

The Factors Influencing Youth Marriage Abstinence in Saudi Arabia: A Comprehensive Review

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ABSTRACT

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Marriage abstinence among Saudi youth has emerged as a significant sociological phenomenon affecting over 66% of Saudis aged 15-34 who remain single. This review synthesizes existing literature to examine the multifaceted factors contributing to delayed marriage patterns in Saudi Arabia. Through analysis of demographic trends, economic barriers, social transformations, and cultural shifts, this study identifies key determinants influencing youth marriage decisions. The review reveals that economic factors, including unemployment, housing crises, and high dowry costs, constitute primary barriers to marriage. Social factors such as changing gender roles, educational pursuits, and evolving family structures further compound these challenges. The findings indicate a complex interplay between traditional values and modern aspirations, creating tension in marriage expectations. This comprehensive analysis contributes to understanding contemporary marriage patterns in Saudi society and provides insights for policy development addressing youth marriage concerns.

Contribution/Originality: This study documents the current marriage abstinence trend among Saudi youth by providing a comprehensive analysis of the economic, social, and cultural factors influencing delayed marriage, thereby offering valuable insights for policymakers to address the challenges faced by young Saudis in forming marital unions.

1. Introduction

Marriage represents one of the most fundamental social institutions in Saudi Arabian society, serving as both a religious obligation and cultural cornerstone that ensures lineage continuity and adherence to social norms (Alhareth et al., 2015). Traditionally viewed as "the most important event in one's life," marriage in Saudi Arabia has historically facilitated the transition into adulthood while satisfying innate human needs for companionship and family formation. However, contemporary Saudi society faces an

unprecedented challenge: increasing rates of marriage abstinence among its youth population ([Al-Bashira, 2013](#)).

Recent demographic studies reveal alarming trends in marriage patterns across the Kingdom. Statistics indicate that over 66% of Saudis aged 15-34 remain unmarried, with notable gender disparities evident in these figures. Among this demographic, 75.6% of males have never married compared to 56% of females, while among those aged 25-34, approximately 43% of women and 23% of men remain unmarried ([General Authority for Statistics Saudi Arabia, 2023](#); [Al-Shehri, 2024](#)). These statistics represent a dramatic shift from historical marriage patterns, where men typically married between ages 15-20 and women between 14-18. Contemporary expectations now see men marrying between 30-35 years of age and women between 25-30 years ([General Authority for Statistics Saudi Arabia, 2023](#)).

This demographic transformation reflects broader societal changes occurring within Saudi Arabia as the nation undergoes rapid modernization and economic diversification. The phenomenon of marriage abstinence, previously unknown in traditional Saudi society, has emerged as a complex social issue influenced by multiple interconnected factors. The increasing prevalence of delayed marriages poses significant implications for individual wellbeing, family structures, and broader societal development ([Situmorang, 2015](#)).

The Saudi family system, traditionally characterized by extended kinship networks and early marriage arrangements, currently experiences substantial transformation. These changes manifest in preferences for nuclear family structures, increased emphasis on individual choice in partner selection, and evolving gender roles that challenge conventional marriage paradigms. The intersection of traditional values with modern aspirations creates unprecedented tensions in young people's approaches to marriage and family formation ([Al-Khraif et al., 2020](#)).

Marriage abstinence in Saudi Arabia cannot be attributed to a single cause but rather emerges from the complex interplay of economic, social, cultural, and psychological factors. Economic challenges, including unemployment, housing shortages, and inflated dowry costs, create substantial barriers to marriage. Simultaneously, social transformations involving educational advancement, changing gender roles, and evolving lifestyle expectations contribute to delayed marriage decisions ([Abdelsattar et al., 2025](#)).

Understanding the factors influencing youth marriage abstinence requires comprehensive analysis of the multidimensional challenges facing Saudi society. This review aims to synthesize existing literature to identify, analyze, and contextualize the primary factors contributing to marriage abstinence among Saudi youth. By examining demographic trends, economic barriers, social transformations, and cultural shifts, this study seeks to provide a holistic understanding of contemporary marriage challenges in Saudi Arabia.

2. Methods

This comprehensive review employed a systematic approach to analyze existing literature on marriage abstinence among Saudi youth. The methodology involved extensive analysis of scholarly articles, demographic surveys, and research studies from

major databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Medline. Primary sources included peer-reviewed publications, government statistical reports, and academic dissertations, covering studies published between 2000 and 2024. Keywords such as "marriage abstinence," "Saudi Arabia," "youth marriage," "economic factors," "social change," and "demographic trends" guided a thorough search to capture diverse economic, social, cultural, and demographic influences on marriage decisions. Data sources included the General Authority for Statistics Saudi Arabia, academic journals focusing on Middle Eastern sociology, and specialized studies on Saudi family dynamics. The review employed both quantitative demographic data and qualitative research findings to provide a multifaceted understanding of marriage abstinence factors. Research synthesis involved thematic analysis of identified factors influencing marriage abstinence, categorized into economic, social, cultural, and psychological dimensions. The methodology ensured comprehensive coverage of diverse perspectives while maintaining focus on empirically supported findings. This approach enabled identification of both immediate causes and underlying structural factors contributing to marriage abstinence among Saudi youth.

3. Demographic Trends and Marriage Patterns

Contemporary Saudi Arabia exhibits significant demographic shifts that fundamentally alter traditional marriage patterns. Historical data from the Saudi Vital Register reveals declining marriage rates over recent decades, with the percentage of married women aged 15 and above decreasing from 60.16% in 1990 to 54.45% in 2010. Similarly, marriage rates among men aged 15 and above declined from 58.66% in 1990 to 49.64% in 2010 ([Al-Bashira, 2013](#)).

These demographic trends reflect broader societal transformations occurring within Saudi Arabia. The transition from a traditional, kinship-based society to a more urbanized, economically diversified nation has profound implications for marriage patterns. Young people increasingly delay marriage as they pursue higher education, establish careers, and navigate complex economic challenges ([Al-Rabid, 2019](#)).

The gender disparity in marriage abstinence reveals important sociological dimensions of contemporary Saudi society. While both men and women experience delayed marriage, the factors influencing their decisions differ significantly. Men often cite economic concerns and inability to meet financial obligations as primary barriers, while women frequently emphasize educational pursuits, career development, and changing expectations regarding marriage partners ([Abdelsattar et al., 2025](#)).

Regional variations in marriage patterns further complicate the demographic landscape. Urban areas typically exhibit higher rates of marriage abstinence compared to rural regions, reflecting the influence of urbanization on family structures and individual choices. The concentration of educational institutions and employment opportunities in urban centers creates environments where delayed marriage becomes more socially acceptable and practically necessary ([Al-Nakbi, 2019](#)).

The demographic implications of marriage abstinence extend beyond individual choices to encompass broader societal concerns. Declining marriage rates potentially affect population growth patterns, family formation processes, and intergenerational relationships. These demographic shifts require comprehensive policy responses

addressing both immediate barriers and long-term societal implications (Al-Khraif et al., 2020).

4. Results

4.1. Economic Factors Influencing Marriage Abstinence

Economic considerations represent perhaps the most significant barrier to marriage among Saudi youth. The complex interplay of unemployment, housing costs, and inflation creates substantial financial obstacles that prevent young people from establishing independent households and supporting families.

4.1.1. Unemployment and Limited Employment Opportunities

Unemployment constitutes a critical factor preventing young Saudi men from marriage. Despite the Kingdom's substantial oil wealth, employment opportunities for Saudi nationals remain limited, particularly in the private sector. Statistics indicate that only 7.1% of private sector employees are Saudi nationals, while the sector employs over seven million expatriate workers. This employment structure creates significant challenges for young men seeking stable income necessary for marriage (Al-Gharib, 2005).

The mismatch between educational preparation and available employment opportunities exacerbates unemployment challenges. Many graduates possess qualifications in fields with limited demand while sectors requiring skilled workers face shortages. This disconnect between education and employment needs creates a generation of educated but unemployed young people unable to meet traditional marriage expectations (Ajami et al., 2015).

Cultural preferences for government employment further complicate employment challenges. Many families prefer their daughters to marry men with secure government positions rather than private sector employees. This preference creates additional pressure on young men to obtain government employment, which remains highly competitive and limited in availability (Al-Khraif et al., 2020).

The psychological impact of unemployment extends beyond financial constraints to affect young people's self-confidence and readiness for marriage. Unemployed individuals often experience diminished self-worth and reluctance to assume family responsibilities, leading to voluntary marriage postponement until achieving financial stability (Al-Bashira, 2013).

4.1.2. Housing Crisis and Cost of Living

Housing represents a fundamental requirement for marriage that has become increasingly difficult to obtain in Saudi Arabia. The housing crisis creates substantial barriers for young couples seeking to establish independent households, forcing many to delay marriage until securing adequate accommodation (Abbas et al., 2024).

Recent studies indicate that 55% of young people require independent housing post-marriage and refuse to accept marriage unless couples can live independently. This requirement reflects both practical concerns about intergenerational conflict and

changing expectations regarding privacy and autonomy in married life. Only 30% express willingness to live temporarily with in-laws, while a mere 15% accept permanent multi-generational living arrangements (Banijamali & Sadeghi Fasaee, 2021). The cost of living increases compound housing challenges by reducing young people's ability to save for marriage-related expenses. Inflation rates in Saudi Arabia have fluctuated significantly, reaching 11.1% in 2008 and creating substantial financial pressure on families and individuals. Rising costs affect all aspects of marriage preparation, from housing deposits to wedding celebrations (Lashkari & Jahanbakhsh, 2023).

Geographic variations in housing costs create additional challenges. Urban areas, where employment opportunities concentrate, typically exhibit higher housing costs that exceed young people's financial capabilities. This geographic mismatch between employment opportunities and affordable housing creates difficult choices between career advancement and marriage feasibility (Lashkari & Jahanbakhsh, 2023).

4.1.3. High Dowry and Wedding Costs

The escalation of dowry and wedding costs represents a particularly problematic economic barrier to marriage in Saudi society. Traditional practices that once emphasized spiritual and social aspects of marriage have increasingly become displays of material wealth and social status, creating financial obstacles for many families (Alhajjaj et al., 2021).

Contemporary dowry expectations often include expensive jewelry, furniture, clothing, overseas trips, and elaborate wedding ceremonies. These requirements transform marriage from a spiritual and social union into what some observers describe as a "buying and selling process" that prioritizes material display over relationship quality (Al-Shahri et al., 2020).

The competitive nature of wedding celebrations creates additional pressure on families to meet or exceed social expectations. Parents often view their children's weddings as opportunities to demonstrate family status and success, leading to expenditures that exceed practical financial capabilities. This emphasis on material display particularly affects young men, who may resort to debt financing to meet dowry and wedding expectations. The long-term financial implications of expensive dowries and weddings affect married couples' economic stability. Young men who begin married life with substantial debt face ongoing financial stress that may strain marital relationships and limit family formation decisions. This financial burden creates a cycle where economic pressures continue to influence family development long after the initial marriage barriers are overcome (Puspita & Octariza, 2022).

Regional and international marriage patterns reflect the impact of dowry costs on marriage decisions. Some young Saudi men seek marriages with foreign women, where dowry expectations may be lower, while others delay marriage indefinitely rather than incur substantial debt. These responses demonstrate the significant influence of economic factors on fundamental life decisions and family formation processes (Al-Nakbi, 2019).

4.2. Social Factors Affecting Marriage Decisions

Social transformations within Saudi society create complex pressures that influence youth marriage decisions. The intersection of traditional values with modern aspirations generates tensions that affect individual choices and family dynamics.

4.2.1. Changing Gender Roles and Educational Pursuits

The expansion of women's education and workforce participation fundamentally alters traditional gender roles and marriage expectations. Saudi Arabia's commitment to women's education, beginning with the establishment of King Saud University as the first institution enabling Saudi women to pursue higher education, has created a generation of educated women with career aspirations ([Topal, 2019](#)).

The Saudi Vision 2030 emphasizes women's increased participation in the labor market, with targets to increase female workforce participation from 22% to 30%. This policy direction reflects recognition of women's economic potential while creating new dynamics in marriage relationships. Educated, employed women often seek partners who support their career goals and are willing to share household responsibilities ([Saudi Vision 2030, 2024](#)).

Women's educational and professional advancement affects partner selection criteria. Contemporary Saudi women frequently establish specific requirements regarding their potential husbands' education, career prospects, and attitudes toward women's employment. Studies indicate that 15% of unmarried women specify educational requirements for potential partners, while 11% require agreements regarding continued employment after marriage ([Al Khalifa et al., 2025](#)).

The changing role of women creates corresponding adjustments in men's expectations and readiness for marriage. Traditional breadwinner models face challenges as women become economically independent and expect partnership rather than dependency in marriage relationships. These evolving dynamics require renegotiation of traditional marriage roles and responsibilities ([Al Khalifa et al., 2025](#)).

4.2.2. Family Structure Transformation

The transition from extended to nuclear family structures significantly affects marriage patterns and decisions. Traditional Saudi families, characterized by multi-generational households and collective decision-making, increasingly give way to smaller, more autonomous family units. This transformation affects both marriage timing and relationship dynamics ([Ahmed, 2024](#)).

Nuclear family preferences create housing and independence requirements that complicate marriage decisions. Young couples increasingly seek residential independence rather than integration into extended family compounds. This preference necessitates greater financial resources and planning, contributing to marriage delays while couples accumulate necessary resources ([Ahmed, 2024](#)).

The diminishing role of extended family support networks affects marriage feasibility and stability. Traditional systems provided economic, social, and childcare support that facilitated early marriage and family formation. Contemporary nuclear family

preferences reduce access to these support systems, requiring couples to achieve greater self-sufficiency before marriage (Albanghali, 2023).

Intergenerational conflicts regarding marriage decisions reflect broader family structure changes. Older generations may prioritize traditional marriage arrangements and timing, while younger generations emphasize individual choice and personal readiness. These conflicts create additional stress and may contribute to marriage postponement as young people navigate family expectations and personal preferences (Albanghali, 2023).

4.2.3. Cultural Values and Social Expectations

The intersection of traditional cultural values with modern lifestyle aspirations creates complex pressures affecting marriage decisions. Saudi society maintains strong traditional values regarding family formation while simultaneously experiencing rapid social change that affects individual expectations and choices (Abbas et al., 2024).

Traditional marriage customs, including preferences for cousin marriage, tribal approval requirements, and family-controlled partner selection, continue to influence contemporary marriage decisions. However, these traditions increasingly conflict with young people's desires for personal choice and compatibility-based relationships (Abbas et al., 2024).

Social class considerations remain significant factors in marriage decisions, with families often restricting marriage options based on social status, tribal affiliation, and economic position. These restrictions limit potential partner pools and may contribute to marriage delays when suitable matches within acceptable social categories are unavailable (Al-Bashira, 2013).

The influence of Western cultural values, transmitted through education, media, and international exposure, affects young people's marriage expectations. Some youth develop preferences for individual freedom and delayed commitment that conflict with traditional marriage timing and arrangements. These cultural tensions require navigation between family expectations and personal aspirations (Zohra, 2023).

4.3. Psychological and Personal Factors

Individual psychological factors significantly influence marriage decisions among Saudi youth. Fear of responsibility, changing personal priorities, and psychological readiness affect young people's willingness to commit to marriage relationships.

4.3.1. Fear of Marriage Responsibilities

Contemporary Saudi youth often express anxiety regarding marriage responsibilities and potential relationship failure. Observations of divorce rates and marital conflict create apprehension about marriage commitment, leading some young people to delay or avoid marriage entirely (Abbas et al., 2024).

The perception of marriage as restrictive to personal freedom particularly affects young people who value independence and individual achievement. Some view marriage as potentially limiting career advancement, educational pursuits, or lifestyle choices. These

concerns lead to deliberate marriage postponement while individuals pursue personal goals and establish independence (Zohra, 2023).

Gender-specific fears affect men and women differently. Men often worry about their ability to provide financially and meet traditional breadwinner expectations, while women may fear losing career opportunities or personal autonomy. These gendered concerns reflect evolving social roles and expectations regarding marriage partnerships (Zohra, 2023).

4.3.2. Educational and Career Priorities

The emphasis on higher education and career development increasingly takes priority over early marriage among Saudi youth. University attendance and professional advancement require significant time and energy investment that may conflict with traditional marriage timing (Yabiku, 2005).

Educational institutions often fail to prepare students for marriage responsibilities, focusing primarily on academic and professional development. This educational approach may leave young people unprepared for relationship skills and family formation challenges, contributing to marriage avoidance or delay. Career establishment becomes a prerequisite for marriage consideration among many young people. Both men and women increasingly view professional stability as necessary before assuming family responsibilities. This prioritization extends marriage timing as individuals focus on educational completion and career development (Yabiku, 2005).

4.3.3. Social Pressures and Stigmatization

Unmarried women face particular social pressures and stigmatization that affect their psychological well-being and marriage decisions. Society often views unmarried women over certain ages negatively, creating stress and anxiety that may paradoxically inhibit marriage readiness. Family interference in marriage decisions creates additional psychological pressure. Parents and extended family members may continuously question unmarried individuals about their marriage plans, creating stress and potentially contributing to resistance to marriage arrangements. This pressure may cause young people to avoid marriage-related discussions and decisions (Al-Murshid, 2019).

The psychological impact of social stigmatization affects self-esteem and confidence in relationship formation. Individuals who experience criticism or negative labeling due to unmarried status may develop defensive attitudes that hinder natural relationship development and marriage consideration (Al-Murshid, 2019).

4.4. Contemporary Challenges and Societal Implications

Marriage abstinence among Saudi youth creates broader societal challenges that extend beyond individual circumstances to affect demographic trends, economic development, and social stability.

4.4.1. Demographic Consequences

Declining marriage rates potentially affect population growth patterns and age structure distributions. If current trends continue, Saudi Arabia may experience demographic challenges including aging population structures and reduced birth rates that could affect long-term economic and social development ([Lari, 2022](#); [Aref & Rahman, 2024](#)).

The gender imbalance in marriage patterns, with higher rates of male marriage abstinence, may create long-term social complications. Substantial numbers of unmarried men could affect social stability and require policy interventions addressing employment, housing, and social integration challenges ([Aref & Rahman, 2024](#)).

Regional demographic variations create additional complications as urban areas experience higher marriage abstinence rates compared to rural regions. This geographic disparity may contribute to internal migration patterns and regional development imbalances that require comprehensive policy responses ([Lari, 2022](#); [Aref & Rahman, 2024](#)).

4.4.2. Economic Implications

Marriage abstinence affects consumer spending patterns and economic development. Traditional marriage-related expenditures, including housing, furniture, and family goods, may decline as marriage rates decrease. These changes could affect various economic sectors and require adaptation in business and economic planning. The delay in family formation affects workforce development and human capital formation. Reduced birth rates may eventually affect labor supply and economic productivity, while delayed family formation may influence women's workforce participation patterns and career development trajectories. Housing market dynamics reflect marriage abstinence trends, with demand for family housing potentially decreasing while demand for single-person accommodation increases. These shifts require adjustments in housing policy and urban planning approaches ([Afiyah et al., 2024](#)).

4.4.3. Social Structure Evolution

Marriage abstinence contributes to broader social structure changes affecting family systems, community organization, and intergenerational relationships. Traditional extended family networks may weaken as fewer marriages create kinship connections and family expansion. Community social structures, often organized around family networks, may require adaptation to accommodate increasing numbers of unmarried individuals. Social institutions and community services may need modifications to address changing demographic realities and social needs. The psychological and social support systems traditionally provided through marriage and family networks may require alternative arrangements for unmarried individuals. Community organizations, government services, and social institutions may need expansion to address these changing needs ([Aref & Rahman, 2024](#)).

5. Policy Implications and Recommendations

Addressing marriage abstinence among Saudi youth requires comprehensive policy approaches that address multiple contributing factors while respecting cultural values and individual choices.

5.1. Economic Policy Interventions

Employment generation policies specifically targeting youth could address unemployment barriers to marriage. Initiatives promoting private sector employment for Saudi nationals, skills training programs, and entrepreneurship support could improve young people's financial capacity for marriage. Housing policy interventions, including affordable housing programs, first-time buyer assistance, and rental support, could address housing barriers to marriage. These programs should specifically target young couples and newly married individuals to facilitate family formation. Financial literacy and marriage preparation programs could help young people better manage economic challenges associated with marriage. These programs might include budgeting skills, debt management, and realistic financial planning for wedding and family expenses (Topal, 2019).

5.2. Social and Cultural Initiatives

Public awareness campaigns could address unrealistic dowry expectations and promote more modest marriage celebrations that emphasize spiritual and social rather than material aspects. Religious and community leaders could play important roles in these initiatives. Marriage counseling and preparation services could help young people develop relationship skills and realistic marriage expectations. These services should address both practical and emotional aspects of marriage preparation while respecting cultural and religious values. Educational system modifications could include marriage and family life education that prepares young people for relationship responsibilities while maintaining focus on academic and professional development (Al-Shaqi, 2025).

5.3. Support System Development

Community support networks could provide assistance for young married couples, addressing some traditional extended family support functions. These networks might include childcare assistance, financial counseling, and social support services. Government policies supporting work-life balance, including parental leave, flexible employment arrangements, and childcare support, could reduce concerns about career-marriage conflicts particularly affecting women's marriage decisions. Research and monitoring systems could track marriage trends and policy effectiveness, enabling evidence-based adjustments to interventions and support programs (Al-Shaqi, 2025).

6. Conclusion

Marriage abstinence among Saudi youth is a multifaceted issue influenced by economic, social, cultural, and psychological factors. Over two-thirds of Saudis aged 15-34 remain unmarried, signaling significant shifts within Saudi society as it balances traditional values against modern aspirations. Economic challenges such as unemployment, high housing costs, and steep dowry expectations serve as major obstacles to marriage, while evolving social factors like changing gender roles, increased education, and transformed family dynamics also impact youth decisions regarding marriage timing. Beyond these external pressures, psychological aspects contribute to delayed marriage, including fears of responsibility and shifting personal priorities among young people. These combined influences have broader implications, affecting demographic trends, economic progress, and the social fabric of the nation. Effectively addressing marriage abstinence requires comprehensive policies that tackle economic barriers while respecting cultural

traditions and individual autonomy, ensuring that solutions align with the complex reality faced by Saudi youth. Future efforts should focus on ongoing research to track marriage pattern changes and evaluate the impact of interventions, emphasizing innovative strategies that support young people's marriage choices. This phenomenon mirrors a global trend of delayed marriage but carries unique cultural and economic traits in the Saudi context. Ultimately, policies should aim to facilitate marriage for those who desire it while avoiding pressure that disregards personal circumstances, balancing support for family formation with respect for individual freedom.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Not applicable

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of Interest.

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