

A Daughter's Choice: To Marry or Stay Single?

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Is staying single a social evil?

In 2019, there is no need for people to discuss their marital status when talking with neighbors. However, even in this modern age, it is not acceptable for people to stay single and the fact that someone is not married is considered to be a social problem. Our society only talks about single people who want to get married but are still waiting to find a partner, not those who choose to stay single.

Society's belief that a person's marital status is the only way for a man or woman to achieve stability in his or her life creates a negative perception of people who choose not to marry. This begins with believing that the "normal" family is a key structure in society. In the "normal" family, men are responsible for the livelihood of families in the public domain of wage markets, and women are exclusively responsible for households and their children in the private sector of the family, and contribute to the maintenance of society through reproduction. In other words, if women and men do not meet and form a family, it will undermine the overall maintenance of society. From a society-wide perspective, this is only a negative view of single life.

Women choose not to marry, witnessing a break in the career of married women around them. This leads to a fall in birthrates, and women who elect not to marry become a less visible, less "valuable" part of society. In other words, women who do not marry threaten the hierarchy of sexuality and are blamed for hindering social maintenance through reproduction, which has been viewed as stable in the "normal" family.

Causes of non-marriage

Indeed, are women who choose not to marry irresponsible beings who are avoiding taking up their role in the traditional family order? In a survey conducted by a research firm Micromill Embrain, both men and women in their 20s said that "monetary reasons or losing their sense of self" were the biggest reasons for not marrying. However, there was a gap in the responses between the sexes. Men's responses were based on actual or perceived financial burdens, such as increasing housing prices and supporting their livelihoods, while women cited as burden of household labor, relationship with their in-laws, patriarchal gender clashes within the family, career disruption in the labor market. In other words, becoming a married woman is a life of "only wife" after giving up some of the socio-economic status and relationships acquired during her single life.

These perceptions are not fiction. There is an extensive social background. The employment rate of women in Korea increased from 40.9% in 1985 to 50.2% in 2016. Their level of education and participation in economic activities also improved significantly. However, the gender gap for household labor is still vast. According to the National Statistical Office's data on daily home compatibility indicatorⁱ in 2016, women are still responsible for majority of household chores in double-income households, spending an average of 3 hours and 14 minutes per day on housework, while men only spending 40 minutes. Considering that women spent an average of 3 hours and 28 minutes and men spent 32 minutes on housework per day in their double-income households in 2004, the situation has been at a standstill for 10 years.

Staying single: Closeup immediate view

Choosing to remain single is an act that raises questions about traditional marriage and family systems that control the hierarchy of sexuality; an increase in the number of people who are not married is an important move that reveals 'pressure' hidden under the name of normality. However, it should not be interpreted as a social problem itself.

The reality of remaining single is not an urgent social issue. Rather, it should be recognized as a stable presence in the social system. When this perspective is possible, it can effectively resolve issues revolving around discontinuing careers or the division of household labor for married women. Denying other types of lifestyles, making the lives of married women an ideal choice for marriage and childbirth for single women means that Korean society is still under the shadow of the dictates of a "normal" family.

Freedom to choose is compulsion unless freedom to choose is guaranteed. Freedom exists when freedom not to marry is guaranteed. But there is a need for it to be guaranteed, and marriage is no longer a force and requirement for all women. Only when this 'obsession' is resolved will the pattern of women's lives be diversified.



ⁱ http://www.index.go.kr/potal/main/EachDtlPageDetail.do?idx_cd=3025