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## **An Examination of Breadwinner Family**

A social institution is “a group or organization that has specific roles, norms, and expectations, which function to meet society's social needs”. They exist because people believe they help with society's fundamental needs. Such institutions exist because they help stabilize our society. However, as the awareness of equality rises among people, the inequality embedded in such social institutions requires careful examination. Is the current state of such social institutions optimal, or can they be further optimized to increase the benefits for more people? In this essay, I will focus on gender and marriage institutions, examine the social roles and roles associated with them, discuss the existing injustice and inequality in these norms, and identify possible drawbacks of extending these institutions.

Marriage and gender are two of the social institutions that we interact with from day to day. They provide important functions to us both individually and as a society. Growing up, children learn the role of a male as the breadwinner and of a female as the caregiver. Father usually has more responsibility to work hard, earn money, and make major decisions, while mothers tend to focus more on taking care of the family and performing housekeeping. In contemporary society, however, people have started to be aware of the

inequality in such settings, why should males make the decision for the family and females obey the decision, why should females be spending more time taking care of family members instead of entering the workforce and pursuing their professional succession. To understand the reason such social roles and norms exist in the marriage institution, we should first look at the origination of this breadwinning household model.

According to Virginie Gouverneur, “The rise of male bread-winning seems to be associated with industrialization in Western Europe”. During this period of time, “a combination of increasing agricultural productivity wealth extracted from colonies and the industrial revolution meant that market economies grew, and standards of living rose”. These factors made the male breadwinning household model more feasible, now one single male working can support the entire family. This further results in the change of children’s role in a household. Before industrialization, children had an active role in family labor, contributing to the family economy. However, since now one single male is feasible to support the family, children’s roles shift to “consumption rather than production”. This directly tied into the expectation placed on females in the household as the caregivers. “The emergence of the male breadwinner model pushed women into the home, ... women’s role, therefore, became focused on being ‘good mother’ who devoted their energies to caring for husband and children.”

Even though in modern society this breadwinner model has blurred a lot with the progress of gender equality, the legacy of this model can still be seen in a lot of places. Reinforced by both legal and cultural norms, a man’s role is still often seen as the breadwinner, with the expectation of working hard, earning more money for the family, and

making major decisions. Women's primary responsibility is still to focus more on taking care of the family and supporting their husbands, in addition to being independent and having a successful career. These not only shaped individual relationships in marriage but also structured society in a way that places values on the labor and roles of one gender while devaluing the other. The commonplace that reflects such inequality in society is the workforce. The wage gap and the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles are the reflection of the stereotyped gender roles. On the other hand, man also faces the pressure of fulfilling the breadwinner role, this is often reflected in expected to be successful and aggressive in their career and bring sufficient amount of money to their family.

As of today, many people are fighting to expand marriage and gender institutions. They believed that the traditional gendered marriage model which assigns rigid roles to men and women is outdated and harmful, and changes should be made to existing institutions. I will identify two categories of arguments: breaking down rigid gender roles in heterogeneous marriage and promotion of same-sex marriage.

In the paper "After the Family Wage: Gender Equity and the Welfare State", Rebecca Sear advocates for recognizing a cooperative family structure rather than a "nuclear family". She argues the breadwinner model is not a tradition and emerged relatively recently in history. She focused on the problem of a nuclear family on child-rearing compared to a cooperative family, "human beings have evolved as a species that relies on cooperative reproduction.... This strategy supports child survival and development, which contrasts sharply with the isolation responsibilities often expected in nuclear families", she empathizes we should move away from a nuclear family model to a more cooperative

family structure to ensure the health and wellbeing of children. She also lists the negative impact of an isolated family structure on maternal, paternal, and child health, challenges the assumption that traditional gendered roles are natural, and suggests that flexibility in gender roles in marriage is more beneficial for contemporary family life. Other researcher such as Arlie Hochschild also highlights the challenges a woman faces in marriage, especially the phenomenon of the “second shift”, which is the expectation of taking care of her family in addition to being financially independent. She argues that breaking down these gender roles is crucial for the progress of gender equality both in the workplace and at home.

In addition to expanding marriage and gender institutions by reforming the marriage structure and moving toward greater equality, activists try to push for same-sex marriage to challenge the traditional gender roles within marriage. In addition to arguing that marriage should be built based on love, unlike the “nuclear family”, same-sex marriage does not rely on the traditional gendered assumption that exists in heterosexual marriage. Same-sex couples often negotiate roles and responsibilities in their relationships, this provides a more equalitarian structure in marriage. Researchers argue that same-sex marriage opens the door to rigid gender-expectations-free relationships and dismantles outdated gender roles that have been tied to traditional marriage for a long time.

Both approaches empathize with the abundance of the nuclear family structure and argue for a more gender-equal marriage to improve equality both in individual relationships and at a societal level. Although it is true that there exists gender inequality that needs to be addressed in traditional nuclear family structure, there are concerns that disrupting

such social institutions will have challenges or even drawbacks toward social structure. When and how we should extend marriage and gender institutions in practice should be closely examined to avoid unseen consequences.

The first concern would be the resistance. Many cultures including Europe and Asia hold the traditional marriage and gender norms for a long time. In Japan, for example, females usually resign from their jobs and stay at home to become housewives, taking care of children and their husbands while the husband is expected to work hard and get a promotion. Same in the United States of America, even though the expectation of marriage life is not written in any legal paperwork, people are used to playing their expected gender role once they are married. The experience of growing up watching how their parents perform gender roles has shaped their expected gender norms in marriage. Disrupting these long-standing norms can lead to resistance and disorientation. A woman growing up watching her mother taking care of the family may be disoriented about actions she should take once she is in a gender-equal marriage. Likewise, a man raised in a household where his father took sole responsibility for breadwinning might be disoriented when they are expected to take care of household work and child-rearing. Although it is a positive step toward fairness, advocating for equality disrupts traditional expectations and may create challenges for individuals who are accustomed to traditional marriage. From a broader perspective, societal resistance often arises when a deeply ingrained norm is challenged. Often time the resistance may result in cultural backlashes with policymakers and communities attempting to reaffirm traditional roles by changing policies. It is possible for individuals to experience more inequalities as a result of such societal resistance.

In the paper "Beyond the Expansion Framework: How Same-Sex Marriage Changes the Institutional Meaning of Marriage and Heterosexual Men's Conception of Marriage", Alan and Jason suggest that redefining social institutions like marriage to include same-sex couples will fundamentally alter the institution of marriage by removing its historically gendered framework. "Changing the public meaning of institution changes the institution", and I would assume they would agree that changes in the institution mean the functionality of stabilizing the society of the social institutions will no longer be guaranteed. In addition to discussing how redefining marriage may weaken the connection between marriage and family responsibility, Alan and Jason highlight the idea of unintended long-term social consequences. Drawing parallels to no-fault divorce, which "to some extent, tipped the scales of marriage in favor of adult emotional interests and personal choice over its institutional, child-centered elements", they argue that changes to the institution of marriage may also have unforeseen and long-term effects that destabilize marriage as a societal cornerstone. "Knocking out a defining marital pillar of gender is not just a remodeling to make room for more potential residents; it is a major architectural change with potential consequences for the viability of the entire structure of the institution of marriage."

How should we address the rigid gender norms in marriage while minimizing its potential social instability? Firstly, instead of advocating for immediate changes, we should focus more on next-generation education. While adults are not expected to change their existing marriage structure, trying to raise children in a family environment where both parents have the approximately equal responsibility of breadwinning and caregiving will not

only help children establish the idea of equality in marriage and avoid disorientation but also help build gender equality in society in the future. Secondly, promoting gradual cultural shifts through media and public campaigns may help reshape societal attitudes with minimized societal resistance. For instance, popular social media targeting teenagers and young adults could portray equitable partnerships to normalize gender-equal roles, younger generations have the ability to accept changes in social norms easier compared to older generations. Thirdly, implementing workplace and community policies such as shared responsibilities in marriage can further reinforce gender equality. Policies like mandatory paid parental leaves for both parents and incentives for dual-income households could function as a catalyst for promoting gender equality both in domestic and workforce environments. Lastly, it is important to not frame the efforts as radical turnover of the existing social framework but as an enhancement to the existing ones. Emphasizing more on enriching family life and fostering fairness rather than dismantling traditions can help minimize resistance.

In conclusion, marriage and gender institutions have provided stability and structure to society since the industrialization period. However, it also perpetuated inequality and rigidity in their traditional forms. As the awareness of gender equality grows, it is important to address the problems existing in such institutions for the greater benefit of society. This process is full of challenges and must be approached with care as we cannot foresee the unintended consequences. Through this essay, I explored the origination of the traditional marriage structure. We have examined two main efforts to expand this institution: through dismantling gender roles in heterosexual marriages and advocating for

the inclusion of same-sex marriage. While all these approaches have the intention of promising greater fairness and inclusivity, the drawbacks such as societal resistance, cultural backlash, and potential instability of marriage as an institution should be carefully considered. I also provided some possible ways to address these challenges, empathizing with gradual enhancements over overturns. Although unintended consequences cannot be avoided, I believe we can address these challenges as we work toward a society with greater equality. Ultimately, we should consider the long-term benefits of a gender-equal marriage both in domestic and in society.



## Citation

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