

Extended Abstract

Singlehood, once considered an exceptional lifestyle choice, has become a widespread social reality across the Global North (van den Berg and Verbakel, 2022; Esteve et al., 2020). While extensive research has explored women’s singlehood in relation to autonomy, career costs, and gendered household divisions (Bellani et al., 2017; Spreitzer and Riley, 1974; van den Berg and Verbakel, 2022), far less is known about men’s singlehood. Starting from the premise that lifelong singlehood is unevenly distributed, particularly in societies where traditional gender attitudes have eroded but gender egalitarianism remains incomplete (Bellani et al., 2017), we ask: Which men are more likely to remain single, and how do conservative gender attitudes shape their partnership outcomes?

Bellani et al. (2017) identify an inverse U-shaped relationship between gender equity and singlehood: highly educated women are most likely to remain single in moderately egalitarian contexts, while in the same settings men with low education are most likely to do so. Building on the incomplete gender revolution framework (Esping-Andersen, 2009), we hypothesize that men’s conservative gender attitudes are associated with a higher likelihood of remaining single, particularly in more gender-equal countries. In less egalitarian contexts, we expect this relationship to be weaker.

We test these hypotheses using newly released GGS-II data from twelve European countries, providing a detailed comparative picture of single men’s circumstances and attitudes. We conduct a cohort analysis, distinguishing between men aged 35–45 and 45+, to capture potential generational differences in how singlehood is experienced and socially evaluated. These age groups represent men who, across contexts, have reached full adulthood. Our measure of singlehood includes men who have never cohabited with a partner and who, at the time of the interview, do not currently have one. Moreover, the dataset includes a comprehensive module on gender attitudes, asking respondents to what extent they agree with statements about women’s roles in society (e.g., “On the whole, who would make better political leaders, men or women?”). We use these items to construct a continuous index of conservative gender attitudes.

Our descriptive results reveal marked educational and economic divides in men’s partner-

ship patterns across Europe. Men with lower education and weaker labor-market attachment (whether unemployed, inactive, or in temporary jobs) are consistently more likely to be single. This pattern is most visible in countries with intermediate or transitional levels of gender equality, such as those in Central and Eastern Europe, echoing earlier findings (Bellani et al., 2017; Park and Choi, 2015; Spreitzer and Riley, 1974). Differences between cohorts emerge mainly along socioeconomic lines: younger single men (35–45) are more likely to rent rather than own and to experience employment precarity compared to older cohorts (45+), who more often combine stable jobs with homeownership. Consistent with prior research, single men also report higher loneliness, lower life satisfaction, and poorer mental health than both single women (Mrozowicz-Wrońska et al., 2023; Timonen and Doyle, 2014).

Figure 1 presents results from logistic regressions estimating the average marginal effects of key predictors on men’s likelihood of being single. Because unobserved characteristics may bias these associations, future analyses will apply an instrumental variable (IV) approach to identify causal effects. Specifically, we will exploit historical female labour force participation as a source of exogenous variation in early socialization and gender norms, following approaches in Fernandez and Fogli (2009) and Giuliano (2017).

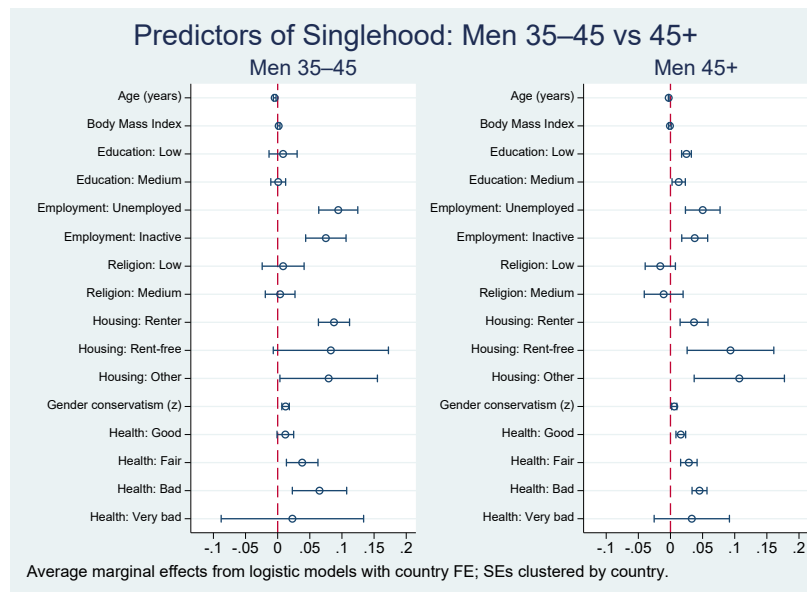


Figure 1: Predictors of never having been in a relationship among men aged 35–45 and 45+. Notes: Average marginal effects from logistic regressions with country fixed effects. Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.

By analyzing men’s singlehood across twelve European contexts, this study illuminates

the interplay of gender attitudes, social change, and economic insecurity in shaping men’s relationship trajectories. Understanding why some men remain single, whether by choice or constraint, is increasingly relevant in an era of persistently low fertility and economic uncertainty. Theoretically, our findings contribute to debates on gender attitudes and partnership formation by examining how new forms of singlehood have evolved across generations and how conservative gender attitudes affect men’s partnering prospects. We argue that in contexts of advanced gender equality, conservative or anti-feminist attitudes may increasingly hinder men’s ability to form partnerships, or lead some men to self-exclude from them. This perspective offers new insights into how gender backlash movements and “incel”-type subcultures intersect with demographic trends, potentially generating new forms of relational and social exclusion among men.

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