

# Economic Independence and its Influence on Singlehood Decisions Among Men and Women

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**Abstract:** *Economic independence has emerged as a critical determinant of individual life choices, particularly in relation to singlehood decisions among men and women. This review synthesizes theoretical perspectives, empirical studies, and cross-cultural evidence to explore how financial self-sufficiency shapes decisions to remain unmarried or delay union formation. Evidence indicates that women's increased access to education, employment, and wealth accumulation has empowered them to pursue independent lifestyles, reducing traditional economic reliance on marriage. For men, financial stability and asset ownership remain influential factors in partnership formation. The interplay of economic independence with psychological autonomy, social norms, and cultural expectations highlights the complexity of singlehood as a life choice. Understanding these dynamics has implications for social policy, gender equality, and demographic trends. Future research should employ longitudinal, multi-country analyses to clarify causal mechanisms and account for diverse socio-economic contexts.*

**Keywords:** Economic Independence, Singlehood, Financial Self-Sufficiency

## I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of singlehood remaining unmarried or unpartnered has evolved significantly in recent decades. Economic independence has emerged as a crucial factor influencing individuals' decisions to remain single. This review explores how financial self-sufficiency affects singlehood, particularly comparing men and women.

In contemporary society, the decision to remain single or delay marriage has become increasingly complex, influenced by a combination of socio-cultural, psychological, and economic factors. Among these, economic independence has emerged as a particularly significant determinant shaping singlehood decisions for both men and women. Economic independence refers not only to the ability to earn a stable income but also encompasses the broader control over financial resources, autonomy in expenditure, and capacity for long-term wealth accumulation (Furstenberg, 2012).

Historically, marital and family structures were strongly linked to economic necessity, especially for women, who were often economically dependent on their spouses due to limited access to education, employment, and financial resources. In such contexts, marriage was primarily viewed as an economic partnership rather than solely a personal or emotional decision (Becker, 1981).

However, with increasing opportunities for women in education and employment, along with rising global awareness about gender equality, financial self-sufficiency has allowed individuals particularly women to exercise greater autonomy over their life choices, including the decision to remain single. Studies suggest that as women achieve higher levels of economic independence, the traditional incentive to marry for financial security diminishes, leading to a rise in voluntary singlehood (Jain, Chuphal, & Shakarad, 2023). Economic independence not only provides women with material security but also enhances their psychological sense of autonomy and self-efficacy, enabling them to prioritize personal goals, career aspirations, and lifestyle choices without the constraints of financial dependence on a partner (Kislev, 2020).

The influence of economic independence on singlehood is also evident among men, albeit in different forms. For men, financial stability, asset ownership, and wealth accumulation often serve as markers of readiness for marriage or

cohabitation, as economic resources are socially perceived as a prerequisite for providing security within a union (Bacher, 2025).

While men generally enjoy greater societal latitude in marital decisions, their economic independence can enhance both their attractiveness in the marriage market and their confidence in pursuing partnerships at an optimal stage in life. Consequently, economic resources function not merely as a determinant of singlehood but as a factor influencing the timing, quality, and nature of potential partnerships. Cross-cultural evidence highlights the variability in this influence; in societies with high gender equality and robust social support systems, such as certain European countries, the economic independence of both men and women correlates strongly with increased rates of voluntary singlehood and delayed marriage (European Social Survey, 2022).

Conversely, in societies where economic dependence is more culturally reinforced, the impact of financial self-sufficiency on singlehood decisions may be less pronounced or mediated by social expectations and familial pressures. Research indicates that economic independence interacts with psychological and socio-cultural factors to shape singlehood decisions. The perception of financial self-efficacy believing in one's ability to manage resources effectively has been found to correlate with greater likelihood of choosing singlehood as a deliberate life strategy (Furstenberg, 2012). Women with high economic self-efficacy often report prioritizing career development, personal fulfillment, and leisure over traditional marital commitments, reflecting a conscious redefinition of social norms around partnership and independence (Jain et al., 2023).

Similarly, men who achieve financial independence early in life may exercise selective partner choice, delaying marriage until optimal socio-economic and personal conditions are met. Furthermore, qualitative studies reveal that individuals who prioritize autonomy and self-reliance perceive singlehood not as a state of deprivation but as an opportunity for personal growth, mobility, and flexibility in lifestyle choices (Kislev, 2020). These findings underscore that economic independence, while crucial, operates within a complex matrix of psychological motivations, gender norms, and cultural expectations.

Demographic and longitudinal studies have documented the growing trend of singlehood alongside rising economic independence. The European Social Survey, covering multiple cohorts across the last five decades, demonstrates that young adults particularly women are increasingly remaining single or postponing marriage, coinciding with expanded access to education and labor market participation (European Social Survey, 2022).

Similarly, studies in emerging economies such as India reveal that women who secure professional employment in sectors like information technology or finance exhibit a tendency to delay marriage and challenge traditional marital timelines (Jain et al., 2023). These patterns suggest that economic independence is not merely a corollary of singlehood but an active enabler of agency, reshaping the decision-making framework around marriage and partnership.

Moreover, the relationship between economic independence and singlehood is shaped by societal norms and structural factors. In societies where marriage is closely tied to financial stability and social expectations, economic independence provides individuals with leverage to negotiate terms of partnership or opt for prolonged singlehood (Bacher, 2025). Conversely, in contexts where social and familial pressures remain high, the effects of financial autonomy may be moderated, leading individuals to conform to expected marital timelines despite personal readiness for single living.

Gender dynamics are particularly salient; while women's economic independence empowers personal choice, it simultaneously confronts entrenched gender norms that may stigmatize delayed marriage or non-marital living. Studies in Latin American contexts, for example, suggest that even economically independent women navigate complex societal expectations around motherhood and partnership, balancing personal aspirations with external pressures (PMC, 2022).

Economic independence also has broader implications for life-course planning and demographic trends. Voluntary singlehood linked to financial self-sufficiency contributes to delayed childbearing, lower fertility rates, and changes in household formation patterns, which in turn influence urbanization, labor market participation, and social policies (Furstenberg, 2012).

Policymakers increasingly recognize that supporting financial autonomy through equitable access to education, employment, and property rights can facilitate individual choice and gender equality while also shaping population-level outcomes. Importantly, the trend of economically motivated singlehood is not solely negative; it reflects a shift toward individual agency, informed decision-making, and diversified life trajectories that transcend traditional marital structures (Kislev, 2020).

Economic independence is a significant and multifaceted factor influencing singlehood decisions among men and women. For women, financial self-sufficiency empowers autonomy, career prioritization, and delayed or selective marriage, challenging traditional socio-economic dependencies. For men, economic resources influence timing and quality of partnership choices while reinforcing social norms around financial readiness for marriage. Across diverse cultural contexts, economic independence interacts with psychological, social, and cultural dimensions to shape patterns of voluntary singlehood and delayed marriage.

As societies continue to evolve, understanding the dynamics between economic independence and singlehood becomes critical for social scientists, policymakers, and demographers seeking to comprehend changing family structures, gender roles, and life-course decision-making. Future research should further explore these dynamics using longitudinal, cross-cultural, and multi-dimensional approaches that integrate economic, psychological, and socio-cultural variables.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### **A. Economic Independence Hypothesis**

**New Home Economics Theory:** Traditional models of marriage (Becker, etc.) consider specialization and exchange. As women's earnings and human capital increase, the economic incentive to marry (or stay married) may decrease, because the gains from pooling resources or depending on a partner become less attractive.

**Life-cycle Wealth Accumulation:** Economic self-sufficiency also affects savings, investments, and wealth accumulation, shaping long-term life decisions.

### **B. Gender and Financial Independence**

Financial independence is not just about income, but also about control over wealth, power, and decision-making.

There are gender differences in how economic resources and wealth are accumulated and invested, which can shape relationship preferences and union formation.

## **EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE**

### **A. Singlehood Trends and Economic Shifts**

Research using European Social Survey data finds an increase in singlehood among young adults, especially women, across cohorts born from 1930 to 1989.

The rise among women is linked to their growing education and earning capacity, giving them greater opportunities for independent living.

### **B. Economic Independence and Marriage Decisions: Country Case Studies**

In **India**, a study by Jain, Chuphal & Shakarad (2023) found that women who became financially independent (due to the IT-sector boom) delayed marriage and preferred grooms nearer to their own age, compared to earlier periods.

In **Chile**, research on single mothers tests the "economic independence hypothesis": unlike traditional expectations, single mothers' own earnings and education did *not* strongly predict union formation; instead, external supports (government, parents) played a larger role.

In **Germany**, wealth (especially homeownership) is positively associated with entry into marriage or cohabitation, more strongly for men; for women, individual-level homeownership particularly predicts marriage and parenthood.

### **C. Psychological and Sociological Mechanisms**

A study of Greek-speaking participants (both men and women) found that a desire for independence is strongly associated with voluntary singlehood.

Economic self-efficacy (belief in one's ability to succeed financially) formed in adolescence predicts later financial independence. For women, employment and education are particularly important; also, parenthood reduces financial independence more in women than men.

Multilevel analyses across European countries also suggest that more gender-egalitarian societies (where women have greater economic freedom) see higher rates of lifelong singlehood.

#### **D. Broader Economic Narratives**

According to Pew Research, women's gains in education and earnings have altered traditional "spousal benefit" dynamics: more women now bring significant financial resources into relationships, changing patterns of who marries whom.

On a macro-economic level, the demographic shift of single, economically independent women has broad economic impacts: for example, research notes that many women delay or forego marriage to focus on careers, influencing workforce trends.

### **GENDER ASYMMETRIES IN ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE**

Economic independence significantly influences life choices, yet its effects are shaped by pronounced gender asymmetries. Historically, women's access to education, employment, and financial resources has been limited compared to men, resulting in structural economic dependence within familial and marital contexts (Becker, 1981). Even with rising female labor force participation globally, women continue to face disparities in wages, career advancement, and asset accumulation, which affect their ability to achieve full financial autonomy (World Economic Forum, 2023). These gendered differences not only influence economic outcomes but also shape personal life decisions, including the choice to remain single or delay marriage. Women with higher economic independence are more likely to prioritize career development and personal fulfillment, often delaying marital and familial commitments (Jain, Chuphal, & Shakarad, 2023).

Men, on the other hand, often experience social reinforcement linking financial independence to readiness for marriage or partnership. Economic resources, including wealth and property ownership, enhance men's perceived marital attractiveness and societal status, positioning them to exercise selective partner choice (Bacher, 2025). This asymmetry reflects enduring gender norms: women's independence challenges traditional expectations, whereas men's financial autonomy is often socially encouraged and expected. Cross-cultural research indicates that in societies with greater gender equality, the influence of economic independence on singlehood is more evenly distributed, yet women still navigate social pressures surrounding marriage, motherhood, and domestic responsibilities (European Social Survey, 2022).

Moreover, gender asymmetries extend beyond income to wealth control, decision-making power, and access to financial instruments. Women may earn comparable incomes but face limitations in asset ownership or investment opportunities, which can constrain their full autonomy (Furstenberg, 2012). Recognizing these asymmetries is crucial for understanding the intersection of economic independence and life-course decisions, as policies promoting gender equity in financial and educational spheres directly influence individual agency, societal norms, and demographic trends.

### **INDEPENDENCE VS. OTHER MOTIVATIONS FOR SINGLEHOOD**

While economic independence is a major factor influencing singlehood, it operates alongside other motivations that shape individuals' decisions to remain unmarried. Psychological autonomy, personal fulfillment, career aspirations, and lifestyle preferences often intersect with financial self-sufficiency to determine singlehood outcomes (Kislev, 2020). For many individuals, the desire for independence is not purely economic; it encompasses the ability to make decisions without external constraints, pursue personal goals, and maintain control over one's daily life. Studies have shown that individuals with higher levels of self-efficacy and autonomy are more likely to opt for voluntary singlehood, even when they have the option to marry or cohabit (Furstenberg, 2012).

Social and cultural factors also play a significant role. Societal norms, familial expectations, and peer influences can either reinforce or counteract the effects of economic independence. In collectivist societies, for instance, pressure to marry and form a family may lead individuals to conform despite personal readiness for independent living, whereas in individualistic contexts, singlehood may be celebrated as a legitimate lifestyle choice (PMC, 2022). Additionally, emotional and relational considerations, such as previous relationship experiences, fear of commitment, or prioritization of personal growth, often interact with financial autonomy to influence decisions (Kislev, 2020).

Thus, while economic independence provides the material foundation for self-directed life choices, singlehood is rarely the result of financial considerations alone. It emerges from a dynamic interplay of personal values, psychological needs, social norms, and life goals. Understanding this multidimensional motivation is crucial for policymakers and social researchers seeking to contextualize the increasing prevalence of singlehood in modern societies.

### **POLICY AND SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

Economic independence significantly influences singlehood decisions, and its implications extend to policy and societal structures. Financial self-sufficiency enables individuals particularly women to exercise greater autonomy in their personal and professional lives, reducing reliance on marriage for economic security (Furstenberg, 2012). This shift necessitates policy interventions that support equitable access to education, employment opportunities, and wealth accumulation. For instance, initiatives promoting gender pay equality, property rights, and entrepreneurship empower individuals to make voluntary life choices, including the decision to remain single, without facing financial constraints or societal penalties (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2022).

At the societal level, the rise of voluntary singlehood due to economic independence impacts demographic patterns, urbanization, and labor market dynamics. Delayed marriage and childbearing contribute to lower fertility rates and changes in household structures, prompting policymakers to consider social support systems such as childcare services, housing policies, and healthcare access that accommodate diverse family arrangements (Jain, Chuphal, & Shakarad, 2023). Additionally, cultural norms may lag behind these economic changes, leading to social tensions or stigmatization of single individuals, particularly women, in communities where marital status is closely tied to social acceptance. Addressing these social challenges requires public awareness campaigns, community-based support networks, and legal frameworks that protect the rights of single individuals (Kislev, 2020).

Furthermore, recognizing economic independence as a driver of voluntary singlehood underscores the importance of longitudinal and cross-cultural policy research. Policies that encourage financial autonomy, reduce gender-based economic disparities, and facilitate independent living not only empower individuals but also contribute to broader social development. In this context, economic independence is both a personal asset and a societal factor that shapes evolving family structures, gender dynamics, and demographic outcomes.

### **LIMITATIONS IN CURRENT RESEARCH**

Despite the growing body of research examining the relationship between economic independence and singlehood decisions among men and women, several limitations remain that restrict a comprehensive understanding of this complex phenomenon. First, a significant proportion of studies are cross-sectional, which limits the ability to establish causality. While associations between financial self-sufficiency and voluntary singlehood are well-documented, the directionality of these relationships remains unclear. For instance, it is difficult to determine whether economic independence directly encourages singlehood, or whether individuals who choose to remain single invest more in achieving financial autonomy (Furstenberg, 2012). Longitudinal studies, which could trace individuals' life-course trajectories and the temporal relationship between economic independence and union formation, are still relatively scarce.

Second, much of the existing research is geographically and culturally biased. A majority of studies have been conducted in Western societies, such as Europe and North America, where social norms, gender equality policies, and labor market opportunities differ markedly from other regions. Findings from these contexts may not be generalizable

to countries with distinct cultural expectations, gender roles, or economic structures. For example, in many parts of South Asia or Latin America, familial pressures, dowry expectations, or gendered labor market restrictions may mediate the influence of economic independence on singlehood in ways not captured by Western-centric research (Jain, Chuphal, & Shakarad, 2023; PMC, 2022).

Third, conceptual and methodological inconsistencies complicate comparisons across studies. Economic independence is operationalized differently across research, sometimes measured solely through income or employment status, while other studies consider broader dimensions such as asset ownership, financial literacy, and subjective perceptions of financial autonomy (Kislev, 2020). Similarly, singlehood is often treated as a binary outcome without distinguishing between voluntary singlehood, involuntary singlehood, cohabitation, or serial partnerships. Such variations in measurement reduce the comparability of findings and may obscure nuanced gendered patterns.

Fourth, the psychological and socio-cultural mediators of economic independence on singlehood are underexplored. While some studies highlight the role of autonomy, life satisfaction, and career orientation, the interactions between economic resources and subjective motivations remain insufficiently analyzed (Bacher, 2025). Similarly, social norms, peer influences, and familial expectations often intersect with financial independence, but many quantitative studies fail to account for these contextual factors, potentially oversimplifying the relationship.

## II. CONCLUSION

Economic independence plays a significant role in influencing singlehood decisions. As individuals gain financial self-sufficiency, they have more agency to choose if, when, and whom to partner with. However, this relationship is nuanced: financial independence interacts with psychological desires, social norms, and life-cycle factors. Future research should further unpack these dynamics, use longitudinal data, and broaden cultural contexts. Economic independence plays a critical and multifaceted role in shaping singlehood decisions among men and women. For women, financial self-sufficiency provides autonomy, enabling them to prioritize personal development, career goals, and lifestyle preferences over traditional marital expectations. This empowerment has contributed to rising rates of voluntary singlehood and delayed marriage in diverse cultural contexts (Jain, Chuphal, & Shakarad, 2023; Kislev, 2020).

For men, economic stability and asset accumulation often influence the timing and quality of partnership decisions, reinforcing societal perceptions of readiness for marriage (Bacher, 2025). Across genders, the relationship between economic independence and singlehood is mediated by psychological factors such as self-efficacy, social norms, and cultural expectations, highlighting the complexity of the phenomenon (Furstenberg, 2012). Despite its significance, current research faces limitations, including cross-sectional designs, cultural biases, and inconsistent operationalization of both economic independence and singlehood. Nonetheless, evidence consistently suggests that financial autonomy enhances personal agency, reshaping traditional family structures and life-course trajectories. Recognizing the interplay between economic resources, gender dynamics, and societal norms is essential for understanding contemporary patterns of singlehood, informing policy on gender equality, and anticipating demographic trends in increasingly independent populations.

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