

Sex economy & prostitution in marriage: An economic perspective to the legalisation debate

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Abstract

Objectives: To generate debate in the realm of economic invasion of sexual relationships.

Methods: This study takes a technocratic approach towards the nonstandard economic domains of marriage and prostitution to reveal the inherent economic practices in personal relationships, within the context of sexual intimacy. The study builds upon the original ideas of Gary Becker, whose treatise on the family- written three decades ago- receives critical acclaim in scholastic venues even today. His position is extended to articulate the central focus of this study.

Findings: For the purpose of this research, marriage is taken as a given. It is taken for granted that as all marriages and sexual relationships are voluntarily entered into for better pay-offs. When people as rational agents calculate their actions to augment their resultant welfare, a market in marriages can be presumed to exist. Market equilibrium is satisfied and no one can change mates and become better off. Part II provides an economic take on marriage, sex and the anti-money bias that dominates the respective discourses. Part III elaborates upon the relevant economic theories on marriage markets. Part IV provides a discourse on the reasons behind long-term mate preferences in females. The penultimate chapter is a narrative on marriage as prostitution and the conclusion reiterates the central premise. Realisation that marriage is equivalent to prostitution in economic terms could facilitate the rationalisation of the former and the normalisation and legalisation of the latter.

Improvements/ Applications: These events would be a great step in horizontal expansion of economic growth and regulation of the large-scale global prostitution industry.

Keywords: Marriage, sex, economy, legalisation, prostitution.

1. Introduction

In tune with the technocratic consciousness that pervades every sector of our lives in this global world, economic research has permeated sacred institutions like marriage to explain the rational participation of the actors in the game of wedlock. In pursuance of these studies, scholarly debate has been generated about the economic theory of marriage and the role of sex in it. In the paradigm of rationality, marriage may be seen as a contract between a man and his potential mate to indulge in reproductive sex to produce a new breathing entity over which they will share parental rights. The sexual gratification is adequate compensation for the man whereas the consideration for the woman is the promise of a safe home, protection and social status. The sexual intimacy between a man and his wife may be seen as an act where she offers sexual pleasure to him, in exchange for certain non-sexual benefits and rewards like bread and shelter. The thriving economy of paid sex (prostitution) is analysed and analogised to the market in marriages. If prostitution is indeed the act of offering sexual goods for monetary rewards or other recompense, it is boldly submitted herein that, from an economic perspective, almost every woman has been a prostitute at some point in her life. As the wedded wife of her legal husband, the sexual relationship that she shares with him may not be very different from one she can share with a 'John'. Hence, at *ceteris paribus*, marriage is prostitution! In order to neutrally evaluate this claim, marriage and social relationships must be rationally analysed without subjective and emotional considerations.

The predominant anti-money bias in our culture lends a base- if not unethical- tone to painting a pecuniary picture of near and dear social relationships. Any scientific enquiry into the monetary aspects of our valued social connections will be undoubtedly coloured by the prejudice of perspective. The usage of money in personal relations has yet to gain currency in society. People are averse to price tagging individuals in their private matters and there exists a ubiquitous dislike of handing out money to others to express human feelings. Ironically, people have no qualms about gifting each other material goods, which ultimately have a price tag. Whether all worldly possessions can be monetised is another debate altogether, but for the purpose of the research paper we may say that people are comfortable presenting their friends and relatives with possessory goods on special occasions whereas they are hostile to the idea of giving away money to express their sentiments. Monetisation of human feelings and emotions is inherently problematic to the irrational 'human' mind, which refuses to evaluate and estimate the worth of personal bonds. The prevalent prejudice against money seeps into almost all aspects of human life and existence including sexual relations where it is felt strongly. Paid sex is discountenanced because sex is considered something pure, which could be polluted by 'immoral' elements like money. The logical inconsistency in the fact that societal stigma against money does not play in the cases of gifts with a monetary estimation makes for an interesting economic analysis of the apparently anti-economic behaviour.

Economic analysis involves the application of the concepts of cost-benefit analysis and market analysis to understand human behaviour and it is informed by the assumption that rational people have objectives and tend to choose the most efficient way possible to achieve them. The rationality of human beings is presupposed and taken as a given to preclude human subjectivities. Suppositions and these assumptions are mandated in the interest of simplicity and lucidity and no economic study can claim to be wholly free of them.

2. Non-standard economic institution of marriage

It is a safe assumption to make that the institution of marriage is deeply regarded by most societies, since antiquity. New Home Economics, which evolved in the 1960s as an integral part of the academic activism in the domain of Demographic Economics [1] has highlighted the technocratic and reciprocal nature of the seemingly 'human' bonds and emotional connections. Scholarship in this area has analogised marriage to economic institutions like quasi-wage labour market [2] and a firm, [3] much to the abomination of the orthodox conservatives. This economic invasion of the holy institution of marriage is in tune with the teeming technocratic consciousness across various spheres of life. The outrage can be explained by the fact that the sacred institution of marriage is being compared to economic institutions that have an ostensibly monetary nature and that could be seen as a factor that will taint the inherent purity of wedlock. The societal preconception of money as a defiling factor is deeply entrenched in nonstandard economic institutions. For the sake of understanding, two instances may be provided.

First, it is commonly known and it may be taken as given that society is much more forgiving of men who marry women for their beauty than for their wealth. Wealth and beauty are both positive ascribed qualities that a woman may be born with; it is a lottery of birth, in most cases. From an economic perspective, it is hard to see any rationale in deriding monetary concerns and over-emphasising physical attributes, except through the irrationality of taste and preference, which is informed by the notions of impurity attached with money. Second, let us take a brief excursion into a simulation where a man is eager to consummate sexually his relationship with his girlfriend. To increase his chances of receiving sexual benefits later in the evening, he will consider options like taking her to a romantic movie of her choice or a candle light dinner and spa. The option of using money as an exchange for sexual rewards would be appalling to him and insulting to her. However, as per societal standards it was acceptable to court her with luxury dinners and other gifts. This leads us to the controversial inference that conventional dating is a disguised form of prostitution, as deduced by some economists, much to the angst of the conservative populace.

The above mentioned situations illustrate how an economist's scientific intervention into personal domains like household and sex has had its share of problems. The technocratisation of nonstandard economic institutions has met with scepticism and rebuke from conservative scholastic circles, right from the time of Becker's theory of marriage [4]. It makes for an interesting enquiry to study the market in marriage, to understand human behaviour from an economic perspective.

3. Marriage market models

Going by the tone of the current marital discourse, which is dominated by increase in divorce rates and decrease in alimony, economists agree that marriages are evolving in the direction of a civil union between two parties. A civil union entails a secular contractual relationship or a domestic partnership, free from the clutches of religion and legality of status. Mutual consideration is the essence of a contract and the contract of wedlock is no exception. Despite the fact that marriage has been privatised and it has been reduced to a standard contract, it has not lost all of its cultural meaning and emotional significance. Historically, marriages have been explained as the culmination of our inherent desire for parenthood. We assume that, both parties seek the tangible benefit of child production. From the perspective of sex economy, a man marries because of his immanent drive for reproductive sex. He will derive greater utility from wedlock than extra-marital sex, since marriage involves the attendant benefits of intangibles like love and emotional attachment apart from being a medium for realisation of his parental dreams. He has an effective choice between marriage and bachelorhood. Being a rational individual, he chooses the former, since it provides him greater utility despite the fact that his expenditure will increase post-marriage. The benefits of marriage outweigh any cost related concerns he might have. These factors point towards the existence of a market in marriage and it can be further substantiated by considering cultures where bride price or dowry is common at the time of marriage. This is an explicit cost of matrimony, which could overshadow the countless implicit costs associated with it.

Empirical data suggests that married men spend more time in work than bachelors do while single women spend more time working than their married counterparts do. Unmarried men and women have greater freedom and responsibility to allocate their time and resource, than their married counterparts who have a spouse to care for. In most cases, the spouse is also a source of comfort and benefit. Data shows that single women and married men work more than their counterparts do, from the perspective of relationship status [5]. This provides women an incentive for marriage apart from advantages like companionship, love and subsistence that they receive in exchange for providing reproductive sex to men.

The most clichéd explanation for heterosexual marriage would be the trio of reproductive instinct, emotional attachment and sexual attraction. The prostitutes in the red-light areas can satisfy demand for sexual gratification but they cannot offer love and children for sale. Only a married wife can offer a man the social status as a legitimate father of their child. Hence, he must marry her and co-habit with her. From an economic perspective, co-habitation has been explained through the concept of 'economies of scale'. Men and women are said to share a common household to avoid the cost of frequent contact and to share resources. This explanation has been extended to the creation of a comfortable home for children under the love and protection of the parents. It can be seen that such an explanation would be an over simplification to the point of being random for the reason that, any number of people can share a common place as roommates to reduce costs. The fact that marriage is more than mere sharing of possession means that any economic theory of marriage must go beyond that.

1. Pooled household model

In this economic paradigm, the decision maker is the household itself, which includes the husband and the wife, as one entity. In studies of consumption, labour supply, or fertility and these models find use and they have been labelled as 'neoclassical'. They take the household as a given and either assume they make singular decisions as one entity or that their choices are a function of their altruistic behaviour [6]. When a husband is altruistic, he cares for the welfare of someone else- usually his wife. He is concerned with her consumption as much as he is concerned about his own.

The consumption of any normal good will increase as the income of the consumer increases. At any undisturbed situation, the husband will consume his own income and the wife will consume her own income. If he decides to transfer some of his income to her, her consumption will increase without decreasing the satisfaction obtained by her husband since- theoretically- it makes no difference to him, who is the consumer between the two of them. Practically, until an optimal point this principle will stand. The husband cannot force the wife to transfer some of her income to him but any changes in the combined income of the altruist and the beneficiary will have the same effect on the consumption of both regardless of whose individual income it has affected. Hence, it would be in the interest of the beneficiary to keep an eye on the income of the altruist as much as she maintains her income. In turn, the wife becomes an altruist as well as she watches over the financial situation of her husband. Further, it should be noted that the changes in income discussed here are caused by external parties and they would result in the same consequences even if they were caused by the beneficiary.

2. Quasi-wage labour market

Grossbard Shechtman propounded the conceptualisation of marriage as exchange of spousal labour that benefits either the husband or the wife. Spousal labour could include anything from washing utensils to drying clothes. Either these activities are done on a higher scale post marriage or they are done differently in order to accommodate the other spouse. Both men and women are willing to pay an implicit or explicit price for the time and effort of a spouse, and both men and women have the capacity to supply these resources to their significant other. Yet, the degree varies and the gender disparity becomes apparent. On an average, men demand more spousal labour than they are willing to supply. Hence, he compensates for this by transferring some of his income to her or by giving her more power in the house. These acts are done to bring the household market to equilibrium.

Further, it can be seen that for men, leisure is an inferior good while it is a normal good for women. For the private good of labour supply, they concluded that the variance in the hours worked between single suggest that labour is a normal good for men, but an inferior good for women. Hence, as the income of the husband increases his contribution towards household work will decrease whereas it is the other way around for the wives. An opposite result was recorded when labour was taken as the point of study [7]. Hence, according to this theory, the relationship between the man and the woman is characterised by transfer of labour and benefits. The woman will dominate in household work whereas the man will look after paid work. In exchange for subsistence, a typical wife provides sexual benefits to her husband. This is the positive division of labour in marriage. However, research has also indicated that an increase in female earnings has reduced their demand for producing children and the advantages of sexual division of labour in marriage [8]. The ideal sexual division of labour and specialisation will not be valid in cases where the position of man and woman are altered to a more gender-neutral situation.

3. Marriage as firm

Marriage can be considered a firm of two people where one of them is the entrepreneur and the other is a labourer for wage. The residual profits stay with the entrepreneur and he may have a greater say. This theory had greater relevance during the time of household production. Now, it is reductionist to say that couples live together to maximise on economies of scale since it can evidently be achieved by sharing a house with anyone. David Friedman attributes this paradigmatic shift to the increasing specialisation and mechanisation in the post-industrial society. Therefore, the amount of time spent in household work has reduced and the firm-specific capital acquired by the wife has decreased to the point of making the firm theory of marriages questionable.

4. Commercial sex economy

Each of the abovementioned models have their own shortcomings but they are still viable in economic theoretic. The field of sex economy in prostitution is oft ignored in economic analysis beyond the legalisation debate and the issue of human trafficking to which it is inextricably linked. However, some of the ideas expressed through these models would be applicable to the economy of commercial sex.

As discussed earlier, the red-light sex economy is socially discount enanced because of the element of promiscuity inherent in it to augment the impurity of the monetary element. Such a response is inconsistent with the assumption of rational agency in men. Without digressing too far, it can have stated at this juncture that an individual ought to not have any interest in the activities of others that do not harm him but merely psychologically concern him.

This argument is not economically sound since both physical and mental harm are indistinguishable as they merge into one in the utility index. The more nuanced question is whether and if yes how, prostitution by a third person affects the utility of an unrelated bystander and the economist has no answer to it yet. It can be safely stated that undoubtedly, the comparison of marriage to prostitution would be psychologically unpalatable to people, to say the least!

4. Sexual partner preference patterns

Studies in New Home Economics [9] has revealed that greater male earnings cause an increase in the gains from marriage since men of greater income can support a family better thereby increasing their desirability quotient. They can rear better children who will have greater opportunities and resources in life. Apart from this, there are numerous factors that determine mate preferences in women and they have been stretched as far as the “sexy son hypothesis”[10]. Good Genes hypothesis posits that women seek to marry men with ‘good genes’ since they provide a better chance at successful production and parenting [11]. Here, the negative interactions indicate positive effects in long-term context. Hence, it was concluded that that women prefer for a long-term mate in marriage, men who are able to provide investment and care [12]. This study holds well in all cases. However, it should be mentioned that women have become more independent and they are making more rational matrimonial choices than they earlier did [13]. Their role has grown beyond that of a harlot in marriage. Hence, they look at other qualities in men and make an informed choice about marriage. Yet, information asymmetry will continue to persist resulting in post-marital discords [14].

1. Pigouvian tax on social behaviour

A tax on activities and behaviour that has negative externalities is called Pigouvian tax. Such a tax creates a dead weight loss in the sex market and leads to a gap between the marginal private and social interests. This results in situations where neither the beneficiary nor the creator of harm pay for the externalities. One person merely creates the cost and some unintended beneficiary is created. It is a given that whenever marginal social costs tend to be higher than the private costs, people being selfish consumers, will over-produce.

A tax may be imposed on the offender i.e. the harm producer. The tax should ideally bring the marginal social and private costs to equilibrium to prevent overproduction. The simplest way would be to make the producer liable for the negative externalities since it is difficult to identify the unknown and unintended beneficiaries. Over the course of a few years, it should eventually shrink the market if the economist’s predictions are right. It is debated by policy analysts across the world whether such a tax should be imposed on prostitution post-legalisation. However, this move has great risks associated with it. In the author’s opinion, it would be much more advisable to follow successful models than ambiguous ones. In countries like Iceland where the demand for paid sex is illegal whereas the supply of the same is perfectly legal, the market was seen to be shrinking at an effective pace [15]. Hence, that would be a more effective economic model to follow, by particularising it to local contexts to make up for cultural differences and structural difficulties.

5. Marriage as prostitution

There is no universal definition of the term ‘prostitution’ but it has always been related to the institution of marriage. If a prostitute is a woman who sells her body, as per this definition, every woman who marries for any pecuniary concerns other than pure love can be termed one [16]. Engels concurs with this idea and he blames the economic unit of society as constituted by a monogamous family, calling for its abolition [17].

He argues that the husband forms the bourgeoisie within the family, whereas the wife parallels the proletariat in her gender role. Though he earns a living to support the family, she performs household work and other unrecognised tasks, the fruit of which is appropriated by the husband. She gives birth to his child and including this, no product of her labour is left in her possession; they all become the property of her husband. Hence, women are alienated from a part of themselves as the man seizes the consequences of her hard work without adequate compensation. If the status of women in marriage is such, it is hard to see how it could be very different from that of prostitutes.

Further, it can be said that married woman, in seeking a source of livelihood end up enduring equal if not more undesirable sex than prostitutes [18]. Feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft have also said that marriage in the Industrial age had every semblance of a 'legal prostitution', which gives recourse to underprivileged women to support themselves [19]. This largely makes up for the feminist rhetoric that is hostile to the economic exchange of women's bodies. Economists have accepted these feminist notions and argued that a prostitute sells non-reproductive commercial sex, which is not very different from the reproductive sex that a wife sells in wedlock [20]. The major assumption is that women sell and men buy commercial sex, since the empirical data supporting the contrary is negligible [21]. The subsequent paragraphs operate upon the premise that fecund women are scarce and that the mother alone is the default parent of a child. These assumptions are logically sound since fertile women will always be rare as compared to men, on account of disproportionate parental investment and fatherhood shall remain disputed until the mother identifies the father. The woman may not have the power to unilaterally thrust fatherhood upon any man. However, she has the power to refuse to acknowledge his legitimate claim on custodial rights. She alone can grant him social parenthood and the recognition of his affiliation. It is debatable whether the selling of reproductive sex can be considered supply of labour in marriage; it can be said that it is highly possible. It has been established that men have a stronger sex drive and promiscuous nature [22]. Men want fertile women with a young appearance [23]. However, such women are scarce compared to the excess demand that exists for them [24]. This scarcity can be attributed to a second factor and it is that older men continue to retain their fertility longer than women, thereby skewing the equilibrium. Due to these factors and out of their sheer love for variety, men are bound to solicit sex from the demi-monde. This simple economic logic supported by empirical data explains why prostitution is the oldest profession in the world and how it is flourishing in every nook and corner.

Marriage can be described as one form of prostitution. It is a legalised bargain that offers a man to sexually access a woman in return for providing her with subsistence. Marriage has become very fashionable among young women and even professional women have entered the sphere of life where right to her body is provided in exchange for other [25]. Glaring links between marriage and prostitution could be seen in the case of mail-order brides. This industry is in essence a type of human trafficking. Their husbands could later sell the women into prostitution upon purchase. Mostly wealthy white men access these services and the women belong to backward cultures. The globalisation of the sex industry can be attributed to military use of prostituted women around US bases in Thailand, South Korea and the Philippines. Countries like Netherlands that have legalised prostitution have been termed "pimp states" in criticism of the move as a 'collusion to preserve women's inequality'. This is the social reality where the notion of gender inequality and women's oppression has become inextricably tied with prostitution.

6. Conclusion

The attributes of oppression and inequality should be dissociated from prostitution since they unnecessarily defile a profession that has already been destroyed from inside because of its paid nature. Prostitution should be seen and respected for what it is: an economically flourishing profession. The status quo has to change and the change can begin with the realisation that in economic terms there is prostitution in marriage and that most women have provided sexual favours after constant wooing with material goods, which have a price tag attached to them. It is not the author's case that every marriage is synonymous with prostitution; it is conceded that there may be innumerable motives for marriage.

The study is limited to highlighting the similarities between certain patterns in marriage and prostitution, from an economic perspective. The realisation of these similarities is the first step towards destigmatising prostitution, which is a precondition for legalisation.

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