

Exploring Gender Dynamics in Morocco Through the Work of Marriage Brokers

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ABSTRACT

This article explores gender-driven dynamics in the Moroccan marriage market in light of the country's promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment. Because matchmaking has become a more structured business enterprise, it makes investigating mating patterns more informative. This research examines the case of a Moroccan matchmaker whose exchanges on her Facebook page offer pertinent data on the Moroccan mating market. Three questions guided data collection and analysis procedures. First, what profiles seek matchmaking services? Second, what expectations do men and women have? Third, how do these profiles and expectations explain the changes impacting marital relations in Moroccan society? Data analysis has unveiled four significant findings. First, undergoing socioeconomic pressure has pushed many women to take the initiative in the mating market. Second, marriage for many women is a vital means of socioeconomic security. Third, despite Morocco's restrictive policy on polygamy, many women are willing to engage with polygamous men to boost their chances of finding a spouse. Fourth, supporting a family is still perceived as a man's obligation, even when a woman is professionally active.

Keywords- gender-specific expectations, matchmaking, precariousness, socioeconomic dynamics.

I. INTRODUCTION

Matchmaking has been integral to building marital relations in Moroccan society. Al-khatibah, a female matchmaker, is a mediator between a potential couple and receives financial compensation for her service. She often has a reputable social status and strong ties within her community. When gender relations are subject to close monitoring, men and women do not enjoy proximity beyond the family circle; thus, people seek al-khatibah's service to facilitate breaking gender-based boundaries without disrupting social values. By

collecting relevant information, *al-khatibah* matches the profiles available to her and her clients' requests. This process costs her months of legwork and consulting numerous sources to widen her research.

Families' role in the marriage market has decreased significantly in the past few years, leading to a decline of traditional marriages, notably arranged marriages, and putting the responsibility of finding a spouse on the individual man and woman. Family members, especially parents and grandparents, played a vital role in matchmaking; they either found a suitable match for their sons or daughters within their entourage (extensive family, friends, and neighbors) or hired a

marriage broker to facilitate finding a potential spouse. Matchmaking has been accepted and sought because it promotes a socially and religiously permissible reason, vis., marriage.

Ahmed Siddiqi, a sociology researcher at Sidi Mohammed Benabdallah University in Fez, states that *al-khatibah* contributed to the cohesion of social ties within the Oasis community in the southeastern part of Morocco (Benherar, 2022). She was a mediator between two families and took part in weaving social relations in the Filali cultural system; thus, *al-khatibah* was a channel that linked two individuals willing to get married but did not know anything about each other than what she told them (Benherar, 2022). The matchmaker’s deeply rooted connections enabled her to accumulate a rich and varied repertoire of information about potential spouses, helping her clients save time and energy.

Al-khatibah’s role is significant because she promotes serious relationships. Unstructured and open-ended romantic relationships can last for years before they are officiated unless they break up prematurely. Conversely, resorting to *al-khatibah* serves both men and women as it prevents investing time and resources in lingering relationships as both parties know beforehand what they are up to when they seek her service. In addition, professional matchmakers ensure that ‘getting to know each other’ does not extend beyond reasonable time as, first and foremost, it is bad for business and second, it negatively affects their efficiency, and by extension their reputation in the marriage market.

To keep pace with today’s rapid, tech-driven transformations, the tasks and methods of matchmakers have evolved, allowing them to maintain their status despite the change in customs and mentalities (al-Ashraf, 2017). Modern communication media have impacted the patterns of social relationships, including the forms of mating. Several individual actors and organized entities have entered the business of marriage brokerage, making it more flexible and accessible regardless of one’s geographical location. Equally important, social media have enriched the repertoire of candidates that matchmakers can use to run their businesses more efficiently. This tech-driven transformation has granted *al-khatibah* access to profiles from different parts of the world, giving her business activity a transnational outlook.

This research has relied on secondary data that a female matchmaker uploaded to her Facebook page. *Zawaj Express* [Express Marriage] is a Facebook page created on May 4, 2016, and has more than 178K followers (last accessed on July 21st, 2024). Besides receiving calls from people living in Morocco, the matchmaker receives proposals from the Middle East and Europe, primarily France, Spain, Belgium, and England since these countries host a large Moroccan expat community. I analyzed 309 marriage proposals

uploaded between April 15th and July 21st, 2024. I selected only the participants who live in Morocco to provide an analytic approach adapted to the specificity of the Moroccan socioeconomic and cultural context.

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II. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

2.1 Offer and demand

Like any business enterprise, matchmaking is subject to offer and demand. The pool of potential customers has expanded due to the significant increase of unmarried men and women in the last two decades. In addition to the rise of singlehood among men and women, who either voluntarily or involuntarily choose to remain unmarried,¹ there has been an upsurge in divorce cases in the past two decades.

Table 1: Marital status in 2021 (%)

	Single	Married	Widow(er)	Divorced
Females	28	57.6	10.8	3.5
Males	40.5	57.6	0.8	1

Note. From Haut-Commissariat au Plan, 2022, p. 14

Theoretically, more than 42% of Moroccans are potential clients of marriage brokers. In the marriage market, one’s attributes, such as market skills, age, and beauty, might determine his/her quality (Douglas, 2005, p. 24) and their chances of getting engaged. The age of marriage has reached 25.5 years among women and 31.9 years among men (Haut-Commissariat au Plan, 2022, p. 14). Women’s willingness to finish their studies and

¹ Evans (2023) has argued that marriage rates tend to fall with secularization, individualism, and gender parity in earnings. A socioeconomic and political analysis would support that these three policies are pertinent to Morocco’s current situation. Morocco’s liberal policies have caused a decline in religiosity, especially one’s abstinence from sexual transgression; the feminization of employment, giving women the capacity to support themselves; and a decline in the family’s interference in the personal affairs of their children. These factors have had notable repercussions in the Moroccan marriage market.

build a career occurs at the expense of their reproductive clock. Cultural, social, and political transformations have also caused an upsurge of singlehood, especially among men, triggering a sexual liberalization that has given men and women alternative paths to satisfy their biological needs without investing in long-term, serious relationships that may/may not work. However, at some point getting married becomes a pressing issue, especially for women due to their short reproductive span in comparison to men's. This pressure is probably the main reason women seek matchmakers' services in significant numbers (see Fig. 1).

Because of the increasing demand, marriage brokerage has become a more structured business today. Several agencies and individuals are now offering their services in Morocco. Access to modern means of communication has made matchmaking a promising income-generating activity.² This business is run via websites (such as www.unicis.com & www.mawada.net), applications (such as *Zwaj-Moroco*, *al-Maaqool*, & *AYNAANTI*), and individual matchmakers active on social media (such as the case under study). Institutionalizing matchmaking has greatly benefited from the outreach capacities of modern communication technologies. Traditional matchmaking was constrained by the boundaries of the community within which *al-khatibah* was located. Conversely, modern communication technologies enable matchmakers to connect men and women from different geographical locations, including Moroccans living abroad. The growth of online matchmaking might indicate that traditional marriage, which rests on finding a spouse within one's immediate entourage, is losing ground to the borderless matchmaking enterprise.

The growth of this business is due to several socioeconomic transformations. The first prominent factor is the upsurge of unmarried adults (in this broad category we can include single and divorced men and women as well as widows and widowers). In addition to the unprecedented numbers of single men and women, who (in)voluntarily remain unmarried, there has been a groundswell upsurge of divorce rates in the last two decades (see e.g. Khayr Zada, 2010, pp. 275-298). Morocco's adoption of a new family law in 2004 contributed to this upsurge, notably because it has granted women the right to initiate divorce without having to provide evidence for marital abuse as was the

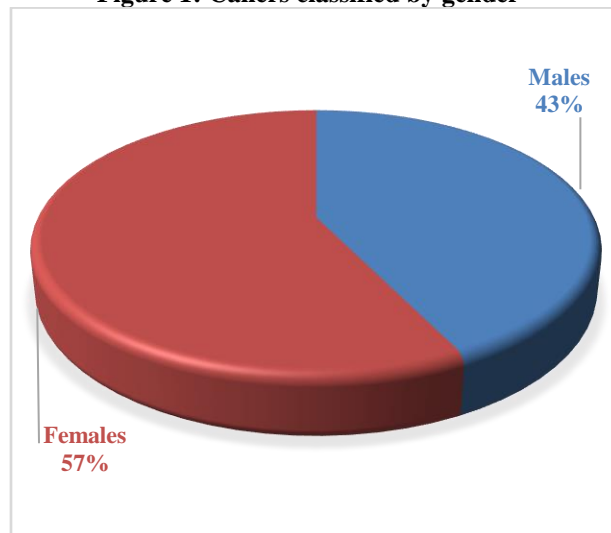
case in the Family Law adopted in 1957, and modified slightly in 1993. Thus, divorce has become much easier and more accessible, especially for women.

The upsurge of unmarried men and women has created a demand for matchmaking services. In economic terms, demand for marriage has turned into an offer, leading to the emergence of organized, often online, matchmaking enterprises. The massive pool of potential marriage seekers explains the significant demands for matchmakers, both individuals and institutions, as will be further explained below.

2.2 Constructing a profile of matchmaking customers

Men usually take the initiative in the mating market; whereas women react to men's proposals by accepting or refusing. However, due to several social, economic, and cultural changes in the past decades, gender roles in the mating market have seen a notable shift.

Figure 1: Callers classified by gender



The fact that more females are reaching out to the matchmaker than males unveils a notable gender-driven shift in the Moroccan mating market. So, what factors explain this shift? Being unmarried (single, divorced, or widow(er)) cuts across both sexes (see Table 1). However, biology favors men as their fertility span is longer than women's. Unlike males, who can marry and have kids beyond their fifties, females start feeling pressure to start a family upon reaching their late 20s.

Online matchmaking is beneficial because it offers adequate anonymity for its users; thus, women can make their proposals without exposing their identities. Since proposing has been a male role, women's initiative in the mating market might be received negatively; it might be interpreted as women's desperate search for a

² There are no official statistics on the number of entities (organized businesses and individual actors) engaged in the matchmaking business or the gross revenue of this activity. Based on the case under study, the matchmaker receives dozens of requests every month via her Facebook page and WhatsApp number. Given that the matchmaker charges approximately 100 USD for her service, she would make good, untaxable money since her work is still classified as informal business.

spouse and an indicator that they have failed to attract men within their circle of acquaintances.³

Morocco’s promotion of gender equality and women’s empowerment has encouraged women to take the initiative in the mating market. Women’s status has evolved over the past two decades. Notably, Morocco has seen full-scale feminization of education and employment. These transformations have impacted gender dynamics in the family. Thus, women’s initiative in the mating market might be considered an exercise of freedom and an indicator of their empowered status in society.

Seeking matchmakers’ services can also be explained as women’s search for economic stability. Unlike men, who often look for unemployed women (housewives), women never accept marrying unemployed men. In addition, socioeconomic vulnerability is common among the female callers; 57.80% are housewives, 63.58% have not gone beyond high school, and 18.51% have never been to school. Besides, many of these women have not acquired an income-generating skill that could help them get a job and gain a living. Further, despite being numerically insignificant, 2.31% of the female callers are still students. This signifies that some females prefer seeking financial stability through marriage over pursuing their education and building a career.⁴ Thus, unlike many women who enjoy sustainable family support or have attained financial autonomy, many others still view marriage as a “form of insurance,” for instance in case of joblessness (Louzek, 2022, p. 303).

Probably because the matchmaker believes women undergo more pressure in the marriage market than men, she tries to get more information from them. That’s why, women are asked more questions than men. In her exchanges with the callers, the matchmaker asks women up to 20 questions; whereas she asks men 15.

Table 2: Questions directed to men and women

Questions	Men	Women
What is your name?	√	√

³ On several occasions, when the matchmaker receives a call from a single woman who might be considered too old, she asks her if anybody proposed (knocked on her door). Several respondents said that the men who approached them never took the last step.

⁴ Prioritizing socioeconomic stability through marriage over pursuing a career or acquiring an income-generating skill could explain the continuance of underage marriages in Morocco. Of the 269 978 marriages officiated in 2021, 19 369 (7.2%) were of underage girls (Haut-Commissariat au Plan, 2022, p. 16). Although it is numerically insignificant, NGOs and officials still express concerns about underage marriage in Morocco and call for serious measures to put an end to it (see e.g. kingdom of Morocco, 2022).

How old are you?	√	√
Where do you live (rural/urban area)	√	√
What is your marital status?	√	√
Do you have kids? How many? (in case the caller were divorced or a widow(er))	√	√
What is your educational level?	√	√
What is your job?	√	√
Where are you going to settle after marriage? (own house, rent, live with family)	√	X
Do you have any addiction? (smoking, drugs, alcohol, gambling)	√	X
Do you pray?	√	√
Do you put the veil/ face cover on? Would you accept putting on the face cover after marriage?	X	√
Do you suffer from any illness?	√	√
How old should your potential spouse be?	√	√
What should the marital status of your potential spouse be?	√	√
Would you accept a working spouse?	√	X
Should your potential spouse be educated?	√	√
Would you accept getting engaged to a married man?	X	√
Would you accept living with your husband’s family?	X	√
Would you accept living/moving to the countryside?	X	√
Would you like to work after getting married?	X	√
Do you have any specifications on the work of the potential spouse?	X	√
Are you a good cook?	X	√
Have you acquired any skill(s)? (asked to women who have dropped out of school)	X	√

It appears the matchmaker wants to collect more information about women than men, putting more pressure on the former than the latter. Several reasons might explain this gender-specific variation. First, women’s fertility span is shorter than men’s, giving

women less flexibility to postpone marriage and have children. Second, marriage for women is often a means to socioeconomic stability, especially given the high unemployment rate among them. In 2021, for instance, females represented 73.4% of the Moroccans above 15 who were inactive in the job market (Haut-Commissariat au Plan, 2022, p. 58), making men the primary financial providers for families in the country and the leading investors in the mating market. This financial superiority gives men a wider pool of possible candidates and presses women into presenting themselves persuasively.

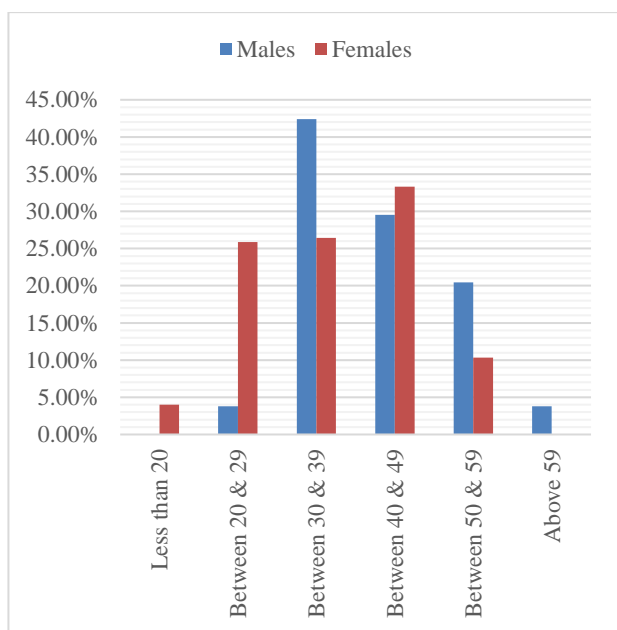


Figure 2: Callers classified by age

In the 1960s, the marriage age was 17 for women and 24 for men; today it is 25.5 for women and 31.9 for men (Al-Ashraf, 2022a). This significant rise is due to skyrocketing living expenses, unemployment among youth, and shifts in social values, which have caused a decline in the value of marriage and triggered a premarital sexual explosion in Morocco (Al-Ashraf, 2022a). Besides, females’ access to education (see Haut-Commissariat au Plan, 2022, pp. 45-54) and the job market (see Haut-Commissariat au Plan, 2022, pp. 57-89) have delayed getting married for both men and women. The significant length of an educational path has repercussions on women getting married in their prime reproductive years: late 20s-early 30s (Davidson, 2022). Educated women are also demanding in terms of their expectations from a marital bond.

Gender-egalitarian discourse and women’s empowering policies, notably feminizing education and the job market, and gender-sensitive legal reforms have impacted women’s expectations from a marital bond and their decision on who and when to marry. As women foster their socioeconomic capital, their pool of

marriageable candidates shrinks, leaving many without a suitable match. Women’s motivation to advance their professional capital is founded on their desire to gain a sense of security, thereby pushing them to postpone getting engaged. On the other hand, working women ‘push away’, either voluntarily or involuntarily, men who are below their professional aptitude.

Women’s increasing demand for matchmaking services is also due to increased divorce rates. This factor has created a promising business opportunity as it provides a large customer base for the matchmaking enterprise.

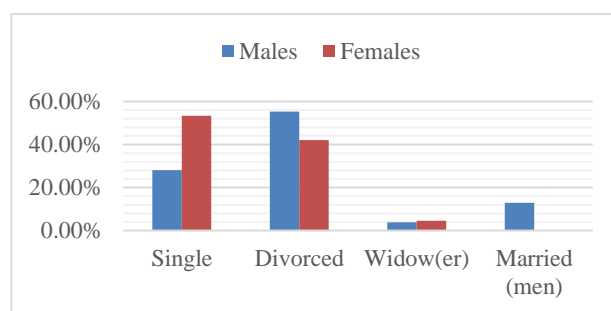


Figure 3: Callers classified by marital status

The Moroccan family has undergone significant transformations in the past decades. Economic, cultural, social, and legal changes have had several gender-specific repercussions. For instance, the soaring living expenses have put burdensome pressure on Moroccan families (Atiqui, 2024), impeding their capacity to start and support a family. Legal reform has also had a notable impact on families. Although it has brought significant positive outcomes to the family, especially for women and their kids (see e.g. Mohamed VI, 2019, Vol. 2, pp. 221-225), reform of the Family Law in 2004 has disrupted family life in several ways. For instance, divorce rates have increased significantly due to the introduction of new divorce laws.⁵

Table 3: Divorce numbers in Morocco

	2010	2020	2021 ⁶
Number of divorce cases	56016	59256	92035

Note. From Haut-Commissariat au Plan, 2022, p. 16

Sociologist Rachid Jarmouni has argued that the soaring divorce cases point to a shift in societal values in the country (Al-Ashraf, 2022b). It is also due

⁵ See Douglas (2005) and Becker (1986) for a discussion of the impact of divorce laws on the rise of divorce cases.

⁶ Notably, the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to the alarming upsurge of divorce cases as the lockdown caused serious socioeconomic upheavals that had serious consequences on many families (see e.g. Hadouch, 2021).

to the reform of the Family Law in 2004, which granted women access to divorce without providing evidence of marital abuse. It also granted women custody and the right to child support, making divorce ‘economically efficient,’ especially for financially autonomous women. In light of the incremental prominence of women’s rights, financial autonomy, and emancipation, which are supported by a state-mandated gender-sensitive policy, women seemingly have begun to overcome the social stigma attached to divorce, which has tainted the image of divorced women in Moroccan society.⁷

On several occasions, the matchmaker stresses that divorced women, especially if they have kids, face more difficulties in their search for spouses. Since 42.04% of the female callers are divorced and 37.83% of these divorcees have at least one kid, seeking matchmaking services might indicate that women without a sustainable source of income undergo significant pressure in the mating market. When women struggle financially and are responsible for the upkeep of their kids, they put much premium on the financial benefits of marriage (Evans, 2023). Therefore, one of the pieces of advice the matchmaker gives to these women is to accept getting engaged to divorced men or widowers with kids so they can expand the pool of potential candidates. Besides, both spouses enter a marital relationship on equal footing, at least due to the ‘burden’ (kids) they bring to the table. She also advises these women to expand the age range of potential candidates to boost their chances of finding a man willing to provide for another man’s kids.

Calling the matchmaker can be due to women’s desperation and failure to attract suitors within their entourage. This is more pertinent when a woman belongs to a disadvantaged group in the mating market, notably divorced or widows with kids. These categories face serious obstacles, especially in light of the extended family’s decreasing role in supporting their precarious members.

The educational background of potential spouses is not significant for the callers. When asked about this criterion, male and female callers often put a premium on ‘awareness’ rather than holding a formal degree, stressing that there is no correlation between educational attainment (holding a degree) and having an adequate level of awareness. Men usually accept women less educated than themselves, which is congruent with

⁷ In several of her exchanges with women, the matchmaker seems convinced that many file for divorce for no solid reason. The matchmaker reprimands women’s rush to divorce without critically considering the hardships that come with raising kids single-handedly. This admonishment comes from her confidence that divorced women with kids struggle in their search for a job adaptable to their circumstances or attracting a man who can provide for them. Thus, she strongly advises married women to work hard to preserve their marriage.

their acceptance of marrying women with lower socioeconomic status; this is probably due to their fear of losing power to educated (empowered) women. Several men have argued that educated women are hard to come by. The matchmaker, though a woman herself, agrees with men’s preference for women who are less educated than themselves as it is challenging to establish communication channels with educated women since they are often thick-headed and unwilling to make compromises.

2.3 Rhetoric of saving

Verse 4:21 of the Holy Quran refers to marriage as a strong bond between a man and a woman. This bond aims to fulfill one of Islam’s five ultimate objectives: preserving progeny.⁸ The sanctity of marriage is also articulated in the Moroccan Family Law. Article 4 defines marriage as “a covenant of (mutual) consent and a legal/religious bonding between a man and a woman on a permanent basis. The purpose of marriage is to preserve purity and create a stable family under the care of the spouses in accordance with the provisions of this Code.” The religious/spiritual significance of marriage is also articulated in a common expression in Morocco; when a man wants to communicate his desire to get married, he would say, “I intend to perfect my *deen* (religion).” This expression reflects the significance of marriage to one’s spiritual fortitude and moral uprightness, since getting married would be a cushion against transgression.

To further highlight this aspect, the matchmaker includes questions about the callers’ religious aptitude.⁹ She asks male and female callers if they pray (93.26% of men and almost 100% of women said yes) and specifically asks female callers if they don the veil (84.24% said yes). Although these two criteria aim to evaluate one’s religiosity, donning the veil and observing prayer are not exclusive evidence of one’s religiosity (see Hamada, 2018 for an elaborate

⁸ According to Muslim scholars, Islamic law (*Al-Shari’ah*) aims to achieve five ultimate objectives (called *Maqasid Al-Shari’ah*): the preservation of the self, the preservation of the reason, the preservation of the religion, the preservation of the property/monetary, and the preservation of lineage (Egypt’s Dar Al-Ifta, n.d.). To preserve one’s lineage, the prophet said, “Marry women who are loving and *very prolific*, for I shall *outnumber* the peoples by you” (Italics added, <https://sunnah.com/mishkat:3091>).

⁹ Prophet Mohamed said, “When someone with whose religion and character you are satisfied asks your daughter in marriage, accede to his request. If you do not do so there will be temptation in the earth and extensive corruption” (<https://sunnah.com/mishkat:3090>). In this prophetic oral tradition, moral uprightness is to be prioritized over material wealth when evaluating a man’s proposal to marry one’s daughter. In reality, it seems women prioritize financial aptitude over moral uprightness.

discussion of this concept). Still, they appear to be among the significant requirements for marriage seekers.

Besides the spiritual/religious basis of marriage, getting married is driven by economic motives that inform people's decision to engage in a marital bond (Karkoub, 2020, p. 188). This aspect is more significant for women than it is for men. Several indicators showcase that many female callers view marriage from an economic perspective. First, women often seek to marry up financially and not intellectually. Women have shown far less concern about the educational level of potential partners than their capacity to sustain the family. Second, women prefer engaging with economically secure men even if this means disregarding the significant age gap between them (Table 5). In this respect, the matchmaker often advises women seeking to enhance their financial status to increase their acceptable age gap between themselves and potential candidates since she believes the younger men are, the less likely they can sustain a family. Third, several female callers have expressed their desire to marry men who reside abroad, and several rural women have expressed their desire to marry men who live in the city, both indicators of viewing marriage as a means of financial upgrading. Fourth, several working women will quit their jobs¹⁰ once they find a suitor. This willingness can be interpreted as their desire to showcase their commitment to fulfilling their home obligations.

Although female callers highlight that they are looking for a *weld al-nas*,¹¹ their exchanges with the matchmaker mostly revolve around the capacity of the male candidates to sustain the household. Because socioeconomic precariousness is a female phenomenon (Zaher, 2015), many women want to enhance their socioeconomic status through marriage. Building a career can occur at the expense of women's procreation chances, pushing many to prioritize getting married over building a career (see Asabii, 2006, pp. 79-121).¹² In addition, because feminizing the workplace has not covered many professional sectors (see Haut-

Commissariat au Plan, 2022, pp. 58-80), career choices are far less limited for women than men. Last, securing an income and providing for a family are still perceived as a man's obligation, relieving many females of the pressure to sustain themselves and their families. So despite the salience of gender equality discourse, which means, among other things, sharing household financial responsibilities, many women still view marriage as a safety net, a means towards socioeconomic ascension, or a relief from the burden of building a career.

2.4 Polygamy

Polygamous marriages represented only 0.4% of the overall marriages in Morocco in 2021 (Haut-Commissariat au Plan, 2022, p. 16). Several factors explain this scarcity. First and foremost, economic transformations have made polygamy costly. Second, gender-sensitive discourse has considered taking more than one wife an onslaught on women's dignity, making it undesired despite being permissible in Islamic tradition. Third, Morocco has put several legal restrictions on polygamy to limit men's access to it.

Moroccan Family Law¹³ has outlined the legal procedure to gain permission to practice polygamy (see Al-Chafii, 2010, pp. 178-183; Al-Rih, 2013). It also lists several stipulations aiming to restrict polygamous marriages and ensure they are practiced under judicial supervision.¹⁴ For instance, it has stipulated that men who intend to take another wife should provide evidence of their capacity to support more than one family (Article 41). Men should also offer a strong reason to justify seeking to take another wife (Article 41), such as the wife's illness or incapacity to reproduce (Al-Chafii, 2010, p. 181). Also, if a woman stipulates that her husband cannot take another wife in a prenup agreement, her husband will not be granted permission in a Family Court (Article 40). Polygamy is not permitted if there is fear of unfair treatment (Article 40).¹⁵

Only 12.87% of male callers are married and want to take another wife. These men provided four reasons to 'justify' seeking to take another wife. First,

¹⁰ It is important to distinguish between 'job' and 'career'. According to www.Dictionary.com, a job is a full-time or part-time employment post. On the other hand, a career is "an occupation or profession, especially one requiring special training, followed as one's lifework." In this sense, people may perform several jobs in their lifetime, whereas they usually dedicate themselves to a single career.

¹¹ *Bent al-nas* (literally 'daughter of the people') and *weld al-nas* (literally 'son of the people') can be translated as 'son or daughter of good people'. In the Moroccan context, they refer to people with good manners, which are the outcomes of a good upbringing.

¹² A woman who has not attracted suitors is pejoratively called *bayra*, literally infertile/barren (see Ennaji, 2016). This 'label' is often used to name-shame a woman who is implicitly held responsible for driving men away, either because she falls short of the norms of beauty or is too demanding.

¹³ Reform of the Family Law in 2004 was part of a multifaceted gender-sensitive policy to enhance women's status in Morocco. These measures have gained momentum since King Mohamed VI assumed the throne in 1999 (see e.g. Al-Uthmani & Al-Musali, 2021; Kingdom of Morocco, 2020).

¹⁴ Before the reform of the Family Law in 2004, men could marry another wife without the consent, and sometimes the knowledge, of the first wife. The 2004 Family Law stipulates that taking another wife has to receive a judge's approval after providing evidence that the first wife is informed of her husband's intention to marry again. This stipulation has made polygamy an exception rather than a 'right' every man is entitled to.

¹⁵ Article 40 of the Family Law articulates verse 4:3 of the Holy Quran that commands husbands to be fair in their treatment of their wives in case of polygamy (see also Ben Lamqadem, 2006, p. 26).

their wives cannot give birth; second, there is emotional distance between them and their wives, on the one hand, and they refuse to divorce them, on the other hand; third, some married men have argued that since they are financially able to support more than one family, they can take another wife; fourth and last, some of the married men have argued that since polygamy is permissible in Islam, they are entitled to it.

On the other hand, 23.78% of the female callers have expressed their willingness to engage with polygamous men, indicating that more women are willing to engage with married men than men willing to take more than one wife. Several reasons may explain women’s approval of entering into polygamous marriages.¹⁶ First and foremost, the older a woman gets, the more likely she will accept polygamy.

Table 4: Women accepting polygamy based on their age

Count <i>n</i>	Mean	Median	Mode	Minimum	Maximum
37	42.05	41	43	29	57

The older a woman gets, the more compromises she makes, especially when she is unemployed, professionally insecure, or afraid her family support is unsustainable. Besides, Morocco has not built a strong public welfare for people living in precarious conditions, forcing them to search for alternative ways to secure a living. On the other hand, polygamous men, especially given their marital status and sometimes old age, usually lower their expectations regarding the women they would take as another wife, providing women with less attractive profiles, especially divorced or widows with kids, a chance to find suitors. Polygamy, then, is an economic institution that can secure a sustainable source of income for women.¹⁷

Women’s marital status is also a significant factor that justifies their engagement to married men. For instance, divorced women, especially if they have kids, and widows would most likely agree to polygamy. Divorced women face more challenges to get re-married, especially because men usually search for single women and women younger than themselves. It is far more challenging for a divorced woman with kids to find a

¹⁶ Becker (1974a & 1974b), Grossbard (2016), and Louzek (2022) have provided an insightful discussion of polygamy as an economic phenomenon.

¹⁷ This economic approach to polygamy is incongruent with a women’s rights perspective. Many feminists call for the abolition of this institution despite the lack of a strong socioeconomic safety net that could help women in precarious conditions deal with the psychological, social, and economic difficulties they face.

man who will take a double-fold responsibility, especially given the fact that mothers often take custody of their children after divorce. For this reason, women’s acceptance of polygamous husbands is probably a ‘sacrifice’ they will make to secure a living for themselves and their children.

Being divorced or a widow with kids is a serious challenge for many women seeking to remarry, pushing them to make compromises. For this reason, the matchmaker encourages this category to accept polygamy, implying that it might be the *only* way for them to find a suitor. Because 42.10% of divorced women have kids and the majority are either unemployed or without a sustainable source of income, attracting men who would empathize with their socioeconomic status is hard. Women with kids are the most vulnerable category as they are required to find men willing to take care of them and their kids. In this sense, engaging in a polygamous marriage is a way out of socioeconomic precariousness and an opportunity to overcome the challenge of raising kids single-handedly.

2.5 Women’s work: An asset or a liability

Despite women’s increasing entry into the job market, it seems marriage is still viewed from a ‘complementarity’ perspective. Men are still perceived as the default financial providers, whereas women are perceived as homemakers (see Ouchelh, 2024). When a wife has a job, her income is considered secondary to that of her husband; thus, she is not obligated to contribute to the household expenses (see Ouchelh, 2024).

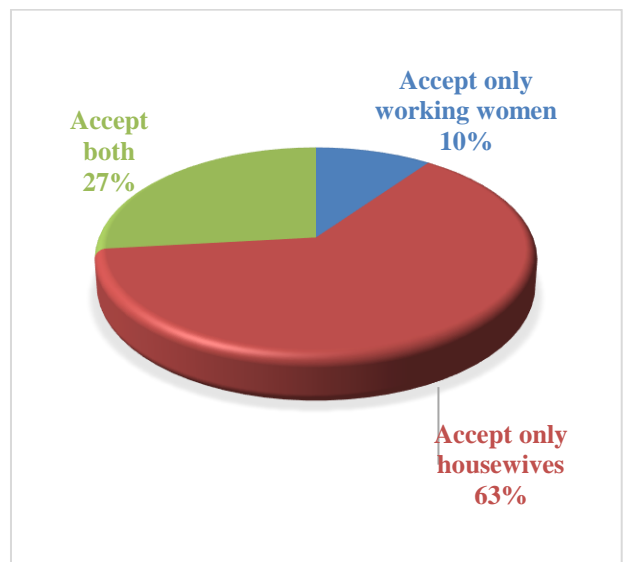


Figure 4: Men’s attitudes towards the work of the potential spouse

Despite the skyrocketing life expenses and women’s increasing access to employment, 63% of male callers look for housewives rather than working women.

This matches the profile of many female callers as 57.80% of them are housewives and only 17.46% of the women who have a job are unwilling to give it up when they get married. Most working women have either expressed their willingness to retain their jobs if the potential husband is looking for a professionally active wife or communicated their desire to quit their job once they get engaged.¹⁸ This indicates that most men and women consider supporting a family a man's responsibility.

Women have provided two reasons to explain their willingness to quit their jobs. First, marriage can be a relief from hard work. They believe that since men still must provide for the family, getting married gives women a chance to offload this burden. Second, giving up their job would help them devote their time and effort to household obligations, especially raising kids. Women's work, thus, is neither considered a right nor an obligation but a burden that getting married can relieve women of, especially because many of them perform jobs that are informal, underpaid, and unsustainable.¹⁹ Women give up their jobs, hence their financial autonomy, in exchange for a financially secure family life. Some women have clearly stated that they were tired of working and wanted to put their effort into fulfilling household chores, fostering men's responsibility to sustain the family and women's obligation towards meeting the needs of the husband and kids. This further supports that complementarity, whereby the husband is the breadwinner and the woman is the housewife, remains the foundation of many spousal relationships in Morocco.

Women's search for a financially secure relationship and their willingness to give up their jobs

¹⁸ Women's willingness to give up their jobs voluntarily or accepting that their husbands have the final say on this matter fittingly translates the Quranic verse 4:34, which states, "Men are in charge of [are guardians of/are superior to/have authority over] women (*alrijalu qawwamuna 'ala l-msa'*) because God has endowed one with more [because God has preferred some of them over others] (*bi-mafaddala AUahu ba'dahum 'ala ba'din*) and because they spend of their means (*wa-bi-ma'anfaqu min amwalihim*). Therefore, the righteous women are obedient, guarding in secret that which God has guarded. As to those from whom you fear rebellion, admonish them and banish them to separate beds, and beat them. Then if they obey you, seek not a way against them. For God is Exalted, Great" (Stowasser, 1997, p. 33).

¹⁹ Socioeconomic security is understood as feeling socially secure (being married and having a man's support) and financially (having a sustainable source of income to meet one's needs). In this sense, marriage for many women, especially divorcees and widows with kids, is a safety net that protects them from life's upheavals, especially because only 18.2% of married women are active in the job market (Haut-Commissariat au Plan, 2022, p. 65), forcing many to rely on their husbands for their upkeep.

(and not careers)²⁰ indicate that getting married is often a decision informed by women's socioeconomic status, since they usually look for men who can enhance their lives. Thus, many female callers seek to maximize benefits by making 'strategic sacrifices', such as marrying older men, putting face covers on, or giving up their jobs if their potential husbands want them to.

2.6 Marriage and women's precariousness

The age gap between wives and husbands is still significant in Morocco. The main reason for this gap is that building a career and having the means to propose and support a family take time; when men do that, they often look for young, single women. As for women, they prioritize financially secure men. That is why many women give up their education and even jobs to get married as they are, in a sense, exchanging their youth²¹ for socioeconomic stability. In contrast, men do not usually prioritize women's financial status; they even prefer women without a source of income to be the sole providers for the family.

Table 5: Age range: Men vs. Women (in years)

	Mean	Minimum	Maximum	Count <i>n</i>
Males	-6.57	0	-29	98
Females	+12.46	+2	+45	141

Socioeconomic precariousness is a notable feature among female callers. More than 82% have not gone beyond secondary education; many have never held a job nor acquired an income-generating skill. Getting married might be the only way to satisfy their everyday needs, especially due to Morocco's lack of a strong social security net.²² Finding a provider guides women's

²⁰ In this context, it is improbable that a public servant or a woman with a secure occupation in the private sector gives up her career even if the husband is well-to-do, especially because in case of divorce, a woman's housework is neither valued nor compensated. In addition, women holding these jobs, especially in the public sector, have reasonable working hours and better working conditions. Further, women who have secure jobs can attract a category of men, usually public servants, who often look for financially autonomous women who can share household financial expenses or at least sustain themselves, hence relieving their husbands of their needs.

²¹ In an economic analysis of marriage, money is not the only currency. "People give their time, emotions, care and commitments, the value of which is decided by their status, wealth, education, intelligence and, understandably, beauty, too" (Louzek, 2022, p. 300). However, this analysis does not disregard the influence of love, culture, and religion in the marriage market (Louzek, 2022, p. 305).

²² Recently, Morocco has launched a social security policy to support precarious families. However, this policy excludes several families in need, and the welfare payments the government provides do not cover the recipients' necessities given the skyrocketing expenses.

search for a spouse, pushing them to prioritize men's financial status over their age.

Women's perception of marriage as a safety net points to a salient cultural perception in the country. Despite the salience of discourse of gender equality and women's empowerment, which is fostered and disseminated by a strong feminist movement and several gender-sensitive policies, there is still a form of 'passivity' that makes women see men as providers and not financial equals. To address this issue, the matchmaker often reprimands the women who have dropped out of school and never acquired a skill to sustain themselves or at least make themselves busy.²³ She argues that this pitfall reduces their chance of finding a good match as their profiles lack attractive traits. These women must make painful decisions and lower their standards and expectations to increase their chances in the marriage market.

Women's resort to marriage to enhance their socioeconomic status is ubiquitous among many female callers. For instance, many have expressed their 'hope' to move from the countryside to the city. Despite living in rural areas, some women are unwilling to stay there if they get married, hence perceiving marriage as 'an escape' from the hardships of rural life and a means to find a better life in the city. Rural life has become tough for many people due to the successive droughts that have struck Morocco in the past decades, the lack of vital facilities, especially schools and health centers, and the scarcity of job opportunities. This might explain women's hope that marriage can end the hardships they are going through in the countryside. Marriage, therefore, can be a 'shortcut' to a better life, especially when pursuing education and building a career are not an option.

Similarly, several female callers have expressed their 'hope' to marry a Moroccan residing abroad. Despite being employed, some women will give up their careers if they find an expatriate willing to propose. Sometimes the matchmaker expresses irritation, even disdain, at some of these requests. Her reaction was due to these women's lack of qualities that may attract expats, implying that finding the sought-after match is reasonable when the candidate meets certain criteria.²⁴

²³ The High Commission for Planning launched an alarming report on young people between the ages of 15 and 24 who are not working, not in school, and not following any training" (NEET). This age group represents about 39% of the overall population, 25% of whom (1.5 million) are in a situation of "no work, no study, no training" (Knin, 2024). Females are 3.5 times more likely to be in this state (Knin, 2024). It can be argued that females' perception of marriage as a possible financial safety net is one of the reasons they will more likely fall into this category.

²⁴ For instance, some divorced women have requested that the potential spouse should be residing abroad although they have

According to the matchmaker, for a woman to find a match abroad, she should meet specific qualifications, notably beauty and youth, that would attract such high-profile suitors. Douglas (2005) clarifies that "individuals tend to match up with others who are of equal "value"" (p. 24). For instance, a man with a high market value tends to mate with a woman of youth and beauty to match his value. Thus, because a Moroccan resident abroad enjoys a high value in the Moroccan marriage market, he would expect to be matched with a woman with an equivalent value.

2.7 Does online matching work?

In light of the lack of statistical data, it is hard to assess the work of professional matchmakers. However, several women believe that what is marketed as a rosy dream can turn into a failure. Iman al-Abdlaoui, a thirty-two-year-old accountant, does not like getting engaged via marriage brokers and described it as a risky venture that may bring about undesirable outcomes (Wahhbi, 2012). She has also stressed that those who seek matchmaking services will inevitably fail, arguing that the institution of marriage does not depend on the standard of beauty and good looks only, but is founded on harmony, intellectual convergence, and mutual feelings. She believes that marriage brokers exploit the dreams and desires of young people to marry for financial gain only. Iman added,

For me, matchmaking offices do not offer a magical solution to spinsterhood and I would rather remain a spinster than be subjected to commercialization in which I become a commodity to be bought and sold; that's why, I do not trust these offices at all since they do not guarantee confidentiality or reassurance. (Cited in Wahhbi, 2012, para. 7)

Unlike traditional matchmaking, which is founded on trust, as people usually know the matchmaker personally and trust her judgment, online matchmakers are not known to clients in the physical world. In addition, online matchmakers rely on multiple-choice forms directed to the callers, and they do not 'hire' a third party that can verify the trustworthiness of the information provided.²⁵ Therefore, exchanging visits and meeting face-to-face are prerequisites to getting closer to the potential spouse and gathering first-hand, and probably more reliable, information. In this respect, the matchmaker has told stories of first-time meetings between two candidates that failed because one provided

kids. They have clarified that if they manage to attract such a profile, they will leave their kids with their grandmothers. This often shocks the matchmaker and makes her reject the request immediately, even though this means losing a potential client.

²⁵ A very pertinent example is the issue of religiosity, which is measured by whether male and female callers pray and whether female callers don the veil or the face cover; however, religiosity is more complex and subtle than simply observing prayers and donning the veil (see e.g. Hamada, 2018).

inaccurate data, such as an AI-enhanced photo or a false birth date. Sociologist Karima Al-Wadghiri has reported that some studies have proven the failure of online marriages. These studies attribute this failure to the fact that people looking for a spouse from behind a screen highlight their virtues and conceal their shortcomings. Eventually, the virtual image appears much better than the real one, creating an atmosphere of mistrust between people (Wahhbi, 2012). In brief, whereas traditional marriage brokerage relies on what marriage brokers know about the people they are matching or what third parties, such as friends, neighbors, and acquaintances, say about them, online matchmaking relies on what the candidates say about themselves.

III. CONCLUSION

This article has explored the profiles and expectations of men and women who seek matchmaking services. It has showcased the variations between men's and women's expectations and what these variations reveal about the gender-based socioeconomic dynamics in Morocco. Because the family is still the nexus of Moroccan society and plays various socioeconomic roles, exploring men's and women's mating expectations has revealed insights into significant gender-related specifications that shape people's views of marital relations.

Data analysis has revealed four major findings. First, the matchmaking business has opened a window for unmarried women who have not attracted suitors within their entourage. Turning to online matchmaking reflects far-reaching changes in the modern, tech-driven world. The Internet has facilitated connecting potential spouses regardless of their geographical location. It has specifically attracted women because of the cultural barriers that compel their initiative in the mating market. Data have revealed that more women seek the service of the matchmaker, *al-khatibah*, than men. This points to a significant shift in gender relations since men are often the ones who look for spouses and propose to them. Several reasons may explain this shift. First, because social media provide a 'cover' for their users, they help women share their proposals while maintaining anonymity. Second, women's economic precariousness might explain why they have taken the initiative in the mating market. This pressure is much felt by divorced women and widows with kids, especially due to the lack of a strong state-mandated social security policy and the lack of family support. Facing hardships pushes women to seek matchmaking services to fast-track the process of finding a spouse, vis., a provider. Third, because the number of men who abstain from marriage is on the rise, partly due to the skyrocketing cost of sustaining a family and the upsurge of premarital sex, women seeking to improve their lives through marriage are left with a short

list of possible candidates. These factors explain why women increasingly use online matchmaking to find a spouse instead of awaiting a knock on the door, as traditional norms dictate.

Second, despite the promotion of gender equality and spousal partnership within the household, men are still considered the default providers for the family. The fact that all male callers are working and many look for housewives showcases that they all present themselves as financial providers. Conversely, more than half of the female callers are housewives and present themselves as financially dependent on their potential spouses. Even when a woman holds a job, she considers her income secondary to men's and is even willing to give it up. Therefore, men are still the financial providers and caretakers in many families. Although the Moroccan Family Law recognizes that the family is a joint enterprise where husbands and wives are partners, understood as enjoying equal rights and fulfilling equal obligations, Moroccans' conception of marriage is still premised on complementarity, whereby men are financial providers and women are homemakers.

Third, women's marriage-seeking does not necessarily signify their search for a balanced family life. Many women may 'sacrifice' emotional bonding with their future spouses, for instance by accepting polygamous marriages and spouses far older than themselves, and prioritize their capacity to sustain a family. This 'sacrifice' is deeper when women are divorced, widowed, aged, and socioeconomically vulnerable. Given the lack of strong public welfare in Morocco, marriage is still a 'security net' that might protect women from life's upheavals.

Fourth and last, despite Morocco's restrictive policy on polygamy, some of the women who have called the matchmaker consider it a way out of their socioeconomic precariousness, especially if they are divorced or widows with kids. For them, engaging with a married man can be an adequate solution.

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