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WAITHOOD
GENDER, EDUCATION, AND GLOBAL DELAYS IN MARRIAGE AND CHILDBEARING

Edited by
Marcia C. Inhorn and Nancy J. Smith-Hefner

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Conclusion

Waithood in the Twenty-First Century

Marcia C. Inhorn and Nancy J. Smith-Hefner

In the twenty-first century, waithood is a growing global phenomenon, with young people waiting to marry and have children, and, in the process, extending their period of young adulthood. In this volume, research by fifteen scholars—including fourteen anthropologists and one political scientist—demonstrate *why* waithood is occurring with increasing frequency, and *how* it is being experienced by young people around the world. Overall, these chapters reveal two broad forms of waithood, both of which pivot around the notion of *intentionality*. These forms might best be described as *unintentional waithood* and *intentional waithood*.

Unintentional waithood reflects the original meaning of the term, which was introduced by political scientist Diane Singerman in 2007. In her research on education and marriage in the Middle East, Singerman used the term "waithood" to refer to a pattern of widespread marriage delay among educated youth in Egypt and in other resource-poor countries across the region (Singerman 2007). As Singerman showed, young people were obtaining higher levels of education than ever before, but their education was not leading to employment. In her work, Singerman gave primacy to the experiences of young men, so as to highlight the role of governments in failing to supply sufficient remunerative employment opportunities

and the failure of educational systems to adequately prepare young men for the jobs that existed.

In this setting, young people were forced to wait—for jobs, for housing, for marriage, for sex, and for families of their own. Thwarted by high marriage and housing costs—in a cultural setting where young men were expected to pay for both—waithood was both undesired and unintended by the men caught in this situation, as well as by the young women who were waiting for them as marriage partners. For both parties, extended unmarried singlehood led to a period of prolonged dependence on parents, as young people were expected to live at home and remain celibate until marriage. Such unintended waithood ultimately translated into delayed adulthood, given that marriage and childbearing were the ultimate markers of full adult status.

A decade later, in the aftermath of the tumultuous 2011 Arab uprisings, Singerman has updated her original waithood research for the purposes of this volume. Utilizing a variety of quantitative and qualitative date, Singerman underscores the fact that unintentional waithood has become widespread across the Middle Eastern region, especially for youth in resource-poor societies such as Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia. Caused by corrupt and callous governments incapable of insuring economic and social justice for their citizens, this unintentional youth waithood was a major precipitating factor in the Arab Spring, as well as in more recent protests in places like Lebanon and Iraq. Singerman thus extends her analysis in this volume to focus on what she calls the "politics of waithood," in which the state bears major responsibility for the crisis underlying young people's waithood plight.

The plight of young people experiencing unintentional waithood elsewhere is further developed in several other chapters in this volume, particularly those that focus on young men in sub-Saharan Africa. As in the Middle East, increasing numbers of young men living in resource-poor African countries are being forced to delay marriage and family formation, with consequences for their gender identity and social welfare. As seen in this book, even highly educated African young men face difficulties and frustrations, given that government jobs are scarce, formal employment formidable, and the required money and goods necessary for securing a marriage and establishing a household beyond reach. These young men are being "forced to wait" against their will, leading in some cases to out-of-wedlock fatherhood without the culturally sanctioned benefits of marriage. However, even in situations of enforced waiting, these "youthmen," as they are called in some societies, demonstrate what might be called "agency in waiting." In most cases, men strive for education and employment against all odds, sometimes developing social networks dedicated to helping one another.

Waithood takes a different form in societies where economic and political constraints are not so pronounced and stressful for young people. Indeed, the majority of chapters in this volume demonstrate emergent forms of *intentional waithood*, in societies ranging from Asia to Europe to Latin America. Intentional waithood signals agency and aspiration, as young people pursue education and new forms of skilled employment, explore opportunities for travel and self-development, and identify appropriate partners for modern, companionate marriage. Intentional waithood plays out in different ways, but the phenomenon is significantly gendered.

To wit, for women around the world, the basic trend is one where, as educational and employment opportunities become more widely available, young women take advantage of those opportunities and postpone marriage and childbearing by choice. Education in particular is becoming women's aspiration, with women now outstripping men in higher education in more than one-third of the world's nations. Women's pursuit of education in their twenties and thirties offers an important space of discovery and freedom, one that was largely unavailable in their mothers' generation. This twenty-first-century shift toward education and intentional waithood on the part of women involves several forms of social recognition: first, the value of women's education; second, women's desires to work and pursue professional careers; third, women's rights to personal development and self-actualization; fourth, new gender norms and sexual identities; and finally, new enactments of courtship, dating, and practices of intimacy.

For young women, but also for young men, intentional waithood and the prolongation of unmarried singlehood has led to new configurations of romance and partnership beyond the bounds of marriage. This can be seen in the growth of online dating services, young people's pursuit of multiple romantic and sexual partners over time, increases in non-married cohabitation, and the emerging acceptance in some societies of childbearing without marriage. These changes have often been viewed as a cause for alarm on the part of the older generation, with well-established religious and moral authorities sometimes warning of a "marriage crisis."

Over time, however, these transformations toward intentional waithood and new forms of gendered intimacy have led to pow-

erful shifts in social values in many societies, with young people becoming much freer to choose among a variety of pathways to partnership and parenthood. But perhaps the most striking social consequence of all in this ongoing social transformation is the global rise in age at first marriage—and, even more consequentially, the global declines in marriage as some people choose to never marry at all. Today, nearly 90 percent of the world's population lives in a country with falling marriage rates. Several chapters in this volume focus on this trend, showing the ways in which women are "opting out" of marriage, either through specific "tactics" of marriage delay, or simply by inertia as they follow their educations and careers into permanent states of singleness.

Having said this, it is important to note that in the majority of cultural contexts, including those presented in this volume, (a) marriage is still a given, (b) childbearing is still expected within the bounds of marriage, and (c) both are closely linked to the achievement of social adulthood. Non-marriage, especially for women, is viewed as a personal failure, as seen in some chapters where unmarried women may face derision, scorn, and social, economic, and physical vulnerabilities. While opting out of marriage may be acceptable in an increasing number of Western societies, it is typically *not* experienced as something desired or planned in other places, especially by women. Rather, non-marriage—and consequent lack of childbearing—may be an unintended consequence of simply "waiting too long."

Indeed, as shown in the final section of this volume, intentional waithood may have *unintended consequences*, particularly for women. For one, educated women are now surpassing the educational achievements of young men around the globe. But they are then faced with a smaller pool of equally well-educated men to marry. These gender-based educational disparities are leading to a "man deficit" and "leftover women," as highly educated women are unable to find marriage partners. For those educated women who do go on to marry, the common pattern of hypergamy (or women marrying "up") is being challenged by a pattern of hypogamy (or women marrying "down"). In other words, an educated woman who wants to marry may be forced to choose a man who has less education, is younger, is economically less secure, or comes from a different ethnic, racial, religious or class background.

Highly educated women around the globe who are unable to find marriage partners are increasingly turning to egg freezing as a way to preserve what's left of their fertility. For women, age-related fertility decline begins in the early thirties, but is significantly amplified

in the late thirties and early forties. As several of the chapters in this volume show, waiting *too long* to reproduce—because of extended educational or career opportunities, inability to find a committed reproductive partner, anxiety over one's financial ability to raise a child, feeling fit and healthy and unaware of the inner "biological clock," and any number of other factors—may result in women's inability to achieve desired reproductive goals. Age-related infertility cannot necessarily be overcome, even with resort to costly assisted reproductive technologies. Particularly in parts of Europe, significantly increased rates of age-related infertility among women, resulting from prolonged states of waithood in the reproductive-aged population, are turning some societies into so-called "barren states," where populations are no longer replacing themselves.

In Europe and beyond, approximately half the world's population now lives in societies where total fertility rates are below replacement level. Particularly in East Asia, the term "ultra-low" is being used to describe total fertility rates well below two children per couple. In Japan, for example, the overall reluctance of young people to *ever* marry or *ever* have sex for the purposes of procreation is leading to a demographic crisis that no amount of egg freezing or assisted reproduction can solve—despite the country's commitment to in vitro fertilization, with the second highest number of IVF clinics (nearly 600) in the world.

Thus, what waithood will mean for the twenty-first century remains to be seen. Will young people around the world increasingly delay marriage and childbearing, or forego it altogether as in Japan? Will societies around the world follow the "ultra low" fertility patterns now common in East Asia? Will young people's reproductive waithood effectively reverse normal population pyramids? Will marriage rates continue to plummet as the costs of marriage continue to increase? Will marriage no longer be a marker of adult identity, and childbearing be accepted outside the bounds of marriage? Will remaining single become a socially accepted lifestyle choice? And will new forms of sociality emerge for people who decide to have children on their own, with or without technological assistance?

All of these questions are inextricably linked to the theme of waithood, with answers likely to emerge over the course of the twenty-first century. Yet, two broad patterns of waithood are already clear, as seen in this prescient volume. Thus, the task for future anthropologists, political scientists, demographers, and others interested in gender, education, marriage, and childbearing will be to "wait and see" how waithood unfolds.

Marcia C. Inhorn is the William K. Lanman, Jr. Professor of Anthropology and International Affairs in the Department of Anthropology and MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies at Yale University, where she serves as Chair of the Council on Middle East Studies. A specialist on Middle Eastern gender, religion, and health, Inhorn is the author of six award-winning books, including *America's Arab Refugees: Vulnerability and Health on the Margins* (Stanford University Press, 2018). She is (co)editor of ten books, founding editor of the *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* (*JMEWS*), and coeditor of Berghahn's "Fertility, Reproduction, and Sexuality" book series. Inhorn holds a PhD in anthropology and an MPH in epidemiology from the University of California, Berkeley.

Nancy J. Smith-Hefner is Professor of Anthropology and Chair of the Department of Anthropology at Boston University. A specialist of Southeast Asia, gender, and Islam, she is author of *Khmer American: Identity and Moral Education in a Diasporic Community* (University of California Press, 1999) as well as numerous book chapters and journal articles. Her recent book, *Islamizing Intimacies: Youth, Sexuality, and Gender in Contemporary Indonesia* (University of Hawaii Press, 2019), is a study of the changing personal lives and sexual attitudes of educated, Muslim Javanese youth against the backdrop of a resurgent interest in more normative forms of Islam. Smith-Hefner received her BA, MA, and PhD from the University of Michigan.

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