenomenon resulting from the developments of traditional society in transition toward modernity. William Goode believes that the development in job opportunities and education for women and also the changes in ideas and attitudes toward feminine roles have changed the patterns and norms of the traditional marriage and have reduced the women's tendency to marriage[7]. In perspective of the Second Demographic Transition theory, this issue is regarded as the outcome of the interplay of economic, social, cultural (secularization), and technological factors of the modern age. Therefore, women tend to develop post-materialistic values and individual autonomy in them; in this way, they avoid family constraints and obligations[8].

So, according to the multidimensional nature of delay in marriage, psychosocial integrated framework was used to examine this phenomenon in light of feminine identity:

1. Considering the developed context of the current society, is the delay in marriage a sign of change in the foundations of the feminine identity?
2. Has the intimacy of marriage become worthless or unimportant for women?
3. Do the other factors such as education, family, and social factors play a part in this process?

3. METHODOLOGY

This study was a qualitative research and it was conducted as a case study. In this method, the researcher, without manipulation in the study, seeks to achieve accurate and true information [9]. The subjects (12 unmarried women beyond the usual age for marriage; namely 27-35 years old) were selected through purposive sampling and they participated in semi-structured deep interviews. The interviews included 30-50 minutes of dialogue in personal, familial, and social dimensions.

A) Personal Dimension
- physical characteristics, beauty, fitness
- values, attitudes, personal desires
- interests, lifestyle, and the personal criteria for spouse selection

B) Familial Dimension
- Number of family members, parental occupation, income and welfare status (home, car, family entertainment, etc.)
- Characteristics of family members and their life satisfaction (father, mother, siblings and their current status)
- Subject's communication with members of family, interactions, conversations

C) Social Dimension
- Occupation, income, and occupational relationships
- Friends, interests and social network
- Family relationships and interactions

Demographic Characteristics: The subjects consisted of 12 (27-35 years old) unmarried young women who participated in this study as volunteers. They all were employees. Regarding the level of income, they were divided into three levels: low (less than 1/000/000 Toman), medium (1/000/000-3/000/000 Toman), and high (3/000/000-5/000/000 Toman).

Data Analysis Method: Interviews were recorded with subjects' consent and then were converted to text. To analyze the information, lexical data from the interviews were processed by interpretive analysis based on grounded theory of Glaser and Strauss. This type of processing is based on careful assessment and categorization of the lexical data. Researcher, who uses this type of analysis, interprets and infers the words semantically in order to create the categories [10].

Processing was carried out in four stages: preliminary analysis (after the interview session), the initial coding, open classification, and ultimately categorization. After recording the perceptions immediately following the interview, the meaningful segment of analysis was chosen as the first step for categorization. This segment is not the same as keyword, but includes a meaningful phrase that can be understood outside the context of the text.

Each meaningful unit (segment) was classified into inferential components on the basis of the elements presented in theoretical explanations and through semantic inference by the researcher. In a process of constant comparison and then modification and re-categorization, this step was repeated until each meaningful unit was located in a clear and distinct category in accordance with grounded theory.

4.RESULTS

The findings are explained in two sections: the personal foundations of identity and the social sources of identity.

4.1. Personal foundations of identity

A) **Physical characteristics**: In the absence of absolute criteria for determining the extent of beauty, it must be said that the subjects of this study were relatively beautiful. Although, in describing themselves, they did not refer explicitly to the beauty or lack of it, but they all considered beauty as one of the effective factors for success in marriage. Especially, they emphasized the similarity of husband and wife in fitness; and some of them (four) regarded the dissimilarity with the other person as one of the factors for delaying their marriage. Saroukhani has also described selecting a spouse of appearance similarity as *Homogamy*[11]. He considers this an instinctive phenomenon that appears as tendency of many human to choose a spouse similar to them.

   Generally, health and beauty are part of factors that may affect the initial contact and emotional bonding between two people. Although, in most cultures, the wisdom teachings emphasize the importance of inner qualities, reactions are often affected by beautiful face and pleasant appearance. However, this reaction is not the same for men and women, and research shows that men are much more affected by the beautiful appearance as compared to women[12]. This characteristic of men has been thought as a requirement for desirable assortative mating and survival of human. But, the role of cultural and social elements in this matter, especially the patterns presented by media, is also a very important factor. This factor will be discussed in social factors analysis.

B) **Cognitive characteristics**: in talking with the subjects, especially about the causes of delay in marriage, they interpreted the causes and barriers by evidence. This indicates the cognitive and intellectual development of these individuals, who are in the post-formal stage. They mentioned to economic, familial, and social barriers; this is an evidence for logical thinking, realisticism, and comprehensive decision making[3, 7].However, according to the existing researches, most adolescents decide for marriage based on the ideals, dreams, emotions, and sexual drives; and they fail to understand all the factors and limitations due to lack of background knowledge and strong cognitive capabilities. In young adults, attention to multiple dimensions leads to more precise decisions. But, in some cases, this carefulness can take a form of uncertainty and inability to make decisions. This state is clearly seen in one of the interviewees: "I'm afraid of the future; I do not know whether I should change myself to accord with his principles".

C) **Affective characteristics**: Regarding the values, beliefs, and personal ideologies there is a variation among the subjects. This diversity is more remarkable in case of religious trends. One of the subjects had a strong religious orientation and a commitment to religious customs and laws, such as Hijab, prayer (Salat), and even Mustahabb actions. But, in some cases, the subjects had weak religious beliefs and they even questioned some religious actions (Dua, Ziarah, etc.). The subjects were affectively in common in that they had a tendency to modern values and beliefs, especially about the feminine roles. Emphasizing on the need for higher education, employment, and personal income before getting married, indicates the strong tendency toward modern feminine roles. In addition, the subjects rejected the traditional role of women in housework, child care, and obeying their husband. They preferred to have independence and freedom in their relationships and recreations. Something was remarkable about the religious person. Stating some evidence and Hadith (Sayings of the Messenger), she accentuated her belief in equality of men and women and necessity of their cooperation in the family as one of the criteria for choosing her spouse. It may be said that feminine ethics of care[6] is turning to

masculine ethics of rights. Unlike Erikson's view, young women try to achieve an integrated personal identity, prior to emotional connection with another person, through access to employment and independent income.

D) **Life style**: people's preferences in how they spend their leisure time represent their dominant values and attitudes and also their life style. Shopping, watching satellite television, listening to music, and doing sports are respectively the common ways with which the subjects of this study spend their leisure time. All of these are the manifestations of the modern feminine roles.

All subjects regarded shopping as an enjoyable and desirable activity. Even when they did not need a product, they went to browse and visit the stores. Here, it is worthy of notice that shopping may provide young women with a new atmosphere in which they, even those unable to buy the product, can enjoy their freedom. In fact, shopping center is a resort for women to escape from their limited roles to new environments with new people.

On the other hand, shopping, as one of the symbols of modern society, represents "consumerism" [13]. This appears in the subjects' modern life style and fashion-seeking taste. Therefore, affected by globalization, a universal culture is being formed in which Iranian young women are exposed to modern universal culture with its integrated attitudes and beliefs.

E) **Religious orientation**: Most interviewees, except one participant, were carefree about religion and religious practices. Six of them did not perform religious actions such as Salat and Sawm. Seven of them did not believe in Hijab. Although some of them insisted that they are religious, they had a superficial perception of religion. They thought of themselves as Muslims because they participated in Mourning of Muharram. They regarded religion as an inner personal matter which is not merely related to the external behavior. Barqaei has also concluded that young individuals have entered the thought of secularism [13]. In the present study, the subjects consider the religious teachings against their tendency toward individuality and freedom. Therefore, this accounts for their resistance toward religious beliefs.

There exists a religious-like behavior in this group of young people; they have also a tendency toward some Eastern religions such as Buddhism. They participate in some classes (Yoga, energy therapy, etc.) as entertainment; but, these tendencies may be viewed as critical approaches toward religion.

F) **Attitude toward marriage**: Although the subjects had some different personal beliefs and values, they were in common due to their modern values and beliefs, especially about women's roles. Emphasizing on the need for higher education, employment, and personal income before getting married, indicates the strong tendency toward modern feminine roles. In addition, the subjects rejected the traditional role of women in housework, child care, and obeying their husband. They preferred to have independence and freedom in their relationships and recreations. They believed that, in Iranian culture, man possesses a great power in family and the women are managed by men after the marriage. They concluded that marriage limits individual freedoms. They also mentioned to childbearing as an obstacle for progressing academically and occupationally.

It may be said that feminine ethics of care is turning to masculine ethics of rights [6]. Unlike Erikson's view, young women try to achieve an integrated personal identity, prior to emotional connection with another person, through access to employment and independent income.

4.2. Social and cultural sources of identity

A) **Educational role of the family:** Family, in many ways, influences the individual's attitude to marriage. Characteristics of family members and their life satisfaction (father, mother, siblings and their current status) and the family interactions are the factors that can facilitate or impede marriage. Most of the subjects related their delay in marriage to family's economic problems. They argued that most suitors pay more attention to the economic status of the woman's family than her personal characteristics and abilities. In addition, the family cannot afford to pay for a suitable dowry for their daughter; therefore, marriage is postponed.

Another issue raised by some respondents about their marriage was the interference of parents or siblings in their decision for marriage. Lack of marital satisfaction and the high expectations of parents and siblings are issues affecting young women in deciding for marriage. A mother or a sister, who is not sufficiently satisfied with her marriage, regards matrimony as an obstacle to achieving personal dreams. She does not encourage the young woman to marry; but she transfers the feeling of doubt, uncertainty, and fear to her. In some cases, mothers are in quest of the lost factors of their own happiness in life of their children. Thus, through high expectations, they reject the existing opportunities hoping to achieve the ideal conditions. This was evident for three of the subjects (e.g.: "You should not become miserable like me").

Another point that needs to be addressed is the importance of interactional atmosphere in family. Majority of the subjects mentioned to the lack of such an atmosphere in their family. Lack of common

times of community with family members, lack of common interests among family members, and spending leisure hours with friends indicate the withdrawal from family and lack of positive interaction between family members. According to Monadi, lack of positive interaction between family members is an obstacle for helping one another in making fundamental decisions [13].

Interviews showed that most participants do not have a good relationship with their parents. Although they love their parents, they do not consider them as their model. They believe that their world is very different from that of their parents. Young women think that their mothers are content women who are merely engaged in housekeeping. Most of them believe that their mothers impose their (mothers') opinion on them (young women) in purchasing products. Some of the interviewees expressed that the difference between their opinion and their mothers' often results in arguments.

Most interviewees also implied the lack of dialogue and positive interaction with their fathers. The young women think of their fathers as selfish people who do not pay attention to the preferences and beliefs of others. Therefore, in most cases, they do not let their fathers interfere in their affairs. In general, we can say that the respondents do not have enough confidence to their parents and they do not establish a positive relationship with them. According to Erikson, identity is rooted in the basic trust of the parents [5]. This confidence affects the development of self-esteem, sense of security, courage, and creativity and also provides the ability to deal with the identity crisis.

In defining their self, most of the subjects introduced their interests and desires about personal freedom, instead of defining their identity based on personal characteristics. It seems that young women consider part of personal identity in achieving independence in various economic and behavioral aspects. Although the search for independence is an essential base for identity, identity theorists like Erikson [5] and Gilligan[6]regard interpersonal relationship as the most important base for feminine identity. It seems that, with the increase in socio-economic participation of women and the enhancement of women's knowledge, young women tend to personal identity originating from independence and income. Unlike traditional woman, today's young woman is in search of individuality and independence through employment, personal income, extended communications, shopping, etc.

Finally, it should be mentioned that individuals' ability of making decisions for marriage depends on their developed potentials in family, as the primary educational environment. Satir also considers family as a factory in which individual is built [13]. Therefore, family play a very important role in children's marriage through the interactional atmosphere it creates, the effects it has on children's decision making, and the facilities it provides for the children's marriage.

B) **The role of education:** Regarding the necessity of employment, personal income, and higher education, subjects of the study show a tendency to modern feminine roles. Some of them suggested that they did not think about marriage before entering university. They regarded their permanent employment as one of their main criteria for marriage. In explaining these attitudes and values, attention must be paid to the social, economic and cultural changes in recent decades. Today, economic developments and the need of industry for professionals have led to increased job opportunities and have made educational periods long [7]. Therefore, young woman try to progress academically and occupationally so as to achieve an active role similar to that of man. So she hopes to question the central role of man in the family. This hope is a ground for delaying marriage.

In addition, the development of the educational system has resulted in changes in attitudes toward traditional roles. Thus, participation of women in social activities has increased; and individual and social patterns of their life have changed. Changes of family structure from patriarchal toward corporate life, more freedom of women in personal decisions, and changes in ways of choosing spouse are cues for the effects of modernity on individual and social patterns on which William Good put an emphasis.

On the other hand, Technological changes in the age of communication and prevalent consumption of cultural products such as television, satellite, and Internet offer new thoughts and beliefs and affect individual's values and patterns of life. Recent developments in media have changed the norms and criteria of choosing a spouse. Pushing youth to pay attention to superficial rather than internal criteria, showing traditional marriage as dysfunctional, highlighting the economic problems, promoting superficial love and romantic relationships before marriage, and demonstrating easy divorce, media represents a negative model of marriage [14]. According to social learning theory [12], observing others' behavioral patterns, people acquire those patterns. And if people are reinforced in a suitable condition, they will practice what they have learned. Therefore, media, especially visual media, are very effective in postponing young people's marriage.

C) **Social role:** Most interviewees in the present study prefer modern feminine roles to traditional roles. Explaining about their mothers, the subjects consider the traditional women as housewife, dependent,

and devoted women who do not think about themselves. In fact, the subjects believe that their mothers do not have a clear and independent social identity for themselves. The subjects regard the ideal woman as a modern woman who is educated, independent, and employed. They believe that housework and childcare are common duties for wife and husband. Therefore, they do not consider the woman's role limited to housework, wifehood, and motherhood; they believe in active social participation of woman indifferent jobs and also their freedom in communication and decision making.

Most of the subjects regard employment as a means of freedom and individualization. On the other hand, they believe that society's stereotyped thoughts make it difficult for women to achieve high-level and appropriate jobs. Additionally, employment has provided young women with higher independent income, individuality, and power. Therefore, they have become more able to choose favorite life style and partner (spouse).

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Marriage is the major component of family and the emotional bond between man and woman. Marriage is explainable in three dimensions: individual, familial and social. In individual dimension, physical, cognitive, and emotional abilities affect the delay in women's marriage. In familial dimension, family's socio-economic factors and the emotional interactions influence the delay in women's marriage. Regarding the social dimension, social changes, affecting the ideas, values and attitudes, account for the delay in women's marriage.

Increased experience at the beginning of adult age results incomprehensive cognitive development and a broad understanding and deep-thinking that makes it harder to make decision for marriage. On the other hand, education and employment lead to a tendency for women to achieve personal and career identity (before achieving interpersonal intimacy) and reduce the desire for marriage.

Economic problems (such as affording to buy dowries) also affect the delay in young women's marriage. Furthermore, employment of women has decreased their emotional interaction with their parents. That's why the parents have a small share in their daughter's decision-making for marriage. On the other hand, because of financial independence, young women have higher expectations for achieving superior opportunities; this hope makes them postpone marriage.

In recent decades, traditional family's structure, values and attitudes have weakened due to the greater educational opportunities for women, their increased participation in financial affairs, and the rapid development of globalization and global communications. Therefore, women's identity is now influenced by the modernization and the critical approach that appear in behaviors, expectations, and new demands.

According to the participants' words, rejection of the traditional feminine roles and rejection of those roles as successful behavioral patterns is quite evident. In addition, trying to achieve modern feminine roles through education and employment is a sign for higher emotional and behavioral autonomy in today's young women [7].Perhaps contrary to theories of identity [5, 6], today's young women put personal identity and intrapersonal factors such as employment into focus and they seek more independence and individuality.

Rejecting the previous values and emphasizing on economic issues, the mass media raise the expectations of young people from marriage and the future spouse; and media do not really provide young individuals with an efficient pattern. Thus, young women have got confused in a complex mystery called "marriage"; this prevents them from making timely decision and delays their marriage. Accordingly, it seems that the problems of young people's marriage are of multi-dimensional nature and it takes sharpness, carefulness, and a holistic approach to social, economic, and cultural aspects to solve these problems.

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