İmgelem | Sayı 16 | Temmuz 2025 | 127-152
Doi: 10.53791/imgelem.1675086
Derleme Makale/Review Article

Timing of Marriage: A Social Problem?

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ABSTRACT

Under the influence of various change factors, individuals and societies encounter or worry about certain problems. However, there are difficulties in distinguishing problems as 'individual' or 'social', in other words, determining what constitutes a 'social problem'. Focusing on the timing of marriage, which closely concerns the institution of family; this article discusses why early or delayed marriages are or are not perceived as 'social problems'. The discussion is carried out by examining the existing literature with a critical perspective. The main finding is that the existing literature, which is almost unanimous, treats early marriage as a social problem, whereas late marriage is treated more as an individual choice resulting from the prioritization of education and career. Based on three arguments, the article argues that late marriage is a serious social problem and proposes a solution to this problem in the context of Turkish/Islamic culture.

Keywords: Social Problem, Early Marriage, Late Marriage, Modernization, Tradition.

Received / Accepted: 13 April 2025 / 11 June 2025

Citation: Çakı, F. (2025). Timing of Marriage: A Social Problem?, *İmgelem*, 16, 127-152.

Evliliğin Zamanlaması: Toplumsal Bir Problem Mi?

ÖZ

Bireyler ve toplumlar çeşitli değişim faktörlerinin etkisi altında belirli sorunlarla karşılaşır veya endişelenirler. Ancak, sorunları 'bireysel' veya 'toplumsal' olarak ayırt etmede, yani neyin 'toplumsal sorun' oluşturduğunu belirlemede zorluklar vardır. Aile kurumunu yakından ilgilendiren evlilik zamanlamasına odaklanan bu makale, erken veya gecikmiş evliliklerin neden 'toplumsal sorun' olarak algılandığını veya algılanmadığını tartışmaktadır. Tartışma, mevcut literatürü eleştirel bir bakış açısıyla inceleyerek yürütülmektedir. Ana bulgu, mevcut literatürün neredeyse oybirliğiyle erken evliliği toplumsal bir sorun olarak ele alırken, bunun aksine geç evliliği daha çok eğitim ve kariyerin önceliklendirilmesinden kaynaklanan bireysel bir tercih olarak ele aldığı tespitidir. Makale, üç argümana dayanarak geç evliliğin ciddi bir toplumsal sorun olduğunu savunmakta ve bu soruna Türk/İslam kültürü bağlamında bir çözüm önermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Toplumsal Sorun, Erken Evlilik, Geç Evlilik, Modernleşme, Gelenek.

Başvuru / Kabul: 13 Nisan 2025 / 11 Haziran 2025

Atıf: Çakı, F. (2025). Evliliğin Zamanlaması: Toplumsal Bir Problem Mi?, *İmgelem*, 16, 127-152.

INTRODUCTION

What makes a problem as a 'social problem' is an ambiguous issue. Although the discipline of sociology focuses on the sources of social problems and their solutions, it has rarely delved into the roots of social problem perceptions. Defining social problems as things that society perceives as problems may be a starting point, but it is not very explanatory. What does society perceive as social problems and why? The question is not as simple as it seems. First

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of all, a behavioral pattern that some societies see as a problem may not be seen as such by others. Or, behavioral patterns that were perceived as social problems at one time may lose that feature in another time period. Even within the same society, what some segments perceive as 'problems' may not be so by other segments. Emphasizing this situation can lead to 'social problem' perceptions being pulled into a subjective area. However, it is not difficult to find examples that were perceived as 'social problems' by the majority of the society within the same society and time period. So what makes a problem a 'social problem'?

One of the oldest definitions of social problem comes from Hart writing in the first querter of the 20th centrury. According to him, "a social problem is a problem which actually or potentially afects large numbers of people in a common way so that it may best be solved by some measure or measures applied to the problem as a whole rather than by dealing with each individual as an isolated case, or which requires concerted or organized human action" (Hart 1923: 349). This definition emphasizes the breadth of the problem and its nature requiring a collective solution. Thus, for Hart, a social problem is clearly different than an individual problem.

A similar way of thinking is apparent in the American sociologist C. Wright Mills who distinguished between 'private problems' and 'public issues'. Although there are many 'troubles' or 'problems' that individuals experience in their lives, not all of them, arise as 'public issues' that attract public attention and concern or require public response (Mills 1959: 7-10). The most obvious factor that can make a difference in whether things are perceived as private troubles or public issues is scale or volume. If only a few people experience a problem of some kind, then it is likely to remain a private matter and not a matter of public concern. However, if a large number of people experience the same problem – or fear that they might affect them – it can become a public (social) problem.

The timing of marriage is one of the areas open to perceptions and discussions of social problems. While people in developing societies marry earlier than in developed countries, it is known that late marriage is becoming an increasingly common phenomenon in developed countries (Coontz 2016; Dessy and Djebbari 2005; Oppenheimer 1988). Researching and discussing the timing of first marriage offer several benefits. First, it can serve to better understand the social consequences of marriage. Many academic studies draw attention to the fact that marriage provides various benefits for both men and women. According to these studies, married people have higher levels of psychological, physical and economic well-being than unmarried people (Nock 1998). If these benefits reflect a general

situation, research on the timing of marriage can also shed light on how such benefits differ for those who marry early and those who marry late. In addition, research on the timing of marriage can further illuminate the intersecting effects of structural and individual factors. Indeed, studies often emphasize that broad structural transformations, such as new educational and employment opportunities or changes in local marriage markets, create significant changes in the timing of marriage (Cliquet 2003; Giddens 1992; Sassler 1997). Discussing such changes can provide important insights into individual life course transitions and preferences for family life, including childbearing, parenthood, educational attainment, and labor force participation after marriage and divorce (Xu, Hudspeth & Bartkowski 2005: 586).

For the reasons stated, this article focuses on the timing of marriage, which is closely related to the institution of family. It aims to analyze whether and why early or late marriage is perceived as a 'social problem'. Additionally, based on three arguments (historical human nature, human rights, societal interests), the article makes the point that late marriage is really a social problem that requires actions. Finally, a proposal is presented regarding the issue of late marriage.

Early Marriage as a Social Problem

Although many changes in family life in modern societies (divorces, single parenthood, fewer children, etc.) are met with concern in various circles, one of these, the delay in marriage age, is not often voiced as a social problem. Discussions around the timing of marriage are rooted in cultural, socioeconomic, and health-related discourses. Early marriage is generally defined as under the age of 18 and is often used synonymously with child marriage. Late or delayed marriage, on the other hand, varies by society, but is generally considered to be after the age of 25.

The social perception of the problem of the timing of marriage is focused on early marriage and is generally indexed to emphasize how it has negative effects on girls. This is very evident in the discourses of many institutions and academisians. The most emphasized issue is the negative impact of early marriage on girls' education. In this context, it is generally argued that early marriage shortens girls' education. For example, in Malawi, it is noted that 60% of girls who marry before the age of 18 drop out of school (Girls Not Brides 2020). Nussbaum (2000: 88-90) also argues that early marriage perpetuates gender inequality by restricting girls' access to education and autonomy and denies girls the ability to shape

their future. Another point of criticism is that early marriage limits individuals' decision-making capacity. It is argued that married adolescents, especially girls, face limited decision-making power over their health, finances, or mobility. Some international NGOs (e.g. Save the Children) provide data on this, as in a study conducted in Yemen, where 92% of child brides had no say in their marriages (Save the Children 2014: 15).

The dominant discourse in this area also uses health risks as a point of criticism against early marriage. Accordingly, girls aged 15-19 are twice as likely to die in childbirth as women over 20; those under 15 are five times more at risk (WHO 2020). Early pregnancies are also associated with obstetric fistula, a debilitating injury that occurs during childbirth (UNFPA 2018). The negative impact of early marriage on mental health is presented as another factor. Accordingly, child brides report higher rates of depression and anxiety. A 2017 study in India linked early marriage to a 40% increase in suicidal ideation (Raj et al. 2020: 4). Wallerstein et al. (2000: 204) also linked early marriage to higher divorce rates due to emotional immaturity. As can be seen, academics, activists and international organizations extensively criticize early marriage as a violation of rights and a driving force of inequality, and emphasize its harmfulness in terms of social, economic, legal, physical and mental health factors in order to construct early marriage as a social problem. A publication by UNICEF (2005: 12) directly describes early marriage as a "harmful traditional practice". This discourse is also supported by international agreements. Indeed, international frameworks such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) condemn early marriage as a violation of rights. Bunting (2005: 168) also describes early marriage as an "international human rights problem".

It should also be noted that early marriage is presented as a fundamental social problem of underdeveloped and/or developing countries. The data used in this regard always consist of data from such societies. For example, according to information provided by UNICEF, in India, despite preventive laws, 27% of girls marry before the age of 18. Patriarchal norms and dowry pressures continue, especially in Rajasthan (UNICEF 2019). Niger, on the other hand, has the highest child marriage rate in the world (76%). UNICEF also emphasizes that while late marriage is more common in wealthy societies, early marriage continues in poor regions (2005: 15).

There may be those who oppose all these and similar criticisms directed at early marriage on cultural, economic, political or social grounds. For example, there may be those

who evaluate that this dominant discourse reflecting opposition to early marriage is based on a Eurocentric value system and contains a hidden agenda to create grounds for intervention to "save" women in underdeveloped/developing non-Western societies. However, instead of entering into such a discussion, this article will argue that delayed marriage can be viewed as a social problem, at least as much as early marriage.

Is Late Marriage a Social Problem?

As emphasized above, late or delayed marriage is characterized by developed/modern societies, but it is not usually presented as a social problem. It is particularly emphasized that late marriage is commonly seen in industrialized and post-industrial societies (Lesthaeghe 2014; Thornton 2001). Far from being seen as a social problem, late marriage is often praised. This praise is justified by appealing to various factors. Education and career development are the most important of these. Accordingly, late marriage allows individuals to achieve higher education and career stability (Coontz 2005). Stephanie Coontz (2005: 145), for example, argues that post-industrial economies prioritize career development and move marriage to the late 20's. Oppenheimer (1988: 573, 583) also links delayed marriage to long-term education and labor market readiness and argues that economic uncertainty delays unions as couples seek financial stability.

Another factor used to praise late marriage is the claim that economic stability and lower divorce rates are associated with it. In this context, it is argued that couples who marry later have higher household incomes and lower divorce rates. According to Cherlin, late marriages also have a reducing effect on stress factors such as debt (Cherlin 2009: 115).

Late marriage is closely related to cohabitation outside of marriage, which is also used as a factor that creates economic stability. Indeed, Smock and Manning (1979: 720) present evidence that living together before late marriage allows couples to pool their resources.

Another factor that is used to praise late marriage is the claim that it contributes to gender equality. In this context, it is argued that late marriages generally involve more egalitarian gender roles. For example, Gerson (2010: 89-92) concludes in his research that women who marry late negotiate the division of household labor more fairly. According to the dominant discourse, early marriages disproportionately affect girls by reinforcing patriarchal norms (Nussbaum 2000: 92), while late marriages generally reflect women's empowerment (Coontz 2005: 189). It is also claimed that couples who marry late have higher emotional maturity and conflict resolution skills, which in turn lower divorce rates. Amato

(2010: 655) presents findings that the risk of divorce is 24% lower in marriages after the age of 25.

As a result, while early marriage is increasingly condemned as a social problem and a violation of rights, late marriage, although it involves some concerns, is generally not seen as a social problem or a violation of rights. Late marriage is generally considered as 'an individual choice' of individuals who prioritize career and economic stability. However, contrary to this widespread belief, this article argues that late marriage is a serious social problem. This argument is based on 3 main grounds.

a) *Contrary to historical human nature*: Any claim about human nature is open to debate and can be interpreted from different perspectives. For example, essentialists think that human nature is something given or created once and for all. Another view is that human nature is a fiction that we inherit from tradition. A third way of thinking understands human nature through an analysis of human development in history. Here by human nature, the third meaning is meant. Accordingly, humans, like other species, are a species that adapts to new conditions. Living beings develop strategies that adapt to environmental conditions in order to survive and continue their species. Mating and reproductive behaviors also occur in this way. When suitable conditions are present, every living thing exhibits these behaviors. It is almost never possible to come across a living thing that avoids reproductive behaviors despite the presence of suitable conditions. The human species is no exception. Throughout history, human societies have tried to establish rules that regulate reproductive behaviors in order to reproduce themselves. Marriage and family are institutions that contain such regulations. Although marriage and family have historical and social diversity in terms of their functions and structures, their existence has been universal. Marriage and family has been a key social institution for all times and all societies for many functions, especially for reproduction. As Metaj – Stojanova (2017: 180) states "the reproductive function of the family in all historical stages of human society's development has always been and continues to remain one of its key functions. This function derives from the need for self-preservation and continuation of mankind."

However, there may be socioeconomic, cultural and political barriers that restrict human reproductive behavior. For example, there may be situations that prohibit or make it difficult for inter-racial or inter-social class marriages. On the other hand, some people may prefer to remain single due to certain special circumstances. However, such situations are exceptional situations in general human history. Exceptional situations can occur in the

present as in the past. Thus, what we mean by saying that delaying marriage to the 30s is unnatural is that it is contrary to the general trends in human history.

Historically, the age at reproduction is largely dependent on the age at marriage (Anderton et al. 1987). Delaying marriage to the 30s is a risk in terms of both restricting the general society's capacity to reproduce itself and especially in terms of running counter to women's biological clocks. It is generally known that men have longer-term capacities in terms of reproductive behavior. In the marriage market, men will prefer their spouses to be younger, more attractive and more fertile. This creates a mechanism that works against women. This mechanism, which is related to women's biological clocks, is especially important in two dimensions: First, late marriage both restricts childbearing behavior and makes this behavior risky. Second, late marriage can also have a meaning that reduces women's attractiveness in the marriage market. Even if the same risk applies to men, statistics indicate that it is a lower risk in practice (Dessy & Djebbari 2005).

As is the case today, human societies in the past have faced various risks such as wars, natural disasters, poverty, etc. Against all these risks, societies have developed various marriage strategies such as endogamy, exogamy, monogamy or polygamy, but these strategies have not prevented them from marriages and reproductive behaviors. Based on this general tendency, it is reasonable to argue that delaying marriage is against historical human nature. Of course, the argument that late marriage is an individual choice will object to this. Such objections will be discussed later lines of the paper.

b) *Contrary to human rights*: In general, in modern societies, the process of marriage and establishing a family is accepted as a private life problem that individuals will solve according to their own means. The human rights approach, which is relatively a new dimension brought by modernity, has the same tendency. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) represents the first attempt of this approach. UDHR Article 16 says that:

1. "*Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution.*
2. *Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses.*
3. *The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State*." (URL-1).

As seen, article 16 clearly acknowledges marriage and founding a family as a matter of human rights. According to its wording, marriage takes place between a man and a woman at a marriageable age. Although the article does not provide any concrete definition on what marriageable age is and what family means, it sets up the principle that all men and women, without any limitations due to race, nationality or religion have the right to create, enjoy and maintain marriage, without any unnecessary interferences.

This principle was further elaborated by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) in 1966. On the other hand, although a sound similar to UDHR, The European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) is built on different words that may lead to unconventional interpretations of the right to marry and found a family. It goes as the following:

> "*Article 12: Everyone has the right to marry and to have a family. The exercise of this right is closely linked with the right to respect for private and family life protected by Article 8. This right is protected by national laws which are very diverse and can go beyond the traditional conception of the family by authorising marriage between two persons of the same sex, or adoption by same-sex couples*" (URL-2).

Unlike the UDHE, the ECHR uses the expression "everyone" instead of the expression "men and women". Thus the ECHR implies that marriage of same sex people might be acceptable if approved by national laws. Thus a large number of law scholars discuss whether or not international human rights law should be interpreted to include a right for same-sex couples to marry (Gerber, Tay and Sifris 2014). It is beyond the aim of this paper to go into such a discussion. What is important to emphasize here is that all those international conventions point out the responsibilities of the state and society only once a family is established. So it is clear that international human rights conventions recognize the right to marry and that the decisions of the parties to marry should be based on free will. Yet they do not impose any duties on the state and/or society before marriage takes place. The family is considered an institution that must be protected by the state only after it is established.

The fundamental question here is: what kind of right is the right to marry and found a family? Is it like the right to life or like the right to speech? This question is important because it implies two different things. The right to speech is up to the will of a person. S/he may or may not want to use this right depending on whether s/he has something to say. But the right to life does not have the same feature.

In other words, is the right to marry and found a family a right that an individual can use if they want to, and not if they do not want to, or is it a right that they should be able to use as soon as they decide? The argument of this article is in favor of the latter. The right to marry and found a family cannot be reduced to the level of the right to speech; on the contrary, it is like the right to life or the right to education. Just as an individual cannot be deprived of the right to education due to poverty, race, etnicity, religion etc., they cannot be deprived of the right to marry for the same reason. If young people are structurally forced to or mentally manipulated to marry late, then their right to marry is violated. Thus society and the state must assume responsibility in this regard.

c) *Contrary to the interests of society*: Young people are now almost not getting married before the age of 30's and this is considered normal. However, this situation deeply affects the demographic structure and family structure of the country. In other words, late marriage leads to decreased birth rates and an aging population, which both harms economic productivity and contributes to straining the country's retirement systems.

Statistical data show a significant increase in the age at first marriage for both sexes across the OECD. In the early 1990s, the average age at first marriage for women in most OECD countries was somewhere between 22 and 27, while the average age at first marriage for men was between 24 and 30. By 2020, these averages appear to have risen to between 27 and 33 for women and 29 and 35 for men in almost all OECD countries (OECD Family Database). Currently, the average age at first marriage for women across OECD countries is now 30.7, while for men it is 33.1. Based on these data, it is possible to predict that the average age at first marriage will increase further in the future. OECD Family Database shows that, despite common trends, there are also significant differences between countries in the age at first marriage for individuals. For example, the average age at first marriage for both women and men is very high in the Mediterranean and Scandinavian countries. In this context, it is particularly striking that in Spain and Sweden the average age of women is almost 35, while the average age of men is over 36.

Among OECD countries, Turkiye is (for now) among the lowest countries in terms of average age at first marriage. However, as of 2020, the average age at first marriage for women in Turkey is 25.2 and for men, 28.0, which is quite high compared to the past (OECD Family Database). If preventive measures are not put in place, it seems likely that the average age at first marriage in Turkiye will rise to 35+ years, like in Scandinavian countries.

The most important effect of an increase in the average age at first marriage in a country will be the decrease in both the marriage rate and the fertility rate in that country. Indeed, a significant decrease has been observed in crude marriage rates across the OECD. This decrease has developed in parallel with the increase in the average age of those getting married. However, as observed in the average age at first marriage, there are also significant differences between countries in crude marriage rates.

In some countries, such as Ireland, Italy, Portugal and Spain, crude marriage rates were very low at less than 2 marriages per 1,000 people in 2020, while in others, such as Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania and Turkiye, rates were almost three times higher at around 6 per 1,000 people (OECD 2024). However, even in Turkiye, the crude marriage rate felt from 6.6 in 2019 to 5.8 in 2020. Still, while the crude marriage rate in Turkiye remains better than in many other countries, a significant downward trend is evident.

The most striking effect of all these trends is undoubtedly reflected in total fertility rates. The total fertility rate, as defined by the OECD (2024), is the average number of children born per woman over a lifetime, assuming no female mortality during the reproductive years, and taking into account current age-specific fertility rates. It is calculated by summing age-specific fertility rates defined at five-year intervals. Assuming no change in net migration or mortality, a total fertility rate of 2.1 children per woman provides broad population stability ("replacement rate"). From this perspective, it is immediately obvious that fertility has also decreased in OECD countries in recent decades. Indeed, while the average number of children per woman of reproductive age was 3.3 in 1960, this number fell to 1.5 in 2022 (OECD 2024). As the OECD (2024) emphasizes, the decline in fertility rates is particularly evident in Colombia, Costa Rica, Korea, Mexico and Türkiye, where an average of four to five children per woman were previously born.

Of course, all these demographic changes are too complex and multidimensional to be explained by a single cause. However, there is no doubt that the age of first marriage reaching the 30's (late marriage) has a serious role in these changes. As mentioned before, age of reproduction is strongly correlated with age of first marriage. Of course, it is not necessary to be married to reproduce. Indeed, it is known that in contemporary society, people often turn to cohabitation and having children out of wedlock instead of marriage. In England, for example, while only 6% of registered births were out of wedlock in 1960, this rate exceeded 51.3% in 2021. This rate is 62.2% in France, 53.3% in the Netherlands, 58.5% in Norway (URL-3). This result indicates the rise in popularity of cohabitation (SIRC 2008: 18).

Although cohabitation has become something that is now socially accepted, single motherhood is still seen as a social problem (SIRC 2008:18). Indeed, the literature is full of studies emphasizing the risks and harms that having children out of wedlock poses for both the mother and the child. Having a child out of wedlock, for example, means that the single mother will face difficulties such as academic failure, poverty, stress, exclusion and loneliness (Zimmerman 1992: 424). On the other hand, changes in family composition have at least three alarming effects on children: rising poverty rates, rising income inequality, and harming children's growth and development (Haskins 2015: 131). Since the 1980s, children in fatherless families have been four to five times more likely to be poor than children in married families (Haskins 2015: 131). Mother-only families not only affect children's current economic circumstances and well-being, but also their economic circumstances as adults. Fatherlessness has negative consequences for children, particularly when it comes to high school graduation rates, social-emotional adjustment, and adult mental health (Haskins 2015: 133).

Even if people continue to have children outside of marriage, it can be said that this situation affecting family structure does not prevent fertility rates from falling rapidly. Marriage is still the most convenient and safe way for childbearing behavior. Delaying the age of marriage, on the one hand, promotes cohabitation (OECD 2011: 24), and on the other hand, decreases fertility rates. The decline in fertility rates can lead to consequences such as population aging, shrinking household size, decreasing the number of working individuals, increasing the number of retired people and therefore increasing retirement payments and health and care expenses. Faced with such problems, societies have no choice but to import population from abroad (receive immigrants). From 1996 up to now, the number of countries trying to increase the number of international immigrants was concentrated in high-income countries and increased from 2% to 24% (United Nations 2013: 8). Immigrants coming from developing countries to Western countries tend to remain isolated from the host society due to their different ethnic, religious, social, economic and cultural differences and generally live in narrower communities where they can preserve these differences (Cliquet 2003: 20). Therefore, it can be said that reinforcing the population through migration creates new problems that are very difficult to solve.

All these facts indicate that late marriage should be considered as an important social problem, as it threatens the country's population balance as well as economic and cultural structures. Additionally, late marriage increases health risks in society. It is known that

women who marry after the age of 30 face increased risks of infertility and pregnancy complications (Balbo et al. 2013). The effect of reduced fertility is not the whole story. Late marriage not only reduces a woman's fertility but can also cause abnormalities in children. Giving birth at a late age can lead to mental problems in children. This problem is not only relevant for older mothers, but also for older fathers. There are research results showing that children of older men over 40 are 5.75 times more likely to have autism spectrum disorder than children of men under 30 (Karamat 2016).

The Source of the Problem

Late marriage is actually a consequence rather than a cause. It can be said that the source of the problem of late marriage lies in the changes brought about by modernization. Characterized by industrialization, urbanization, educational advancement and cultural changes, modernization prioritizes education, especially for women, prolongs the period of youth dependency and delays marriage.

On the other hand, urban communities, which are the centers of modernization, offer various opportunities and encourage individualism. The transition from collectivist rural communities to urban environments emphasizes personal achievement rather than family obligations. City dwellers often prioritize career and self-fulfillment, delaying marriage to achieve individual goals (Lesthaeghe 2014). In modern economies, high costs of living and competitive labor markets require long-term financial preparation. Young adults postpone marriage until they reach stability, unlike in agricultural societies where early marriage supports labor needs (Cherlin 2009).

Modernization promotes gender equality, allowing women to enter the workforce and challenge traditional roles. The dual-income model reshapes marital dynamics, with couples often living together before marriage. This change delays formal unions as partners seek egalitarian relationships (Giddens 1992).

Modern societies, based on the driving force of individualism and secularism, prioritize personal satisfaction and romantic harmony over societal expectations. Secularism encourages a variety of family structures, including cohabitation, by reducing religious pressures for early marriage (Van de Kaa 1987).

The dimensions of modernization mentioned above collectively lead to the prevalence of late marriages in society. While these may be influential factors, neither urbanization, nor individualization, nor educational and career goals, nor the search for economic stability

inherently necessitate the delay of marriage. However, certain cultural/mental patterns may be the main factor that gradually institutionalizes late marriage.

Firstly, the discourse of modernization tends to separate life activities from one another. Dichotomies such as private and public spheres, work and leisure, work and education, career and marriage take on a mutually exclusive character. However, none of these have to be separate from the other. As in traditional society, work and leisure, education and work, career and marriage can coexist and intertwine.

Secondly, in today's modern societies, including Turkish society, the factor that most supports late marriage is that marriage has been made to have an exaggerated and unwarranted complexity and cost. So much so that today, marriage is seen as a stage that can only be realized after completing education, completing military service, settling into a job that brings sufficient income, and completing marriage preparations. With the provocation of the capitalist system, marriage preparations have become a costly process that knows no bounds.

Today, the cost of marriage begins even before the marriage proposal is made. Even the courtship period requires expensive and flashy ceremonies. An ordinary marriage proposal no longer satisfies anyone. On the contrary, the marriage proposal is expected to have a special, extraordinary, and surprising dimension, and this proposal alone is a huge cost. The engagement period also requires similar surprises and ceremonies. Couples who pass these stages and reach the marriage stage have to buy or rent a residence separate from their family's residence and furnish it with expensive furniture and items. When many expenses such as wedding hall rental, wedding dresses and groom's clothes, photo shoots, live music, refreshments, etc. are taken into account, it bomes clear that the marriage itself requires large amounts of money. Of course, the expense of the honeymoon after the wedding is another item. Not to mention the jewelry to be worn at the engagement and/or wedding.

Now it is obvious that cultural/mental patterns of the society has made the process of marriage and starting a family a very expensive and difficult process in today's society. This difficulty may be aimed primarily at making divorce more difficult. However, statistical data indicates that this is not very useful. So why is marriage still so difficult? And why should people delay marriage?

When these issues are considered together, it can also be concluded that the root cause of the problem of late marriage is modernization. Modernization is an effective force that no

one can resist in terms of discourse. No one seems willing to give up on modernization. On the contrary, in Turkiye, both the state and the society show great desire and effort for modernization and simultaneously advocate for the preservation of traditions against the negative effects of modernization. However, it is hard to say that this effort is based on a certain systematic program and theory. For this reason, we are witnessing vital processes that are almost based on competition between modernization and tradition and therefore full of contradictions.

Let us remember Hart's (1923) definition of social problem. The perception of a social problem also brings with it a belief in the necessity of taking action/doing something. If delayed marriage is a social problem, it is necessary to touch on which resources can be used to solve the problem and what can be done. Delayed marriages are one of the contradictory/tense processes between modernization and tradition. In this case, is a choice between modernization and tradition necessary to purify from contradictions?

While the classical modernization theory sees an inevitable opposition between tradition and modernity, the view that these two are not mutually exclusive has become widespread in contemporary sociology literature (Petković 2007: 25). In fact, in most societies, tradition and modernity are intertwined and affect each other. One approach to this interaction is to follow Anderson's (1991) thesis of "imagined communities" and argue that tradition is invented/constructed by modern societies in the service of new social and political powers (Hobsbawm 1992: 4-5). Another approach (selection of tradition) is to accept that instead of inventing traditions that did not exist in the past, the selection and use of appropriate and useful ones from real past traditions is the common form (Farkas 2016: 35).

In the face of the problem of late marriage, is a choice between modernization and tradition necessary to purify contradictions, as is the case in Turkish society? Focusing on late marriages, this article will now present a draft proposal on this issue, based on the tradition-selective approach.

An Alternative Proposal for the Issue of Late Marriage[**]

In the context of changes in the family, one of the issues that must be resolved first is what needs to be done to eliminate the current complexity and difficulty of marriage. The argument here is that tradition can be a source of inspiration and solution for us in this regard. It is known that the government in Turkiye has initiated the practice of "dowry fund aid" as a

[**]This proposal was also shared, by the author, in a conference at Sakarya University (see Çakı 2021).

traditional value to contribute to the marriage of young people. In this context, taking out consumer loans from banks is also an alternative. However, none of these are of a nature that eliminates the complexity and high cost of marriage in society; on the contrary, they have a reinforcing effect on this situation.

This article argues that marriage should be simplified and streamlined, while at the same time arguing that delaying marriage limits social benefits and human rights. In this context, it is argued that the reconstruction of Islamic tradition can provide a way out. It is obvious that the Islamic tradition encourages marriage and starting a family. In fact it is true for almost all religions including Judeo-Christian religions (Xu et al. 2005: 589). The important point here is that the Islamic tradition foresees that marriage and its ceromony should be simple, plain and far from ostentation. According to this tradition, the basic condition of marriage is that the couples who are going to get married must freely declare their desire to marry and at least two witnesses must be present at the marriage contract (Sharmin & Azad 2018: 30). Marriage is such a simple and straightforward process. However, depending on the social status and customs of the individuals, there may be additional activities such as hosting meals and organizing entertainment for the members of the community. However, it is essential that even such additional activities remain away from luxury and ostentation. Therefore, according to Islamic tradition, a marriage can be realized at a very low cost even under today's conditions.

The most important feature of Islamic tradition regarding marriage and starting a family is that especially the first marriages are within the responsibility of the community. From Islamic point of view, in adddition to the fact that marriage is a religious duty and a moral safeguard it is also a social commitment. Within a marriage, both man and woman have rights and obligations to each other (Meraj 2018: 4). The verse in the Quran, "*Marry those of you who are single and those of your slaves and maidservants who are good*" (An-Nur 32), shows that marriage is not only a duty and responsibility of individuals but also of the society/state. It is not correct to understand this duty and responsibility as just mediation/matchmaking. On the contrary, it should be considered that the costs of marriage for singles and the conditions required for their livelihood (employment) are also a duty of the society/state. Therefore, the Islamic tradition requires a budget item to be allocated for the expenses of marrying singles when budget planning is made in the state administration. Dowry fund aid is not the equivalent of this state responsibility. Today, municipalities provide many necessary supports to families during the funeral process. They can also do this for the

marriage of singles. Or, this responsibility can be undertaken by the ministry responsible for the family.

Possible Conservative Objections and Resistance Points

It is worth repeating at this point: Delaying marriage is against historical human nature and rights as well as against the benefit of society. This problem can be partly overcome by reviving the Islamic tradition. However, there will be many objections to these views.

First of all, are student life and married life necessarily mutually exclusive? How will young people who marry while studying solve their housing and livelihood problems? Does having children while studying create other problems in young people's lives?

Let us state right away that all of these so-called problems might be solved after the perspective on marriage changes. For example, in regards to the housing problem, even if students are single, they still need housing. They usually meet these needs in student houses and dormitories. Housing options suitable for married students can also find their place in the market. Special 1+1 or 2+1 housing options can be created for married students within student dormitories as proposed by Ellis (1961) and analyzed by Dag-um et al. (2024). Similarly, municipalities can offer special social housing opportunities for married students. Both housing needs and the problem of subsistence income can be met within the existing possibilities. Students already receive pocket money from their families to cover their expenses. Students also benefit from various scholarships and student loan opportunities. Young male and female students who get married can continue to benefit from all these opportunities. In fact, when this family support from both parties is combined with scholarship and student loan opportunities, resources to support a nuclear family are provided. Married young people can live a simple but real married life under these conditions until they complete their education and find employment.

There is no reason to think that young people being married will negatively affect their academic performance. On the contrary, by cooperating and sharing the work, young people can successfully continue both their marriages and their academic lives. As Dag-um et al. suggest "dedication and motivation drive students to succeed academically while managing marital responsibilities fostering a supportive environment within the family". Potential conflicts between student spouses might be overcome by "effective time management strategies, such as collaborative planning and prioritization". Such strategies may improve "communication and mutual support within the marital relationship, fostering a more

harmonious household and improving academic performance and marital satisfaction" (Dagum et al. 2024: 391). During this period, having a baby can be postponed until graduation. However, even if the baby is born, practices similar to maternity leave in work life can be put into effect in academic life, and even nursery services can be provided in the dormitories or social housing where married students stay.

Despite all these explanations and answers provided against late marriage, there will be of course other resistances and obstacles. In Turkish society, parents will probably be at the forefront of these resistances and obstacles. They will not want their children to get married while they are still studying and before they have a job. They will also oppose a marriage that is outside of their control and consent. Moreover, they will want to have a wedding that is "befitting of their moment and glory" for their children. Most parents will probably have concerns that marriages to be made during studying years will not be based on sufficiently accurate choices and may involve certain risks. On the other hand, young people themselves may not be keen on the idea of marriage without delay outlined above. They will want their marriage to be special in every way and to remain as a special day in their memories.

There is no doubt that the concerns of both parents and young people mentioned above are the products of materialist values and consumer culture on the one hand, and security concerns on the other. These concerns are constantly fed and provoked by capitalism because they suit its interests. Marriage without delay within the framework envisioned above is detrimental to capitalism and consumer culture. The concerns of capitalism can be put aside. However, we cannot ignore the elimination of the concerns of parents and young people. Therefore, it is necessary to clearly explain the benefits that marriage without delay will provide to all actors.

Based on the above discussions, it can be concluded that the dominance of marriage without delay in society will increase fertility and thus lead to a more balanced population. In addition, marriage without delay can provide socio-economic benefits at both individual and societal levels.

Regarding the concerns mentioned above, first of all, marriage within the framework envisaged here is a natural extension of the Turkish-Islamic tradition. Late marriage is an imposition of Western-based capitalism and modernism, outside the natural development of Turkish/Islamic culture. Marriage without delay is a practice that is more in line with this

culture. In addition, as emphasized above, marriage without delay is a practice that is more suitable for historical human nature and the benefit of society. Public awareness can be created on these issues by using the media and other means of communication, including marriage seminars.

Secondly, marriage without delay does not require excluding the parent and kinship systems. On the contrary, it does require the support of the parent and kinship systems. Indeed, Turkish-Islamic culture attaches great importance to parental consent and support in marriages. Continuing this tradition will both provide numerous benefits to the marriages of young people and allow parents to eliminate their security concerns.

The desire of young people for their weddings to be very special and to have a special place in their memories can also be satisfied by taking inspiration from some other traditions. Circumcision wedding practices can provide inspiration in this context. As it is known, the majority of male children are circumcised shortly after birth, usually within the first 6 months. However, the circumcision ceremony itself is performed after the child grows up to 8-10 years. Marriage can be held in the first stage, just like this, with a simple and plain wedding. After the young people complete their education, get employed and reach a certain level of welfare, they can have a wedding full of nice and special memories.

Finally, the dominance of marriage without delay in society will also enable both parents and young people to get rid of the feelings and concerns that disturb them in their subconscious. Late marriage does not mean late sexual life. In most cases, young people are sexually active even if they remain single in terms of status. Both having Islamic beliefs and being involved in sexual activities outside of marriage condemn them to a relationship with the discomfort created by a sense of guilt/sinfulness in their subconscious. Many parents also have these concerns, especially for their daughters. The practice of marriage without delay will largely eliminate all these concerns. In addition, even if the parents live far away from them, they will be more confident about the safety of their children who marry because they will feel that the young couples will take care of each other.

Possible Secularist Objections

The first reaction from secularist circles is that this article is drawing on a worldview. Even if the author does not have such a motivation, this reaction is misplaced because this criticism is itself the product of a certain worldview. Besides, there is nothing wrong with drawing on a worldview. In their efforts to explain phenomena, theorists/researchers do not naively observe

the world as it is. Theorists develop their explanations within the framework of a paradigm. In a sense, theories are attempts to confirm our paradigms (Babbie 2001: 26) which broadly refers to a worldview and reflects a set of values, beliefs, and ideologies, sometimes conscious and sometimes unconscious.

A second reaction might ask whether this article provides sufficient evidence to support the claim that late marriage is a social problem. It is not fair to expect a strictly positivist proof on this issue. The idea of proof has been left behind in the social sciences. What is now expected of social scientific studies is not proof but sufficiently supporting evidence. In this regard, it is thought that the statistical data presented in the context of marriage rates, fertility rates and age at first marriage and the literature reviews on the effects of these data on the socio-economic structure of society provide sufficient support. Of course it is not impossible to find even further evidence. What has been presented here is accepted sufficient within the limits of the paper.

The main point of criticism that might be considered more important is the view that late marriage is not a social problem but an 'individual choice'. This criticism, inspired by the dominant discourse, may suggest that the approach adopted in this article ignores the individual's right not to marry and proposes a paternalistic model that would invite the state's direct intervention in individual choices.

The view that late marriage is an individual choice is itself quite controvertial. Although this article does not completely deny that late marriage may be a conscious individual choice for *some people*, it argues that late marriage as an individual choice is not as common as it is thought to be. For most people, 'individual choice' is just an illusion or a concept they resort to in order to rationalize their helplessness.

Whether individual choice is *truly* individual is part of a deep and old academic debate on the structure-agency dichotomy. Even those who accept that agency exists acknowledge that it is mediated by biological, social, economic, and cultural factors. While Marxism, for instance, argues that capitalist systems constrain choice by perpetuating class-based inequalities, postmodernism argues that individual identities and choices are fluid, fragmented, and shaped by discourse (Ritzer 2000). This paper aimed at showing how discourses on timing of marriage differ in presenting it as a social problem or as an individual choice. The paper also challenged the dominant discourse accepting it as an individual choice. This challenge is essentially no different than Bourdieu's (1984) argument that social class

and cultural conditioning unconsciously shape preferences and choices. Similar arguments can be confidently offered regarding body images and body modification behaviors of the people of modern time (Featherstone 1991).

Contrary to the criticisms mentioned above, the approach adopted in this article does not suggest direct state intervention in individual choices but emphasizes the responsibility of the state (and society) to facilitate marriage and provide greater support for those who want to marry without delay. Examples of structural measures to facilitate marriage were already given above (housing, employment and scholarships opportunities specific to married students etc.).

Another criticism that may come from secularist circles may be that the cliam that Islamic tradition is a usable tool in solving the problem of late marriage is contrary to the principle of cultural pluralism and the fundamental values of the secular social order. In this regard, it is beyond the scope of this article to produce a universal solution that would be valid for all societies. In fact, this is possible for nobody. Even if societies experience a common problem, they do not experience it in the same way and same scope. Therefore, each society should produce unique solutions that are suitable for its own structural conditions and cultural codes. This article points out that Islamic traditions can contribute to the solution of the problem of late marriage and that, in this context, a society-based mental transformation is necessary together with state-based structural measures aimed at facilitating and simplifying marriage. It is suggested that this transformation be carried out through social movements like "The Marriage Movement A Statement of Principles" which was signed in 2000 in the USA by 113 prominent family scholars "who outlined the need to promote activities to renew a 'marriage culture,' the cultural focus on lifelong, heterosexual marriage as an institution central to family life and parenthood" (Heath, Randles & Avishai 2016). Thus the claim that a proposal aimed at protecting marriage and family would contradict cultural pluralism is a forced claim.

CONCLUSION

In perceptions of social problems, the value systems that are taken as a reference are a determining factor. In modern societies, discourses on the timing of marriage portray early marriage as a pathological situation, while late marriage is generally praised or at least evaluated as an adaptive response to modern living conditions.

This article argued that late marriage is a serious social problem, although it is not viewed so on the public agenda. It argued that the source of the problem is modernization, but in Turkiye, while determination is shown in modernization efforts, there is also a strong concern for preserving traditions.

The mutually exclusive construction of the relationship between modernity and tradition leads to many new problems in today's society, far from responding to needs. In this article, late marriages of young people beyond the age of 30 are discussed as one of these problems. Delay in marriage, on the one hand, disrupts the demographic structure of the society; on the other hand, it causes violations of basic human needs and rights.

In overcoming the family changes and problems that have entered our agenda with modernization, policies inspired by tradition can produce creative and effective solutions. For this reason, it is not possible to apply tradition completely as it was in the past. Tradition needs to be updated according to the conditions of the day and creatively and selectively integrated into life.

Late marriage, which can be considered as one of the serious problems of today, is an important example that can be considered in this context. As outlined above, the marriage of young people without delay can be facilitated by reviving of traditions that challange current cultural/mental patterns. For this, in addition to some structural measures, a social change of mentality is needed. On the one hand, the state being ready to undertake its responsibilities on this issue, on the other hand, the emergence of a social movement can change everything.

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Makale Bilgileri/Article Information

Etik Beyan:	Bu çalışmanın hazırlanma sürecinde bilimsel ve etik ilkelere uyulduğu ve yararlanılan tüm çalışmaların kaynakçada belirtildiği beyan edilir.	***Ethical Statement:***	It is declared that scientific and ethical principles have been followed while carrying out and writing this study and that all the sources used have been properly cited.
Çıkar Çatışması:	Çalışmada kişiler veya kurumlar arası çıkar çatışması bulunmamaktadır.	***Conflict of Interest:***	The authors declare that declare no conflict of interest.
Yazar Katkı Beyanı:	Çalışmanın tamamı yazar tarafından oluşturulmuştur.	***Author Contribution Declaration:***	The entire study was created by the author.
Mali Destek:	Çalışma için herhangi bir kurum veya projeden mali destek alınmamıştır.	***Financial Support:***	The study received no financial support from any institution or project.
Yapay Zekâ Kullanımı:	Bu çalışmada herhangi bir yapay zekâ tabanlı araç veya uygulama kullanılmamıştır.	***Use of Artificial Intelligence***	This study did not utilize any artificial intelligence-based tools or applications.
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