

Marriage Anxiety Among Urban Young Women: A Sociopsychological Perspective

Weifang Liao

Southwest Petroleum UniversityCity, Chengdu 610500, China

ABSTRACT

An increasing number of urban young women are exhibiting hesitation and fear toward marriage, a phenomenon that reflects the reconstruction of gender norms amid modern societal transformation. The conflict between traditional marital institutions and contemporary female subjectivity, the dissemination of negative marital narratives in social discourse and media, disharmony and expectations within family of origin, as well as personal self-perception and emotional experiences, collectively contribute to urban young women perceiving marriage as a life choice requiring cautious evaluation. To mitigate this issue, it is necessary to promote the modernization of marital concepts, optimize the online information environment, improve social support systems, foster harmonious family dynamics, and enhance self-awareness and psychological adaptability, thereby strengthening women's confidence in facing marriage.

KEYWORDS

Marriage anxiety; Young women; Marital attitudes

1 Introduction

Youth attitudes toward marriage and relationships have long been a significant social issue. In recent years, with the advancement of modernization, traditional marriage has gradually become "hollowed out." Marriage is no longer a compulsory choice dictated by familial interests but rather an autonomous decision based on mutual affection. While individuals have gained greater freedom in marital choices, they also bear increased risks and consequences. The rising uncertainties surrounding marriage have led some urban youth to avoid it altogether, exhibiting a rejection of marriage—thus forming the so-called "marriage anxiety group." Notably, this phenomenon is more pronounced among young urban women.

According to the 2022 Report on Chinese Youth's Views on Marriage and Relationships, 76% of marriage-age youth experience marriage anxiety, with 61.2% admitting a reluctance to marry early. Studies reveal that among reasons for declining marriage willingness, 30.5% of youth cite "distrust in marriage," with women accounting for 73.4% of this group—indicating a higher prevalence of marriage anxiety among females. Additionally, the average age of first marriage for women of eligible age has been steadily increasing, reflecting their growing caution toward entering matrimony.

Marriage anxiety is one of China's pressing social issues, an unavoidable phenomenon with far-reaching implications. For young women, it not only negatively impacts emotional and psychological well-being but also poses broader societal challenges. Demographically, it may exacerbate trends of delayed marriage or outright rejection, further depressing fertility rates and accelerating population aging, thereby disrupting normal demographic development. On the other hand, it could also stimulate societal reevaluation of marital norms, drive transformations in traditional marriage concepts, and spark discussions on women's value and familial responsibilities.

2 Literature Review

In recent years, marriage anxiety among urban youth has become increasingly prevalent, emerging as a notable social concern. Against the backdrop of China's social transformation, this phenomenon is particularly pronounced among young urban women. Scholars from diverse disciplines have conducted in-depth research on this issue.

From a sociological perspective, urban youth's marriage anxiety represents an inevitable outcome of structural changes during modernization. Domestic studies identify the following key structural determinants:

First, economic pressures serve as fundamental constraints. Rapid urbanization has driven up living costs—housing, education, and healthcare—elevating the financial threshold for marriage and fueling anxiety among youth. For instance, prohibitive housing prices in first-tier cities deter many from marrying over concerns about diminished quality of life. Childrearing costs further compound this burden, with expenses spanning from infant care to education imposing significant financial strain.

Second, shifting values critically influence marital attitudes. The rise of individualized society has heightened urban youth's emphasis on self-actualization and personal fulfillment, creating tension with traditional marital expectations of compromise and responsibility. This conflict is especially evident among highly educated urban women.

Additionally, evolving social contexts play a pivotal role. Selective media coverage of marital failures, coupled with demonstration effects from rising divorce rates, amplifies risk perceptions regarding marriage. Intergenerational transmission effects are equally salient—parental marital quality significantly shapes offspring's marital outlooks, with many fearing they might replicate dysfunctional family dynamics.

International research broadens the theoretical lens. Psychological studies examine formative mechanisms of marriage anxiety, emphasizing developmental experiences and personality traits. Sociologists analyze structural linkages with education, career autonomy, and economic independence. Anthropologists' cross-cultural comparisons reveal heightened marriage anxiety in conservative societies where marriage bears heavier societal expectations.

Notably, existing research exhibits a critical gap: insufficient focus on young urban women despite their demographic significance. A specialized sociological examination of this group could not only strengthen theoretical frameworks but also inform targeted policy interventions to mitigate this social challenge.

3 Factors Influencing Marriage Anxiety Among Urban Young Women

3.1 Social Factors

3.1.1 Clash Between Traditional Marriage Institutions and Modern Ideologies

Traditional marriage systems imply gendered role expectations and division of labor, while contemporary women—empowered by educational attainment and professional participation—have achieved significant subjective awakening. The tension between these paradigms has increasingly framed marriage as a "risky investment" rather than a "life necessity."

In Chinese tradition, marital decisions were dictated by parental authority ("parents' orders, matchmakers' words"), reflecting a family-centric culture where individual choices were subordinated to familial interests. Under feudal patriarchy, women had no marital autonomy, being treated merely as instruments for continuing the family line. Concepts like male superiority and female submission ("men lead, women follow") shackled women to lifelong dependence on fathers, husbands, and sons.

With societal progress, women's agency has markedly strengthened. Outdated notions like "men must marry, women must wed" or male dominance have faded, replaced by widespread gender equality ideals. Modern women, through higher education and careers, have gained economic independence and personal autonomy, making marriage optional rather than obligatory. Influenced by feminist values, they prioritize equal rights and self-actualization over traditional marital and maternal roles. Some urban women, through rational assessment, view marriage as potentially detrimental to their quality of life and personal growth, opting to postpone or forgo it—a choice that fundamentally embodies their defense of agency and pursuit of diverse lifestyles.

Moreover, workplace pressures and familial role conflicts shape urban women's marital decisions. Professionally, they face equal competition with men yet encounter implicit gender biases: appearance-based hiring preferences, competence skepticism during promotions, and leadership stereotypes. Despite legal protections, women remain undervalued, with constrained career advancement. Simultaneously, traditional gender expectations persist, assuming women should shoulder disproportionate domestic and childcare duties—a "career woman vs. homemaker" double bind. This conflict renders marriage a tangible threat: sacrificing either career progression or personal well-being. Faced with this dichotomy, increasing numbers of women delay or reject marriage—not as evasion, but as a conscious critique of structural inequities. Until true workplace equality and equitable domestic labor materialize, they refuse to compromise self-worth for matrimony. Such choices reflect urban young women's resolute defense of professional aspirations and life autonomy. Thus, marriage anxiety also represents a compelled response to systemic gender injustice.

3.1.2 The Impact of Public Discourse and Media Representation

In the digital media era, the proliferation of negative marital narratives has significantly shaped urban young women's perceptions of marriage. The constant exposure to domestic violence, infidelity, and other marital crises constructs a risk-saturated imagery of matrimony, inducing vicarious trauma among female audiences. This "socialization of risk" triggers three psychological responses:

First, the recurrent portrayal of negative cases establishes an availability heuristic, leading women to overestimate the probability of marital failure. Second, media amplification of marital conflicts fosters a negative cognitive schema, cultivating systemic distrust toward marital relationships. Third, the dissonance between idealized marital expectations and media-reported realities creates an expectation gap, intensifying marriage anxiety and deepening apprehensions among urban young women.

From the perspective of risk society theory, contemporary women are adopting a rational risk-aversion strategy: when

marriage is socially constructed as a high-risk/low-reward option, postponing or forgoing it becomes the optimal solution for life-risk minimization. This choice does not reflect mere psychological fear but rather a calculated risk-assessment logic formed in information-saturated environments. Within the context of an insufficiently modernized marital institution, risk avoidance aligns more closely with the rational actor's cost-benefit analysis than impulsive participation.

3.2 Family Factors

3.2.1 The Influence of Family of Origin

Sociological studies demonstrate that familial discord can be intergenerationally transmitted, shaping offspring's perceptions and attitudes toward marriage. From a psychological perspective, adverse experiences in one's family of origin—such as parental conflict, divorce, or remarriage—may foster insecure attachment styles, which directly influence women's marital outlook. Exposure to dysfunctional family dynamics often leads young women to project negative experiences onto their prospective marriages, resulting in diminished confidence and heightened marital apprehension.

Empirical observations reveal that women who witnessed parental strife, domestic violence, or divorce during childhood frequently develop pessimistic views of marriage, subsequently exhibiting marriage anxiety. These individuals tend to anticipate relational instability or emotional distress in their own future unions, reinforcing avoidance behaviors.

3.2.2 Parental Expectation Pressures

In Chinese society, marriage is culturally codified as a critical life milestone, prompting significant familial scrutiny—particularly toward women. Many parents impose heightened expectations regarding marital timelines (e.g., "marrying by a certain age") or spousal qualifications (e.g., socioeconomic status), creating measurable psychological strain. This pressure intensifies during traditional holidays like the Lunar New Year, when urban young women frequently face "marriage" (marriage-pushing) from relatives. The persistent interference is perceived as an infringement on personal autonomy, with many fearing that marriage would irrevocably compromise their independence. Consequently, some opt to evade matrimony altogether—a choice reflecting resistance to sociocultural coercion rather than intrinsic aversion to partnership.

3.3 Individual Factors

3.3.1 Self-Identity and Career Development Needs

The advancement of educational attainment and evolving social roles have led modern women to place greater emphasis on self-actualization and personal growth. Increasingly career-oriented, they aspire to achieve professional success, economic independence, and occupational fulfillment. Many perceive marriage as a potential impediment to career progression, particularly due to anticipated familial obligations and child-rearing responsibilities.

Concurrently, heightened self-awareness has fostered a stronger valuation of personal autonomy and freedom of choice. Unwilling to compromise their individual aspirations to conform to traditional marital expectations, these women prioritize self-development over societal norms. Consequently, driven by the pursuit of self-realization and professional advancement, a growing number of young women opt to postpone or forgo marriage altogether—a deliberate strategy to better align life choices with personal and career objectives.

3.3.2 Romantic Experiences and Psychological Trauma

In modern society where romantic relationships are freely pursued, many young women have experienced emotional setbacks such as heartbreak or betrayal. Additionally, childhood exposure to familial discord or parental divorce may leave lasting psychological scars. These experiences profoundly shape marital perceptions, fostering skepticism and apprehension toward love and marriage.

When confronted with new marital possibilities, affected individuals often exhibit fear and distrust rooted in past emotional wounds. Some develop entrenched beliefs about the unreliability of marriage, adopting pessimistic outlooks that prioritize self-protection over commitment. Concerns about recurrent emotional harm and the perceived constraints of matrimony lead many to consciously elect singlehood—valuing autonomy and independence over partnership.

4 Coping Strategies for Marriage Anxiety Among Urban Young Women

4.1 Optimizing the Online Information Environment

Certain media outlets demonstrate bias in marital reporting, with some deliberately distorting facts and exaggerating

negative narratives to attract viewership. Such practices profoundly influence urban young women's perceptions of marriage, exacerbating matrimonial apprehension.

Media and society should adopt more balanced reporting on marital issues, disseminate positive case studies of healthy marriages, and reduce sensationalized coverage of marital conflicts. Highlighting marital fulfillment and happiness can foster constructive social attitudes toward marriage, thereby mitigating externally induced marriage anxiety among young women. Concurrently, collaborative societal efforts are needed to cultivate a healthier and more supportive dating and marriage environment for this demographic.

4.2 Improving the Social Support System

Despite legal provisions for gender equality, women continue to face employment discrimination in practice. The state should implement relevant policies and regulations to safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of working women, ensuring their career prospects are not compromised due to gender and protecting them from workplace discrimination, thereby securing their economic status. Additionally, more guidance institutions should be established to help women balance career development and family responsibilities, offering free psychological counseling services to assist young women in better coping with workplace and domestic pressures, thereby strengthening their confidence in marriage.

While improving protections for women's professional rights, reforms to the marriage system must also be advanced. Currently, China's marriage registration system follows a "lenient entry, strict exit" model—marriage procedures are simple and efficient, whereas divorce is subject to multiple restrictions, such as mandatory cooling-off periods and prolonged litigation. This institutional design objectively increases the cost of exiting a marriage, leaving women in a more vulnerable position when facing an unhappy marriage. The marriage system be restructured to address the current imbalance between "easy marriage" and "difficult divorce." While protecting marital freedom, complementary mechanisms should be established, including premarital rights and obligations disclosure, expedited divorce procedures for special cases (e.g., domestic violence), and accessible marriage counseling networks. By balancing the "entry" and "exit" of marriage, institutional concerns deterring women can be alleviated, ultimately ensuring genuine autonomy in marital decisions.

4.3 Fostering a Harmonious Family Environment

Parents should fully respect young women's marital choices, trusting their ability to make responsible life decisions. It is essential to acknowledge their personal life plans and arrangements, adapt traditional viewpoints appropriately, and avoid exerting excessive pressure or interference in their marital decisions. By adopting an understanding and encouraging attitude, parents can help young women develop a healthy perspective on marriage while alleviating the psychological burden caused by familial expectations.

A supportive family environment contributes to more positive perceptions of marriage among young women, enhancing their confidence and willingness to enter matrimony. Therefore, cultivating domestic harmony is crucial. When conflicts arise, parents should engage in constructive communication to resolve disputes promptly, rather than resorting to arguments or violence, thereby setting a positive example for their children. Mutual respect and affection among family members can serve as a valuable reference for young women in shaping their expectations of future marital life.

4.4 Enhancing Self-Awareness and Psychological Adaptability

Young women should develop an accurate understanding of their own needs and capabilities, thoroughly examine their fears and concerns regarding marriage, and clearly define their expectations and perspectives on marital relationships. It is crucial to rationally assess the significance and value of marriage through self-reflection, thereby avoiding misguidance by one-sided information.

Proactive measures should include acquiring psychological knowledge, participating in social activities to broaden cognitive horizons, and engaging in in-depth communication with partners to establish mutual trust. Additionally, drawing upon familial experiences can contribute to forming objective judgments about marriage. Adopting a positive mindset toward romantic relationships will lay a solid foundation for future marital life.

5 Conclusion

The phenomenon of marriage anxiety among urban young women constitutes a complex socio-psychological issue involving economic, cultural, and psychological dimensions. Addressing this phenomenon requires concerted efforts from government, society, families, and individuals. Governments should implement relevant policies to alleviate

workplace pressures and establish comprehensive support systems for women. Society should promote healthy marital concepts and foster positive attitudes toward marriage and childbearing. Families need to provide greater understanding and support to young women, while urban young women themselves should actively adjust their mindset to develop rational perspectives on marriage and reproduction.

Future research should further examine variations in marriage anxiety across different genders, age groups, and occupational demographics, as well as its impacts on individuals and society. Through interdisciplinary comprehensive studies supported by quantitative research, we can gain deeper insights into the nature and root causes of marriage anxiety among urban youth, thereby providing scientific foundations for developing effective intervention strategies.

About the Author

Weifang Liao, master, research direction: social policy.

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