The Marriage Boundary: How Social Exclusion Constructs the Unmarried Woman as Other

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Abstract

The "marriage imperative" is not just a social expectation, but a system of mutually reinforcing boundaries that limit women's freedom. Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's concept of situated freedom alongside feminist theories of adaptive preferences (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000; Khader, 2011), this paper argues that cultural vilification, economic precarity, and internalized misogyny work together to narrow the practical options available to women. Against claims that rising employment and changing social attitudes have dissolved the marriage boundary, I show that structural penalties persist in updated institutional forms. When remaining unmarried carries real economic, social, and psychological costs, a woman's "choice" to marry must be evaluated within these constrained conditions. Undoing the marriage boundary requires dismantling cultural vilification, decoupling basic economic security from marital status, and unlearning lateral social policing.

Keywords: boundaries, Other, marriage imperative, Beauvoir, situated freedom, adaptive preferences, internalized misogyny, Kate Manne, social exclusion

Introduction

From early childhood, popular media, family expectations, and public policies frame marriage not as one lifestyle option among many, but as the primary destination of a woman's life. This widespread social arrangement—what I call the "marriage imperative"—shapes how society judges single and married women, embedding itself deep within everyday language, digital trends, and state structures.

The core philosophical question is not simply whether this expectation exists, but how it functions structurally and whether choices made under its influence can be considered genuinely free. I argue that the marriage imperative operates through

three mutually reinforcing boundaries: symbolic (cultural and linguistic vilification), material (economic and institutional precarity), and psychological (internalized and lateral misogyny). Together, these mechanisms treat singlehood as a state of lack, ensuring that non-marriage remains genuinely costly. Treating these forces as mere "social pressure" misses how they lock together to reshape the baseline field of real options available to women.

Understanding this dynamic requires a clear account of human agency under social constraint. By connecting Simone de Beauvoir's concept of situated freedom with modern feminist work on adaptive preferences, this paper examines how each boundary works in practice. Through focused case studies of linguistic stereotyping, contemporary digital subcultures, healthcare access, and social self-policing, I demonstrate that despite changing public rhetoric, the marriage boundary remains structurally active.

Situated Freedom and Adaptive Preferences

To analyze how the marriage boundary limits freedom, we must first establish what choice means under conditions of social inequality. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* demonstrates that human agency is always "situated"—we have an inherent capacity to act and make choices, but our options are always shaped by background conditions, opportunities, and limits we did not choose (Beauvoir, 1949/2011; Bergoffen & Burke, 2023). Within patriarchal structures, Beauvoir shows that women are positioned as the Other: man defines himself as the primary subject and human baseline, while woman is defined strictly in relation to him—as his secondary partner, complement, or dependent (Beauvoir, 1949/2011).

Applying Beauvoir (1949/2011) to marital status requires precision regarding how Otherness functions. Within Beauvoir's framework, "Woman" is already the fundamental category of Otherness, and marriage has historically served as the primary patriarchal institution designed to manage and legitimize female dependency. Consequently, the unmarried woman is targeted not because she belongs to an entirely new or separate category of identity, but because remaining single directly challenges the relational reliance that defines womanhood under patriarchy. Her social exclusion is therefore an active enforcement of the primary oppression of womanhood itself.

This framework introduces an important philosophical question: if societal conditions heavily push women toward marriage, does claiming that marriage is coerced invalidate the lived experiences and agency of women who feel genuinely happy, fulfilled, and autonomous in their marriages? Dismissing a woman's explicit

testimony about her own love or desire as mere delusion would be patronizing, and it would dismiss female agency in its own right.

Feminist philosophy resolves this tension through the concept of adaptive preferences (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000; Khader, 2011). Adaptive preference theory explains how people living under limited or oppressive conditions gradually adjust their desires to match the few realistic options available to them. As Serene Khader (2011) emphasizes, an adaptive preference is neither an absence of agency nor a sign of irrationality. Instead, it is a practical, psychologically protective response to an unfair environment. When staying single brings social isolation, harsh judgment, and financial instability, forming a strong desire for marriage can be completely authentic to a woman's experience while still being heavily shaped by her circumstances. Recognizing a preference as adaptive does not mean judging individual happiness or mocking personal testimony; rather, it shifts our focus away from individual choices and toward evaluating the fairness of the background conditions themselves. True freedom requires transforming those conditions so that remaining unmarried becomes an equally secure, viable, and respected choice.

The Symbolic Boundary: Vilification as Othering

Symbolic boundaries work by denying singlehood the status of a legitimate, positive, or autonomous life path. Instead, cultural narratives, language, and media tropes work together to frame non-marriage as a personal failure or a social defect.

Language acts as a fundamental tool in this process. Words do not simply describe social reality in a neutral way; they shape how actions are judged and valued. Consider the history of the word *spinster*. In late medieval contexts, spinning thread was one of the few respectable jobs that allowed a woman to earn an independent living without relying on a male breadwinner. The term *spinster* originally designated an occupational identity centered on self-sufficiency. However, as economic and family structures tightened around domestic reliance, the term underwent a clear negative shift, turning into an insulting label for an unmarriageable and pitiable woman (Kaplan, 2023).

As Mukhopadhyay (2016, as cited in Bhatt, 2020) notes, this shift in language reframed single women as unlucky figures who simply failed to find a husband. The label acts as an interpretive filter: when an unmarried woman asserts her independence, the cultural trope of the spinster reinterprets her autonomy as sad deficiency. Her choice is stripped of its positive meaning and read purely as an inability to meet the social baseline of marriage.

This symbolic mechanism is actively renewed in modern digital culture through the rise of the "trad-wife" (traditional wife) trend. On social media, trad-wife creators romanticize traditional domestic roles, presenting reliance on a male provider as the true path to female happiness and peace (Proctor, 2023). The trad-wife trend does not exist in a vacuum as a harmless personal choice; it functions as an explicit critique of modern female independence. By framing domestic submission through polished video aesthetics, the trend creates a sharp divide. It places the married, domestic woman at the center of social approval, while subtly casting career-focused, unpartnered, or childfree women as stressed, unnatural, and unfulfilled. The symbolic boundary does not need to explicitly ban singlehood; it achieves its goal by ensuring that stepping outside marriage costs a woman her standing as a fully respected person in society.

The Material Boundary: Coercion as Constraint

Symbolic judgment alone would not be enough to enforce the marriage imperative if it were not backed by concrete economic structures that penalize female independence. Throughout history, marriage has functioned as an economic distribution system designed to organize property, wealth, and basic survival resources. Modern legal and financial systems continue to reflect this design, creating structural instability for those who remain outside the marital unit.

A prime example of this material boundary appears in the structure of healthcare access. Research by Bernstein et al. (2009) shows that unmarried working-age women face significantly higher rates of being uninsured or underinsured compared to married women across all income levels. Because employer-sponsored health insurance was historically built around a primary male earner providing coverage for a dependent family, single individuals face much higher baseline costs for medical security. When access to essential healthcare, tax advantages, and housing stability are systematically easier to secure through a spouse, marriage acts as a practical economic shelter. Unmarried women are left to absorb the full burden of economic penalties—including wage gaps and higher costs of living—without the safety net of a shared household income.

Here, Mary Wollstonecraft's (1792/2009) classic critique in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* remains strikingly relevant. Wollstonecraft argued that when society deprives women of real economic independence, marriage degrades into a transaction where women trade companionship for basic financial survival. When remaining single carries clear financial and physical risks, choosing to marry is better understood as a rational response to economic insecurity rather than a completely free personal preference.

The Internal Boundary: Misogyny as Self-Policing

The most persistent boundaries are those that become internalized within individual psychology and embedded in everyday social dynamics. Internalized misogyny happens when women absorb patriarchal standards and judge their own worth—and the worth of other women—through those restrictive rules (Sunny & Sreenivasulu, 2024).

This internal enforcement functions across two distinct levels. At the psychological level, self-policing occurs within a woman's own mind when she internalizes societal expectations and the male gaze. This internal adoption of external rules turns social pressure into personal feelings of anxiety, inadequacy, or shame about being single. An unmarried woman comes to experience her status not as a position caused by structural conditions, but as a personal moral or romantic failure.

At the social level, enforcement takes the form of lateral policing across peer groups. This happens when women actively enforce traditional norms against other women by excluding, judging, or distancing themselves from single women within their social circles. In *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*, Kate Manne (2017) offers a clear distinction that illuminates this dynamic. Manne defines sexism as the ideology that justifies gender hierarchy, whereas misogyny is the law-enforcement branch of patriarchy—the system of social policing that punishes women who step out of line or challenge traditional roles. Crucially, Manne points out that misogyny is not only carried out by men against women; women frequently participate in policing other women to protect their own standing and safety within a patriarchal system.

This lateral policing appears clearly online and offline through "pick-me" subcultures, where women publicly criticize single, independent, or feminist women to signal their own compliance with traditional expectations (Manne, 2017; Petkova, 2021). Because this enforcement happens through peer dynamics and internal thoughts, the boundary becomes invisible. Structural pressure is misrecognized as natural social preferences or personal choice.

An Objection Considered: Has the Boundary Dissolved?

A prominent objection to this thesis argues that the analysis is outdated. Critics point out that public stigma against single women has dropped significantly in recent decades, single-person households are common, and sociological studies show that single women often report high levels of personal independence and satisfaction. Furthermore, women's increased participation in the workforce provides financial independence that previous generations lacked. From this perspective, the marriage

boundary has dissolved, and marriage is now simply one option among many equal choices.

This objection correctly notices real cultural changes, but it mistakes a shift in appearance for total structural dissolution. While explicit public hostility toward singlehood has softened in many modern spaces, material penalties remain demonstrably active. Ongoing healthcare coverage gaps (Bernstein et al., 2009) and wealth disparities show that institutions remain organized around the married couple.

Furthermore, expanded female employment does not automatically guarantee full independence. Women entering the workplace still face systemic wage gaps and disproportionate unpaid caregiving burdens. Earning an individual income helps cushion financial pressure, but it does not remove the underlying institutional advantages that make a two-earner married household far more secure than living independently.

As feminist philosopher Amia Srinivasan (2021) observes in her work on freedom under patriarchy, a drop in explicit social disapproval does not mean structural equality has been achieved. As long as remaining unmarried carries higher material risks, lower institutional support, and subtle social penalties, the field of options remains heavily skewed.

What Freedom Would Require

The marriage boundary functions not as a single obstacle, but as a connected network of cultural narratives, economic necessity, and internal psychological policing. Symbolic judgment deprives singlehood of positive social value; material structures penalize female financial independence; and internalized misogyny leads women to enforce these limits on themselves and one another.

Achieving genuine freedom requires establishing real, unpenalized alternatives, rather than settling for formal legal permissions. This demands coordinated action across three connected dimensions. First, material reform requires separating essential social benefits—such as healthcare access, tax policy, and housing stability—from marital status, while actively closing gender wage gaps. Second, cultural change requires dismantling media narratives that measure female worth through marriage, while expanding stories that highlight alternative life paths, including independent singlehood and deep, non-marital friendships as envisioned by Wollstonecraft (1792/2009). Finally, psychological unlearning involves recognizing lateral policing and internalized misogyny as mechanisms that maintain gendered power structures.

The goal of this analysis is not to criticize marriage as a personal choice, nor is it to blindly glorify singlehood. Rather, it is to transform the structural conditions under which choices are made. Only when remaining unmarried carries no economic penalty, institutional disadvantage, or social degradation can the choice to marry finally be recognized as genuinely free.

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