Research note: Merry now, marry later? Initial labor market conditions and marital intentions in the Philippines

Vincent Jerald Ramos[1,2,3] & Marianne Joy Vital[4]

[1] University of Southampton, [2] Hertie School Berlin, [3] Humboldt University Berlin, [4] University of Oxford

Address correspondence to: Vincent Jerald Ramos, University of Southampton, Hertie School Berlin, Humboldt University Berlin. Email: v.ramos@southampton.ac.uk

Abstract

Objective: Following the Oppenheimerian hypothesis that employment stability partly explains (earlier) marriage timing, particularly among career-oriented young adults, we test the relationship between precarious initial labor market conditions and marital intentions among the highly educated population in the Philippines.

Background: A substantial body of literature suggests that early career employment instability is associated with family formation. The Philippines, as the only country besides the Vatican without a legal provision for divorce, presents a unique and novel context for analyzing both the institution of and preferences for marriage.

Method: Using data from a nationally representative graduate tracer survey in the Philippines, we estimate the association between initial labor market conditions and marital intentions using inverse probability weighted (IPW) logistic regression models to account for selection into the never-married population upon completing higher education.

Results: Our analysis highlights three findings. First, an overwhelming majority (95%) intend to get married across all labor market statuses, suggesting a near-universal idealization of marriage among highly educated young adults. Second, precarious labor market states are not associated with marital intentions except for economically inactive females. Finally, precarity matters for the expressed timing of marriage - compared to their stably employed counterparts, marriage-oriented young adults on fixed-term contracts, unemployment, or economic inactivity express a slightly later ideal period to marry.

Conclusion: These descriptive findings speak to the idea that in societies where marriage is considered a near-universally ideal life course milestone, young adults in "merry" employment conditions intend to marry sooner rather than later.

Key words: precarious employment, marital intentions, young adults, logistic regression, Philippines

1.   Introduction

The thick strand of the literature on employment instability and marital intentions and behavior proffers overwhelming evidence that precarious conditions such as having a term-limited contract, low income, and poor job prospects lower the intention to marry and delay both the ideal and actual age at (first) marriage in Western societies (De La Rica & Iza, 2005; Ekert-Jaffe & Solaz, 2001; Gutierrez-Domènech, 2007; Landaud, 2021; Oppenheimer, 1997; Vignoli et al., 2016; Yu & Hara, 2020). A similar pattern of earlier marriages for those with stable careers has likewise been found in developing and non-Western (e.g., Middle East and North Africa) contexts (Juárez & Gayet, 2014; Krafft & Assaad, 2020). These results are in line with the earlier theoretical propositions of Oppenheimer (1988, 1994, 1997, 2003) who posits the role of career instability of both men and women, especially those with high levels of education and career aspirations, on the postponement of marriage timing.

This study contributes to the literature on employment instability and marital intentions in the Philippines, which is understudied within the developing country context. Since the Spanish colonial era, the "typical" family has been portrayed as a married household with children, although it has been rapidly changing in recent years (Torres, 2015). The influential Catholic Church has played an active role in shaping the near-universal idealization of marriage, with Catholicism as the predominant religion in the country (Abalos, 2023). By and large, the Philippines regards marriage as an important institution and is closely tied to family values (Miralao, 1997) - so much so that currently, the majority still believes in the centrality of marriage to one's life course, and that it must be preserved and protected "above all else". This is gleaned from data on the 2017 World Values Survey (Haerpfer et al., 2022), which shows that around 70% of the Philippine population[1] believes that divorce is not justifiable, with half of this group saying that it is never justifiable under any circumstances. This is reflected by the fact that the Philippines is the only country with no divorce laws, and as such, the only legal means for union dissolution (i.e., annulment) is more costly. This presents an interesting case to study the preference of marriage given the high cost of marriage dissolution in a society that holds considerable regard for the institution of marriage. On the one hand, one might argue that traditional family values remain strong amidst modernization and economic development, as reflected by recent public sentiment on marriage and divorce. On the other hand, does the significant barrier to dissolution make marriage more costly, thereby affecting people's preferences?

In relation to the first argument, it is quite interesting to note that the idealization of marriage and public sentiment against divorce stand in contrast with increasing non-marital cohabitation, especially among young adults (Abalos, 2023; Kuang et al., 2019; Lesthaeghe, 2020). Looking at broader historical trends, Abalos (2023) demonstrates using survey data that public acceptance of nonmarital cohabitation has doubled from 18% in 1994 to 35% in 2012. Does this mean that more liberal values are taking over, as expected in a modernizing society? This is in line with the implications of the Second Demographic Transition (SDT) theory (Lesthaeghe, 2020). Not necessarily it seems, while there may be an ideational change and growing acceptance of such liberal values, this is not true across all sociodemographic groups in the Filipino society. Kuang et al. (2019) find that lower levels of education are associated with a higher likelihood of cohabitation, suggesting that socioeconomic factors could better explain the surprising increase in cohabitation, rather than the diminishing value and centrality of marriage in the Philippines. Qualitative evidence also points to Filipinos considering economic security as a prerequisite not only for the financial demands of family life but also to afford the costs of an ideal wedding reception (Kuang, 2025). Hence, the prevalent idea of "saving up for a wedding" implies that economic security may be associated more with marital timing rather than a binary preference to get married.

Relatedly, in an update of the global trends of the Second Demographic Transition, Lesthaeghe (2020) shows that young adult Filipina women with at least postsecondary education have lower rates of cohabitation compared to those with lower levels of educational attainment. Given this finding of a lower preference for non-marital cohabitation among highly educated young adults, there is reason to suspect that there may be a strong preference for marriage among this group. The educational gradient therefore builds a case for closer inspection of the marital intentions of highly educated Filipinos.

Meanwhile, the second argument above follows rational choice theory models that consider the motives of marriage (Becker, 1973, 1974; Weiss, 1997). More specifically, the preference for marriage becomes stronger if the perceived benefits are significant in relation to the cost. In the Philippines context, it may be

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1   Own estimates using publicly available microdata.

argued that the high exit cost from marriage (due to the absence of divorce laws) could potentially discourage individuals from marrying, if not delay the timing of their marriage. This is reflected by sentiments in focus group discussions from a study on attitudes towards marriage conducted in Vietnam, Thailand, and the Philippines (Williams & Guest, 2005). When asked on reasons not to marry, some Filipino respondents refer to the illegality of divorce as a barrier, even more so for women especially with the prevalence of domestic violence in the country (Williams & Guest, 2005).

Building on prior work that has established educational gradients in the preference for marriage in the Philippines (Abalos, 2014, 2023; Kuang et al., 2019; Williams & Guest, 2005), we take a different approach and analyze how precarious employment conditions of young adults upon labor market entry are associated with marital intentions within this group of highly educated and career-oriented young adults. Within this class, even with a strong idealization of marriage, there is also a strong sense of caution on the prospect and timing of marriage. This is consistent with the argument of Oppenheimer (1988) that the capability to form unions also plays a role, with this capability measured by early or initial labor market positions. One benefit of such a focused within-group analysis is that we can empirically establish the relationship between labor market precarity and marital intentions for highly educated young adults without the confounding bias of educational attainment. Broadly, this paper speaks to the literature on labor market conditions and preference for marriage (Oppenheimer, 1988) and, partly, on the ideational foundations of household and family changes in the Philippines (Abalos & Yeung, 2025).

Using representative graduate tracer survey data, we examine employment-based differentials in marital intentions among this population subgroup. In doing so, we classify recent university graduates into four distinct employment states: (1) stable employment; (2) casual or fixed-term worker; (3) unemployed; and (4) economically inactive and use regression analyses to analyze their associations with their intent to marry and among those who do, their expressed ideal period of marriage. In operationalizing marital intentions, we focus on two definitions that capture quantum (e.g., intention to marry in the future or not) and a timing outcome (e.g., ideal period of marriage). Testing the Oppenheimerian argument that career instability of highly educated and career-oriented men and women is associated with delayed marriage timing (Oppenheimer, 1988, 1994, 1997, 2003) and subsequent empirical findings discussed above, we empirically test the following expectations:

Hypothesis 1 (Intentions): Among highly educated never-married young adults,

H1a: being fixed-term or casually employed, unemployed, or economically inactive is associated with lower probabilities of wanting to get married, relative to those permanently employed, and

H1b: considering the possible persistence of the male breadwinner model in the Philippines, this association is stronger for males than females.

Hypothesis 2 (Ideal Period of Marriage): Among highly educated, never-married, and marriage-oriented young adults,

H2a: being precariously employed in a fixed-term contract, unemployed, or economically inactive is positively associated with the ideal period of marriage (relative to one's age), and

H2b: considering the possible persistence of the male breadwinner model, this association is stronger for males than females.

2. Empirical strategy

Focusing on the relationship between initial labor market conditions and marital intentions among highly educated young adults necessitates the use of representative survey data with detailed information on employment characteristics and marital intentions. Therefore, we use microdata from the 2014 Philippines Graduate Tracer Study (Tutor et al., 2019), the most recent representative survey of graduates of Philippine higher education institutions. This dataset (n=11,523) contains information on the current (and previous) jobs of college graduates as well as their marital status and, among the never-married, marital intentions. While there are government surveys that ask about attitudes on marriage and ideal age of marriage (e.g., Young Adult Fertility and Sexuality Survey), the Graduate Tracer Study is the only one - to the best of our knowledge - that expressly asks individuals on their intention to marry and at what age they want to marry. Furthermore, unlike the Young Adult Fertility and Sexuality Survey, which limits the sample to individuals aged 15 to 24 years old, the Graduate Tracer Study includes in the sample those above 24 years old. This is

because the sampling frame of the survey is based on the population of graduates between the years 2009 and 2011.

Our two analytical samples are constructed based on the following conditions. To address H1, we restrict the sample to never-married respondents regardless of employment status[2]. To address H2, we restrict the sample to never-married adults who expressed a positive intention to get married and expressed the age at which they intended to get married. In this study, we interchangeably use of the term 'ideal age of marriage' and 'intended age of marriage'. Effectively, we exclude from the sample respondents who say that their intended age at marriage is in the past (e.g., at 20 years old if they're already 25 at the time of the survey). The main analytical samples we use for our regressions thus consist of (1) 7,892 never-married young adults and (2) 7,155 never-married young adults who want to get married in the future. We respectively estimate the following regression models:

$$P(MI_i = 1) = \alpha + \beta E_i + \delta P_i + \gamma D_i + \epsilon_i \quad (1)$$
$$IP_i = \alpha + \beta E_i + \delta P_i + \gamma D_i + \epsilon_i, \quad (2)$$

where MI is a binary variable indicating *positive marital intentions*[3] while IP is the *stated ideal period of marriage*, which is derived by subtracting their actual age from their intended age at marriage. For example, if a 23-year-old respondent states that their intended age to get married is 30, IP takes the value of 7. This transformation effectively standardizes their preferences by their age. E is a vector of employment status categories: (1) stably employed; (2) casual/fixed-term; (3) unemployed; and (4) economically inactive[4]. P is a vector of personal characteristics including age, financial satisfaction, sibling order, urban area indicator, parental coresidence, birth cohort, parental education, and region. Finally, D is a vector of educational-related controls including the type of their university or higher educational institution (HEI) (e.g., public vs. private) and discipline categories (e.g., field of study). A descriptive table presenting the variable levels and weighted frequencies are shown in Appendix Table 1.

Notably, there is selection into our analytical samples. (1) is estimated on the sample of never-married individuals, excluding cohabiting, married, or separated respondents who are not asked the question on marital intentions. This is sizable and there might be selection into the never-married population upon completing higher education (see Appendix Table 2). Similarly, (2) is estimated on the sample of never-married individuals with positive marital intentions, although there might be some selection into this subgroup. To partly address this, we use inverse-probability weighted regression models that first estimate the probability of being never married and of having positive marital intentions, respectively, using the same set of predictor variables in (1) and (2). The inverse of these probabilities is used as weights in estimating (1) using logistic regression and (2) using OLS. Further, results are presented for the full, male-restricted, and female-restricted samples, respectively, to analyze Oppenheimer's theory that there are differential effects of career stability on marriage timing by gender– men's "deteriorating" labor market positions are at least equally important if not more, as a factor in explaining later marriage timing. The point estimates of our parameters of interest are graphically presented in the main text while full model estimates are included in Appendix Table 3.

3. Descriptive statistics

Table 1 descriptively shows the near-universality of positive marital intentions among highly educated young adults in the Philippines. Among never-married permanently employed young adults, 95.6% prefer to get married, and there does not seem to be a sizable difference in the share of positive marital intentions across other, more precarious employment states. The limitation of this estimate is that we cannot distinguish the never-married population between the currently partnered while living apart together (LAT partnerships) from those who are unpartnered. Regardless, these estimates highlight the centrality and idealization of marriage among the highly educated class in the Philippines.

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2   Around 75% of the sample are single upon interview and are retained in the sample. See Appendix Table 1 for the derivation of the analytical samples.

3   In the questionnaire, this question is prompted only for never-married individuals– "do you intend to get married in the future?"

4   This group encompasses youth not in education, employment, and training (NEET), discouraged workers, those on gap years, etc. Broadly, they have no work and are not looking, available, or willing to work.

Table 1: Marital intentions by employment status

Labor Market Status	n	% positive marital intentions
Permanent Employment	3923	0.956
Casual/Fixed-Term Employment	2194	0.955
Unemployment	389	0.944
Inactivity	1386	0.940

Note: The last column presents the weighted proportion of young adults who prefer to get married within each labor market status.

In terms of the ideal period of marriage, we present descriptive summaries by sex using boxplots in Figure 1. The median ideal period of marriage is approximately 4 years from their current ages, which holds across all employment states for both sexes. Overall, males have an average ideal period of marriage of 4.3 years in the future, compared to 3.8 for females, partly supporting general patterns of earlier marriage timing for women than men. To contextualize these periods in terms of actual ages, we include a similar figure using ideal ages instead of ideal periods in Appendix Figure 1.

*Figure 1*:   Ideal period of marriage by employment status
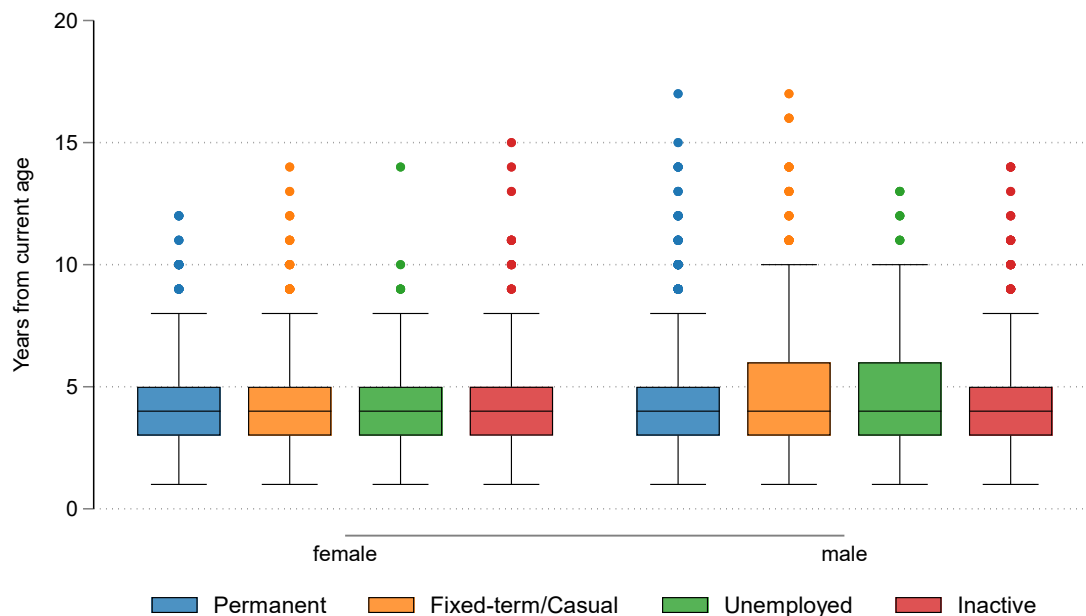
Note: Sample of never-married respondents who want to get married in the future (n=7,471), weighted

4.   Results

Our regression estimates yield two notable findings. First, precarious labor market states (fixed-term/casual and unemployed) are not associated with lower probabilities of wanting to marry relative to those stably employed, except for the economically inactive respondents who are less likely to prefer marriage. These results, as shown in Figure 2, are robust to alternative model specifications starting with a parsimonious specification (e.g., regressing intentions only on employment status) to the stepwise addition of control variables in equation 1 (see Appendix Table 3). To understand differences by sex, we estimate the models in male- and female-restricted samples to examine in which subgroup/s this association holds. We find that this negative association between economic inactivity (relative to stable employment) and marital intentions is present only in the female subsample, implying that highly educated females consider economic inactivity as a deterrent to family formation. Broadly, these results are unsurprising given how there is almost no substantial variation in marital intentions as shown in Table 1. Although we do not have

information about their current dating and relationship status, these estimates imply that highly educated young adults overwhelmingly prefer and intend to get married regardless of their employment status.
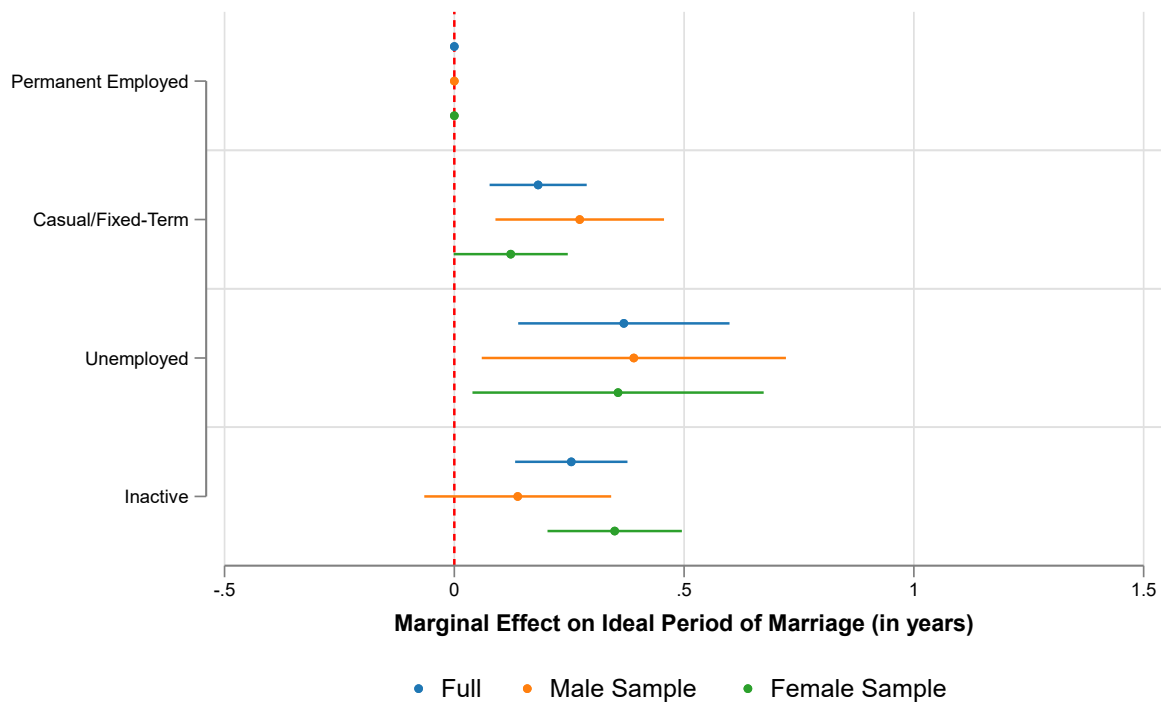
Figure 2:   Marital intentions and employment status
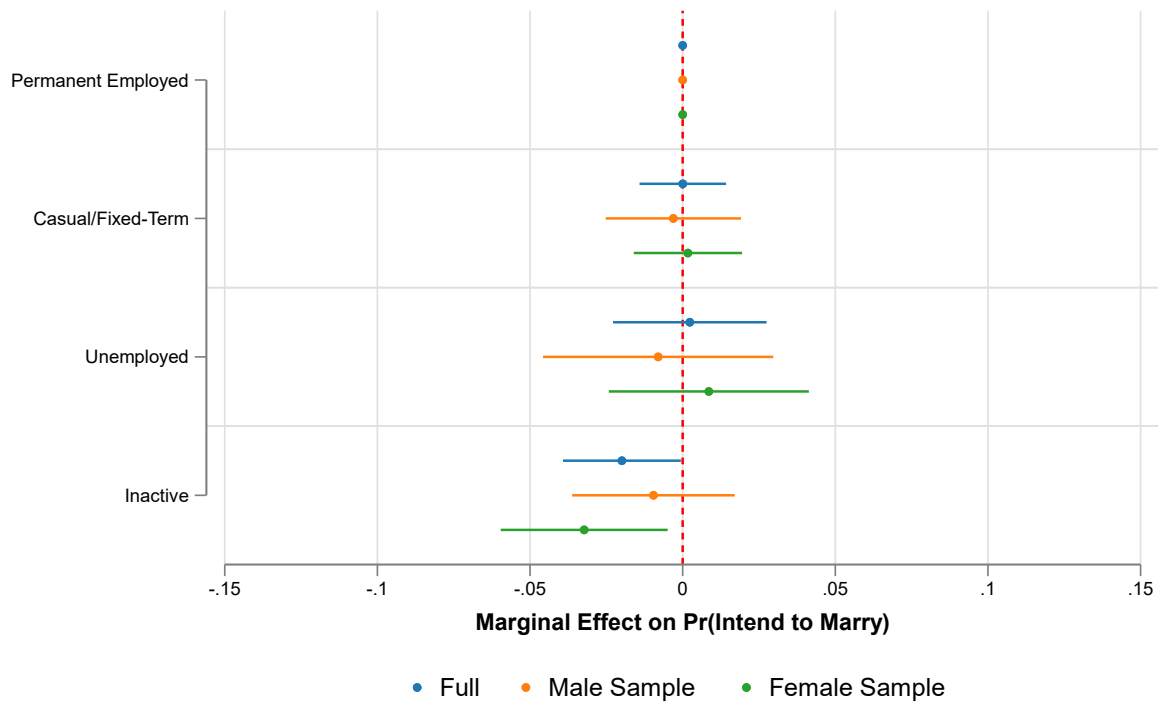
Note: Models control for sex (full), age, birth order, financial satisfaction, region, urban, HEI type, coresidence, cohort, parental educ, and field of study.Sample: Never-married respondents, excluding invalid cases (n_full=7,892; n_male=3,497; n_female=4,395), weighted using IPW

Our second finding lends support to hypothesis 2 - being in precarious employment states is associated with a later ideal period of marriage as shown in Figure 3. Compared to stably employed young adults, fixed-term employed, unemployed, and economically inactive respondents who want to get married, express a later ideal period of marriage of approximately 0.2 years on average. This highlights how highly educated upper-class individuals consider stable employment as an enabling condition to attain their desired marital intentions earlier. Looking at the sex-restricted samples, however, reveals that this pattern holds more consistently for females. Economically inactive females who want to get married express their ideal period of marriage 0.35 years later, on average, than their permanently employed female counterparts. The reasons for economic inactivity could range anywhere from being a discouraged worker to having a gap year or fulfilling caregiving duties, so there is no precise explanation for what might be driving these associations. Regardless of the exact reason, being economically inactive, or NEET in other literatures, implies that one is outside the labor force, which could arguably be a transitory phase among young adults characterized by high uncertainty. While these are statistically significant but notably small magnitudes of approximately four months, we contend that they are substantively meaningful considering that the young adulthood years are "demographically dense" (Rindfuss, 1991) and that these seemingly small differences in intentions might plausibly be larger as these transitions are actualized.

Figure 3:   Ideal period of marriage by employment status

<p style="text-align:center">● Full   ● Male Sample   ● Female Sample</p>

Note: Models control for sex (full), age, birth order, financial satisfaction, region, urban, HEI type, coresidence, cohort, parental educ, and field of study.Sample: Never-married who want to get married in the future, excluding invalid cases (n_full=7,155; n_male=3,178; n_female=3,977), weighted using IPW

5.   Conclusion

Our takeaways from these analyses lend partial support to Oppenheimerian prediction - employment stability among highly educated and career-focused individuals is positively associated with the earlier potential attainment of marital intentions. Given the extremely high proportion of those who intend to get married (>94%), this finding alludes to the idealization of traditional family values, specifically the centrality of marriage, amidst modernization. Nonetheless, we were interested in detecting heterogeneities across employment conditions to test the relationship between economic conditions and the preferences of individuals, following rational choice theory models. We do not find strong support for our hypothesis that labor market insecurities are associated with lower probabilities of wanting to be married, except for economically inactive females. However, we find that among young adults who intend to get married in the future, those outside of a stable permanent job express a slightly later ideal period of when to do so. These results highlight how initial labor market conditions after completing education matter for how young adults think about and idealize family formation. While these ideals may not necessarily translate to future behavior, they reveal perceptions of the enabling conditions for certain life course transitions. As Guetto, et al. (2021) argue, narratives of economic uncertainty deter marital intentions. In the Philippine case, the instability-intentions nexus seems pronounced through tempo rather than quantum. Broadly, this finding speaks to the wider literature on employment conditions and demographic intentions, particularly on marriage and fertility (Guetto, et al., 2021; Kurowska et al., 2023; Modena & Sabatini, 2012; Yu & Hara, 2020).

Limitations: The channels through which initial labor market conditions can affect actual marriage outcomes are varied. Due to the constraints of the Graduate Tracer Study, we are unable to distinguish between never-married individuals in LAT partnerships and non-partnered individuals. As parental coresidence post-university completion is the norm for never-married young adults, it is plausible to have LAT-partnered individuals in our never-married population who may think of marriage differently than never-married. This is a crucial limitation since the absence of current relationship status in the model, as a plausible confounder, could overstate the observed association since it partially captures the indirect effect

of precarious employment on partnership or dating status. Similarly, the question on marital intentions is not asked among respondents who are in cohabiting partnerships, which would have been an interesting population subgroup to analyze in further research.

As is typical in analyses on marital intentions, we do not proffer mechanisms or analyze actual marital behavior. For one, unstable employment might serve as negative signals in dating and matching markets, which might translate to differences in marital behavior. Further, the "objective" economic entitlements that come along with permanent jobs – paid leaves, insurance, and monetary bonuses, among others, might help accelerate the transition to marriage for partnered non-married individuals. While these mechanisms are interesting to entangle, our dataset (and any other dataset in the Philippine context, to the best of our knowledge) unfortunately does not contain information about initial labor market conditions and the actual age at marriage. Therefore, our results speak specifically about the marital intentions and ideations of highly educated young adults in various employment states. As with any observational analyses, we refrain from causally interpreting our estimates because although our inverse probability weighting techniques partly address selection on observables, the plausible confounding from unobservable factors (i.e., values) threaten causal inference.

Implications: This descriptive finding presents novel evidence of how initial labor market conditions are associated with marital intentions among highly educated young adults. When deliberating family policies, constitutionalists and lawmakers in the Philippines frequently point to a provision of the 1987 Constitution, to wit: "Art 15. Sec. 2. Marriage, as an inviolable social institution, is the foundation of the family and shall be protected by the State.". Public policies designed to promote this constitutional provision must therefore not ignore labor market conditions and policies, including job security and job search assistance. As our findings show, "merry" initial employment conditions induce marriage-oriented young adults to prefer marrying sooner rather than later.

Acknowledgments

Data availability statement

The Graduate Tracer Survey microdata is available by request from the Commission on Higher Education of the Philippines.

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Information in German

Deutscher Titel

Merry Now, Marry Later? Eine Forschungsnotiz zu den anfänglichen Arbeitsmarktbedingungen und Heiratsabsichten auf den Philippinen

Zusammenfassung

Fragestellung: Ausgehend von der Oppenheimer-Hypothese, wonach die Beschäftigungsstabilität den (früheren) Zeitpunkt von Eheschließungen erklärt, insbesondere bei karriereorientierten jungen Erwachsenen, untersuchen wir den Zusammenhang von prekären anfänglichen Arbeitsbedingungen und Heiratsabsichten unter hochgebildeten Berufseinsteiger*innen auf den Philippinen.

Hintergrund: Eine Vielzahl von Veröffentlichungen zeigt, wie anfängliche Beschäftigungsinstabilität mit der Familiengründung zusammenhängt. Die Philippinen sind neben dem Vatikan das einzige Land, in dem es keine gesetzlichen Bestimmungen zur Scheidung gibt. Damit bieten sie einen einzigartigen und neuartigen Kontext für die Analyse sowohl der Institution der Ehe als auch der Präferenzen für die Eheschließung.

Methode: Anhand von Daten einer national repräsentativen Absolvent*innenbefragung auf den Philippinen schätzen wir den Zusammenhang zwischen anfänglichen Arbeitsmarktbedingungen und Heiratsabsichten. Wir verwenden invers-wahrscheinlichkeitsgewichtete logistische Regressionsmodelle, um die Selbstselektion von nie verheirateten Personen nach Abschluss der Hochschulausbildung zu berücksichtigen.

Ergebnisse: Unsere Analyse hebt drei Ergebnisse hervor. Erstens beabsichtigt eine große Mehrheit (95 %), unabhängig von ihrem Arbeitsmarktstatus zu heiraten, was auf eine nahezu universelle Idealisierung der Ehe unter hochgebildeten jungen Erwachsenen hindeutet. Zweitens stehen prekäre Arbeitsmarktverhältnisse in keinem Zusammenhang mit Heiratsabsichten, außer bei wirtschaftlich inaktiven Frauen. Zudem spielt die Prekarität eine Rolle für den angegebenen Zeitpunkt der Eheschließung: Im Vergleich zu ihren festangestellten Altersgenossen geben junge Erwachsene in befristeten Arbeitsverträgen, Arbeitslosigkeit oder Nichterwerbstätigkeit einen etwas späteren idealen Zeitpunkt für die Eheschließung an.

Schlussfolgerung: Diese deskriptiven Ergebnisse stützen die Annahme, dass in Gesellschaften, in denen die Ehe als nahezu universeller Meilenstein im Lebensverlauf angesehen wird, junge Erwachsene in „glücklichen" Beschäftigungsverhältnissen eher früher als später heiraten möchten.

Schlagwörter: prekäre Beschäftigung, Heiratsabsichten, junge Erwachsene, logistische Regression, Philippinen

Vincent Jerald Ramos: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9709-4183

Marianne Joy Vital: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6878-6463