

Anxiety Dynamics Among Career-Oriented Women Postponing Marriage: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

This study aims to explore and understand the lived experiences of anxiety among working women who delay marriage. A qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach was employed to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' subjective experiences. Participants were selected using purposive sampling and consisted of three working women aged 28–30 years, employed as a hospital receptionist, a cook, and an entrepreneur. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and observations and analyzed thematically to identify the essential meanings of their experiences. The findings revealed that anxiety was manifested through physical, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions. Physically, participants reported symptoms such as dizziness, cold sweats, heart palpitations, and heightened emotional sensitivity. Behaviorally, they tended to avoid serious romantic relationships and discussions related to marriage. Cognitively, participants expressed concerns about marital commitment, including fears of infidelity, patriarchal marital roles, and the belief that marriage could increase life difficulties and responsibilities. These anxieties were influenced by personal experiences, perceptions of marriage, and social expectations regarding women's marital status. The study concludes that working women who delay marriage experience multidimensional anxiety, with varying manifestations across physical, behavioral, and cognitive domains. Understanding these experiences may contribute to the development of psychological support and interventions tailored to women facing similar concerns.

Keywords: anxiety, working women, delayed marriage, phenomenology, lived experience

1 INTRODUCTION

Human development occurs throughout life, where each stage of life has developmental tasks that need to be completed according to a person's age [1]. One of the significant developmental tasks in early adulthood is building a committed relationship through marriage and entering the workforce as a form of individual independence [1]. At the age range of 18 to 40 years, individuals begin to prepare themselves to live a family life with the partner they choose [2]. Based on recommendations from the National Population and Family Planning Agency (BKKBN), the ideal age for marriage is 21 years for women and 25 years for men. This age is considered a mature time emotionally and psychologically to enter married life [3], [4].

Marriage is one of the important aspects of social life. It not only aims to form a family but also serves as a way to fulfill the emotional and psychological needs of individuals [5]. Law Number 1 of 1974 Article 1 defines

marriage as a physical and emotional bond between a man and a woman as husband and wife, with the purpose of building a happy and lasting family based on belief in God Almighty [6]. However, in recent years, the marriage rate in Indonesia has decreased. Data from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) in 2024 shows that the number of marriages in 2023 was recorded at 1,577,255, decreasing by 128,093 compared to the previous year, which reached 1,705,348 marriages [7].

One of the factors that contributes to the decline in the number of marriages is the increasing number of women who work and have financial independence. Women who have jobs tend to delay marriage because they feel able to meet their own living needs without depending on a partner [8]. Based on data from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS), in 2022 there were around 52.74 million female workers in Indonesia. This increase in the number of working women shows a change in mindset and life priorities, where many

women choose to focus on their careers first before getting married [8].

Financial independence may provide women with greater autonomy in determining their life priorities, including decisions regarding marriage. Women who are financially independent often feel capable of fulfilling their own needs without relying on a partner [8]. However, financial independence does not necessarily eliminate concerns about marriage. Instead, it may create a psychological conflict between maintaining personal autonomy and meeting social expectations regarding marriage. Consequently, financially independent women may experience anxiety when marriage is perceived as potentially limiting their freedom, career aspirations, or financial control [9].

Besides work factors, anxiety is also one of the main reasons why some women delay marriage. Anxiety about marriage can arise from various factors, such as past trauma, lack of trust in a partner, and the influence of negative information about marriage, including cases of divorce and domestic violence that are widely reported on social media [10]. Anxiety is an emotional condition characterized by unpleasant feelings and excessive worry about the possibility of something bad happening [11]. In addition to direct experiences, anxiety regarding marriage may also be influenced by exposure to negative marital experiences through social media. Frequent exposure to stories of infidelity, domestic violence, marital conflict, and divorce may contribute to vicarious trauma, a condition in which individuals experience emotional distress through indirect exposure to the traumatic experiences of others [12]. Although individuals do not directly experience such events, repeated exposure may shape negative perceptions of marriage and increase anxiety regarding future marital relationships. Therefore, social media may play an important role in influencing women's decisions to postpone marriage.

Delaying marriage is a decision made consciously by an individual to postpone the physical and emotional bond with a partner [4]. Some women delay marriage not because they do not have the desire to build a family, but because of various factors that make them feel not ready or because they have not found a suitable partner [13].

Based on the initial interviews conducted with two working women who delay marriage, the interview results are as follows:

"I'm worried about marriage because I was cheated on before, and I still have trauma with men because of that experience. The person who cheated on me did it with my own best friend. I feel that many men cannot be trusted. Now that I already have a job and my own income, I sometimes think, what is the point of having a man if he is not useful and only ends up cheating again.

I also have neighbors who were cheated on, and when I remember my past, I start trembling and feel cold sweat. I am afraid to get married because I am scared of divorce in the future. For now, I don't think I want to get married yet. My family has tried to introduce me to some men, but I still have trust issues. These thoughts disturb me a lot, especially because at my age I am not married yet. I am afraid of failing in marriage and afraid of being cheated on again in the future. Right now, I feel that I am not able to overcome my fear of marriage because I am still traumatized. Besides that, since I already earn my own money, I feel free to go anywhere and buy the things I want."
(TN, 31 years old, August 13, 2024)

"I am not ready to get married yet because I feel anxious that I may not be able to make my parents happy. I am also worried about marriage because I often see many issues on the internet about domestic violence. Those stories make me feel scared and sometimes I get cold sweats. I think that even couples who have known each other for many years can still experience domestic violence. That makes me afraid, so I choose to delay marriage until I find the right person. My family once tried to introduce me to a man, and I did get to know him for a while, but I was not ready, so we stopped communicating. Besides that, I already have a job, so I want to enjoy the results of my work first. I am afraid that after getting married, I might not be able to buy the things I want. In my circle of friends, there are also many women who were cheated on, even after they had just given birth. That makes me feel afraid that the same thing might happen to me if I get married."
(D, 30 years old, August 14, 2024)

Based on the interview results above, it can be seen that anxiety is the main factor underlying their decision. The first subject, TN (31 years old), revealed that a bad experience in her past relationship caused trauma and trust issues toward men. She feels more comfortable focusing on her work and earning her own income, so she feels that she does not need a partner. Meanwhile, the second subject, AL (30 years old), stated that her anxiety about marriage is influenced by the many reports of domestic violence that she sees on social media. The fear of experiencing similar situations makes her choose to delay marriage until she finds a truly suitable partner.

Previous studies have examined anxiety related to marriage from various perspectives, including fatherlessness [14], self-esteem and partner selection [9], self-control in choosing a life partner [9], and anxiety among victims of dating violence [15]. However, limited studies have specifically explored anxiety among

working women who intentionally postpone marriage despite having financial independence. Furthermore, little attention has been given to the role of vicarious trauma resulting from social media exposure in shaping anxiety toward marriage. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by exploring anxiety among working women who delay marriage using a phenomenological approach. Based on this background, this study aims to determine the overview of anxiety in working women who delay marriage based on the aspects of anxiety.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Anxiety is an emotional state characterized by feelings of worry, discomfort, and uncertainty about a threat, whether real or only imagined by the individual. According to [11], anxiety is a state of apprehension or worry that arises from the feeling that something bad will happen. Anxiety can also be defined as a vague and widespread feeling of worry that is related to uncertainty and helplessness in facing certain situations. [16] explain that anxiety is a common experience that can cause negative emotional responses and feelings of excessive worry. From these definitions, it can be concluded that anxiety is an unpleasant feeling that arises from worries about the possibility of something bad happening.

Nevid [11] state that anxiety has three main aspects, namely:

1. Physical aspect: the physical aspect of anxiety includes various body reactions such as restlessness, nervousness, trembling hands and body, sweaty palms, difficulty speaking, rapid heartbeat, feeling weak, a choking sensation, feeling hot and cold, and frequent urination.
2. Behavioral aspect: the behavioral aspect is characterized by a tendency to avoid certain situations, dependence on others, and instability in behavior.
3. Cognitive aspect: the cognitive aspect includes worries about what might happen, feeling disturbed by fear or negative thoughts, and the belief that something bad will happen without a clear reason. Individuals with cognitive anxiety also tend to feel threatened by certain people or situations, experience feelings of hopelessness, and think that the situation can no longer be controlled.

In the context of this study, anxiety is related to the phenomenon of delaying marriage among working women. Umasangadji [4] states that delaying marriage is the result of an individual's decision to postpone the physical and emotional bond with the opposite sex. Working women are individuals who carry out certain activities or jobs and receive wages or income from their work [17]. Pandia in [18] also explains that working

women are those who work outside the home and earn income from their jobs.

In recent years, more working women have chosen to delay marriage. One of the reasons is anxiety about marriage itself. Several factors influence this anxiety, including negative personal experiences, such as being cheated on by a partner, as well as social environmental influences, such as seeing many cases of infidelity and divorce around them. In addition, the increasing exposure to issues of domestic violence through social media also contributes to the rising anxiety about marriage. Some women also worry that they may not be able to make their parents happy or that they may lose their financial independence after getting married.

This study focuses on the description of anxiety experienced by working women who delay marriage. This study examines anxiety from three main aspects, namely the physical aspect, behavioral aspect, and cognitive aspect, to understand how anxiety plays a role in their decision to delay marriage. By understanding this description of anxiety, this study is expected to provide deeper insight into the psychological factors that influence the decision of working women to delay marriage.

Marriage anxiety refers to feelings of worry, fear, and uncertainty related to entering married life. This form of anxiety may arise from concerns about commitment, partner compatibility, family responsibilities, financial stability, marital conflict, infidelity, and divorce. According to Chrisnatalia and Ashariyati [10], anxiety about marriage can be influenced by previous negative experiences, lack of trust toward a partner, and concerns regarding future marital life. The American Psychiatric Association [19] explains that anxiety is characterized by anticipation of future threats or negative events. In the context of marriage, individuals who hold negative expectations about marital life may experience greater anxiety when considering marriage. As a result, marriage anxiety may influence an individual's readiness to marry and contribute to the decision to postpone marriage.

For working women, marriage anxiety may be associated with concerns about changes that may occur after marriage, such as increased responsibilities, loss of personal freedom, or difficulties in balancing personal and family roles. These concerns may manifest through physical, behavioral, and cognitive symptoms of anxiety.

Working women are not only individuals who earn income but also individuals who develop autonomy and independence through their employment. Financial independence enables women to fulfill their own needs and provides greater control over important life decisions, including decisions related to marriage [8]. At the same time, working women may face various

expectations from family and society regarding marriage. The pressure to achieve career goals while also meeting social expectations about marriage may create psychological challenges. Consequently, decisions regarding marriage may involve considerations related to personal autonomy, future aspirations, relationship readiness, and perceived responsibilities associated with married life. Therefore, the decision to postpone marriage among working women cannot be understood solely from an economic perspective. Psychological factors, including personal experiences, perceptions of marriage, and anxiety regarding future marital life, may also play an important role in shaping such decisions.

3 RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach to understand the subjective experiences of working women who delay marriage. This method aims to explore the meaning of individual life experiences in facing certain phenomena [20]. The subjects of this study are three working women who delay marriage, namely C, R, and D. The subjects were selected using a purposive sampling technique, which allows the selection of participants based on certain criteria so that the data are more relevant [21]. The criteria for the subjects include working women aged 26–40 years, living in Lhokseumawe, and who have experienced arranged marriage but refused to marry.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and non-participant observation. The semi-structured interviews were conducted four times with each subject, with a total of 12 interview sessions, to explore their experiences and anxiety related to marriage. Non-participant observation was used to observe facial expressions, body gestures, and tone of voice during the interviews in order to strengthen the data obtained. In this study, the researcher served as the primary research instrument. The researcher was directly involved in conducting interviews, making observations, recording field notes, and interpreting the data. To maintain credibility, the researcher used interview guidelines, conducted repeated interviews, and applied triangulation techniques throughout the research process.

Data analysis followed the stages proposed by [22], which include organizing the data, reading and understanding all the data, conducting coding to identify the main themes, and developing a qualitative narrative based on the research findings.

The validity of the data was tested using source triangulation, technique triangulation, and time triangulation [23]. Source triangulation was carried out by comparing interview data with information from the subjects' friends or family members. Technique triangulation compared the results of interviews and

observations to ensure data consistency. Time triangulation was conducted by carrying out interviews at different times to avoid bias and ensure the validity of the data.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study aims to describe the anxiety and aspects of anxiety in working women who delay marriage. Based on the results of interviews with three subjects, it was found that their anxiety about marriage includes three main aspects, namely physical anxiety, behavioral anxiety, and cognitive anxiety. Each subject experiences these three aspects, although there are differences in the responses they show.

Table 1. Aspects of Anxiety in Working Women Who Delay Marriage

Physical Anxiety	Behavioral Anxiety	Cognitive Anxiety
When thinking about marriage: dizziness, cold sweat, trembling (C); dizziness (D); cold sweat and heart palpitations (R)	Avoiding questions about when they will get married (R, D, C)	Worried about being cheated on because of past experiences of infidelity (R)
When thinking about questions about marriage: dizziness (D); emotional sensitivity (C); cold sweat and heart palpitations (R)	Avoiding serious relationships (R, D, C)	Worried about being cheated on after seeing friends experience infidelity (C)
When being introduced to men: anger (D); emotional sensitivity (C); cold sweat and heart palpitations (R)		Worried about being cheated on after seeing infidelity cases on social media (D) Worries due to past experiences of being hurt (C) Worry that marriage will make life more difficult (R, D, C)

This study found that working women who delay marriage experience anxiety in three main aspects, namely physical, behavioral, and cognitive aspects. In the physical aspect, all three subjects showed responses such as dizziness, cold sweats, trembling, and heart palpitations when thinking about marriage or when being introduced to men. These reactions occur because of excessive anxiety about marriage that has not yet happened, which causes physical symptoms as the body's response to psychological pressure. This is in line with the study by Chrisnatalia [10], which states that early adult women who are not yet married and have concerns about marriage tend to experience anxiety and negative emotions. Individuals with anxiety will feel

tense, restless, and tend to think about negative possibilities even though they have not happened yet.

In the behavioral aspect, the subjects showed avoidance behavior, such as avoiding questions about when they will get married and being reluctant to have serious relationships. This is caused by several factors, such as bad experiences in the past, including being cheated on or being left when their partner married someone else. Some subjects also feel that they have not found the right partner, while others choose to remain free and do not want to feel restricted by marriage. In line with the research by Repi [24], factors that influence the decision to delay marriage include the desire to live freely, concerns about not finding a suitable partner, and the desire to achieve self-actualization through work. In addition, research by Aprilia et al. [25] also shows that past trauma can influence a person's decision to build a relationship. Someone who has experienced a failed relationship before tends to feel worried that the next relationship will have the same outcome.

In the cognitive aspect, it was found that all three subjects have various worries about marriage. They are afraid of experiencing infidelity because they have experienced or witnessed cases of cheating in their surroundings, either from personal experiences or from social media. Other concerns include fear of marital failure, incompatibility with a partner, and worries that marriage may make life more difficult. These findings are in line with the study by Mahfuzhatillah [1], which states that fear of marital failure is often influenced by negative experiences experienced by people close to them. In addition, the research by Salsabila and Sari [26] also supports this finding by stating that emotional insecurity in marriage often involves trust issues, fear of choosing the wrong partner, and anxiety about changes in a partner's behavior in the future.

The findings should also be understood within the socio-cultural context of Lhokseumawe. In a social environment where marriage is often regarded as an important marker of adulthood and social maturity, women who remain unmarried into their late twenties or thirties may experience expectations and pressure from family members, relatives, and the surrounding community. The tendency of subjects to avoid questions regarding marriage suggests that such social expectations may intensify feelings of discomfort and contribute to anxiety. Therefore, the anxiety experienced by the subjects was influenced not only by personal concerns regarding marriage but also by social pressures within their cultural environment.

Overall, the findings indicate that anxiety among working women who delay marriage is influenced by a complex interaction between personal experiences, financial independence, social expectations, and exposure to negative marital experiences. Financial independence may increase women's sense of autonomy

and reduce their perceived dependence on marriage for economic security [8]. At the same time, exposure to stories of infidelity, domestic violence, and divorce may strengthen negative expectations regarding marriage through processes similar to vicarious trauma [12]. Therefore, the decision to postpone marriage cannot be understood solely as a consequence of fear or trauma, but also as a response to concerns about maintaining autonomy, avoiding future emotional harm, and navigating social expectations regarding marriage.

This study has several limitations. First, the number of subjects was limited to only three working women in Lhokseumawe City, which makes the results of this study less able to represent a wider range of experiences of anxiety toward marriage. In addition, this study only focuses on working women, so it does not include the perspectives of women who do not work or other groups who may experience anxiety related to marriage in different contexts. The lack of building rapport during the interview process is also one of the limitations, because it may affect the comfort of the subjects in sharing their experiences more deeply. As a result, the information obtained may be less optimal, and the interviews were conducted in a relatively short time.

5 CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, anxiety among working women who delay marriage is reflected through physical, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions. However, the essence of these experiences extends beyond the presence of anxiety symptoms alone. For the participants in this study, delaying marriage appears to function as a psychological defense mechanism that helps protect the autonomy, independence, and emotional security they have developed through their work experiences and financial self-sufficiency.

The findings indicate that anxiety regarding marriage is shaped by a combination of personal experiences, exposure to negative marital experiences in their social environment and social media, financial independence, and social expectations regarding marriage. Experiences of infidelity, observations of failed relationships, and repeated exposure to negative marital narratives contribute to concerns about trust, commitment, and future marital life. At the same time, financial independence enables participants to fulfill their own needs and reduces the perception that marriage is necessary for economic security. Therefore, the decision to postpone marriage should not be viewed merely as a reluctance to marry. Rather, it reflects a complex interaction between anxiety, self-protection, autonomy, and social pressure. For these participants, delaying marriage represents an effort to avoid perceived emotional risks while maintaining control over their personal lives and future choices.

6 RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be proposed. For working women who experience anxiety regarding marriage, it is important to develop a balanced understanding of marriage through counseling, psychoeducation, and discussions with trusted individuals. In addition, media literacy and healthy information consumption should be strengthened, particularly in evaluating information related to infidelity, domestic violence, and divorce that is frequently encountered on social media. This may help reduce excessive fear resulting from repeated exposure to negative marital narratives.

For families and communities, it is recommended to provide emotional support and respect individual decisions regarding marriage rather than exerting pressure through repeated questions or expectations. Creating a supportive social environment may help reduce anxiety and encourage more open communication regarding concerns about marriage.

For future researchers, longitudinal studies are recommended to explore how anxiety regarding marriage changes over time and across different stages of adulthood. Future studies may also develop and evaluate counseling or clinical intervention programs specifically designed to address trust issues, fear of infidelity, and negative perceptions of marriage arising from previous relationship experiences.

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