

Single Women in Society: Perceptions, Problems and Challenges

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Abstract

Romantic love, partnership, marriage and motherhood form the cultural context of women and resonate in representation of them. Historically, in cultural representation, women have been defined in relation to men; a very different picture has been painted when it comes to the status of being Single Women in comparison to Single Men. Single men are perceived as “bachelors” - independent, having fun, and enjoying life to its fullest before getting “chained down” by a woman. Single women on the other hand called by the names such as “sad spinsters” and “crazy cat ladies. But in the present modern age when human equality is receiving universal attention, hopefully these archaic views are just out of date and untrue. It is also a popular belief that if a woman attains certain age without being married, something must be tragically wrong with her, she must have a bad disease, she is incapable of conceiving children and her great grandmother left her a curse never to get married. These are some of the rumors spread about women who prefer not to get married. There are people who subscribe to the traditional belief that every woman needs to be comfortable in a man’s house playing the role of wife. Why it is difficult for women to decide her own life space, why can’t she choose to remain single throughout her life? Why does she always needs a man shelter and look for her prince charming?

However, not much research has been done on single women yet, because of their special status, therefore the present paper seeks to explore whether single women are marginal, what are the problems and challenges they face in their life being a single women, what are the perceptions and attitudes of society towards them. Based on exploratory research design, present study is being conducted in Surat City. By using snowball -sampling technique a sample of 20 single never married women (who are unmarried up to the age of 40) is being identified and interviewed.

Key-words: - Single Women, Discrimination, Perception, Women Stereotype

Reference to this paper should be made as follows:

Shashi Saini, “Single Women in Society: Perceptions, Problems and Challenges”, RJPSSs 2017, Vol. 43, No.1, pp. 67-79, http://anubooks.com/?page_id=2012 Article No. 10 (RJ1885)

Introduction

The actuality of single women in India is not a modern occurrence; there has been a long tradition of women remaining single by choice or circumstance. Despite the existence of single female modes of being, in the past and more recent history of India, it is within the modern context that different female identities and lived experiences are acknowledged and begin to transpire. Through the process of modernity and the partial integration of tradition with these processes, many women now seriously consider a life without marriage viable. Today modern women are more sensible when it comes to the marriage. She does not hang her hopes as dreams on finding prince charming but she does put a lot of focus on making her career and taking care of herself than getting married.

The dominant view in Indian society is that for a woman, getting married is the primary, if not the sole, route to happiness. Most people believe that a single women's life will be of no meaning unless and until she gets married. Women who observe the codes of appropriate female behaviour are socially regarded as respectable and moral. However, women who do not conform to normative conceptualization of Indian womanhood are constructed as abnormal. As single women are not defined in relation to a male guardian, they are socially situated outside acceptable forms of womanhood. And the stereotypes don't end here. Single women are either supposed to be promiscuous or they don't get any. And if, a divorcee/widow gets remarried, all that can be thought is that the rollover was done to have perfect sex.

Now who constitute single women? Single women can be referred to those women who are unmarried till the age of 35, who abandoned their husbands, who are divorced with their spouses and those whose husbands are dead. Understanding for single women differs from differences of nature and forms of single women. Unmarried, divorced, separate and widow are the various forms of single women and all these forms are defined in different ways. Literally, a widow single woman is simply defined as a woman whose husband has died and who has not married again. Divorcee single women are those who have legal ending of a marriage. Similarly, separate single women are those who stop living together as a couple. Besides this, unmarried single women (a category which is of more focus in this paper) are defined as those who are not married or have an unmarried status.

Stein (1978) constructs another typology of singles on the basis of elements of choice and permanence. First 'voluntary temporary single' include younger never-

married, the divorced who are postponing remarriage and never-married who are interested in marriage, but are not likely seeking it. 'Second voluntary stable singles' includes who have chosen to be single, those who have not married and are satisfied with that, or those who are divorced and do not seek remarriage. Third, 'Involuntary temporary singles' include people whose marriages have been broken down who want to remarry, or those never married who actively seeking marriage. Fourth, 'Involuntary stable singles' include those divorced, widowed and never married people who wished to marry but have come to consider singlehood as a probable permanent situation.

It is also a common understanding of people in our society that neither men nor women can have a happy and successful life in this world and also in heaven if they have not entered into marital life. Our social values have provided an orientation that women have to feel privileged to be with husbands in the family, and be content with happiness gained through this relation by their spouse. The theories of family and marriage institution have established an ideology that a woman is the equal partner of the male for the maintenance of the family and other dealings. However, what is in practice is that she holds an inferior status within these social units.

Whatever the social pressure, it is clear that singles have been growing in number in India. The figures reveal that, since the 1960s, there has been a marked increase in never-married woman. A brief survey of the Census Report 1961-1991 reveal that numerically they form a significant percentage of the population and therefore should not be overlooked. A census conducted in 1980 revealed that a large number of highly educated woman were still unmarried despite being above 40 year of age. The rising number of single women in recent time has contributed to misrepresent the existing order of patriarchal arrangements. It has been so because they are interested to complete their creative and productive education, to grab opportunities of better life provided by that education and wants to have an independent and career-oriented existence. Similarly, divorce rate has become high as a result of pressure or mental strain inflicted by marriage, love and artificial love marriage. lack of common understanding among the spouses, vindictive dowry system and various conservative and profitable or commercial marriage practices. Increasing ratio of widows is considerably high and outstanding as a result of child marriage practices, restriction of remarriage, death of husband in accidents, insurgencies or other unnatural contexts and situations.

According to Matthew Fitzgerald (2009) reason for staying single is that you can enjoy the opportunity of building your career without draining the tons of energy

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a permanent relationship entails. You remain free to put in long hours, work on the weekends or do whatever else you have to do to be successful. This is especially true if you're working in any kind of time demanding field, such as medicine, law or entrepreneurship.

One of the main reasons why women stay single is because women today are more driven to get the next promotion, become financially secure and to enjoy the fruits of their education and hard work. Marriage is way down in their list of goals to achieve. The Asian avoidance of marriage is new, and striking. Only 30 years ago, just 2% of women were single in most Asian countries. The share of unmarried women in their 30s in Japan, Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong has risen 20 points or more. In Thailand, the number of women entering their 40s without being married increased from 7% in 1980 to 12% in 2000. In some cities, rates of non-marriage are higher: 20% among women aged 40-44 in Bangkok; 27% among 30-34-year-olds in Hong Kong. In South Korea, young men complain that women are on "Marriage strike."

In recent years, the increasing incidence of single hood among middle-class women is explained by their economic independence (Baker 1967; Adams 1976; Braito and Anderson 1983). Similar views are expressed by Freeman and Klaus, who opine that employed or financially independent middle-class women, no longer regarded marriage, as necessary for financial support or for self respect. There are new acceptable means to earn money and a growing openness about the fragility of happiness in marriage.

The trend among women to wed later is closely related to education. The more education a woman has received, the more likely she is to delay marriage. (Sumiko Iwao 2011). Nine of every 10 women still want to get married, but the kind of marriage they want has changed a lot in the past decade. There's more emphasis on careers than ever before. Remaining a single woman is a choice that females often make in today society and it's becoming a more popular and accepted practice. Women today are enjoying more success and independence than ever before and taking advantage of professional opportunities. Choosing to stay single is becoming a preferred way of life for more women today than at any other time.

Whatever may be the reason for remaining single, it is a fact that human society since very long has remained prejudiced and narrow-minded towards them. It is very easy for people to blame the women for remaining single, whatever may be its reasons and realities. If we look into the lives of these women, it is not easy for them to stay single in a strict and rigid patriarchal society like India. They have to

bear horrific suffering in every moment of living a single life. However, theoretical insight from the studies exhibits that not much research has been done on the problems and challenges of single women. Therefore the present paper seeks to explore whether single women are marginal; if so how is their marginality constructed, maintained and challenged both in public and private sphere, what are the problems and challenges they face in their life being a single women, what are the perceptions and attitudes of society towards them.

The Study

Methodology

The present study was conducted in Surat city of Gujarat. Based on exploratory research design 18 single women were interviewed. For the purpose of present study only those single women were selected who are unmarried and at least 35 years old; there was no upper age limit. (the oldest interviewee was 61 years old). The researcher chose 35 as the lower age limit because in Indian context this is age when society has accepted that they are going to remain single and stop pressurizing them to get married and women themselves accepted their status. The aim was to study only those women who were not connected to men in any-marriage type relationships, and who had no immediate dependents to care for.

The author found the women through various personal networks and contact through contact, by using the snowball method of sampling. While selecting the sample care was taken for inclusion for different age group women, different job profile, different religion and caste to see the effect of these variables on the problem, perception and challenges of single women. The difficulty with this is allayed somewhat by the fact that a large proportion of well paid, highly educated women were found single. Through semi-structured in-depth interview the author attempted to elicit the experiences of single women. Some women stuck fairly precisely to the questions asked, some elaborated the points by giving examples, and some tended to tell their life stories. There was an attempt to cover all issues in all interviews, but some gap remained, either because of the time constraints of the interviewee or because of the complex nature of interview. As some women respondents were hesitant to reveal the personal information like why they choose to remain single? etc. The method of narrative analysis is used to understand the perception of society towards the single women and problems and challenges are being faced by them. The findings are discussed under themes: the making of single women, on being single, perception and attitude of society towards them, discrimination at workplace, are single women marginal?

The Findings

The making of a ‘Single Women’

Conception of self as single?

Because of the modern diversity in patterns of people’s lives, singleness perhaps need not to be so conscious so it was tried to explore whether the women thought of themselves as single. Simon (1987) in her study of 50 never-married women found that they tended to be unwilling to identify themselves as single. In the present study out of the 18 women interviewed 5 considered themselves as single. Majority of them don’t consider themselves as single.

Yes, I consider myself single as I am living alone for the last 20 years.(R-5)

Yes, I consider myself single, although I am living in joint family but as far as status is concerned, I consider myself single. (R-2)

No I don’t consider myself single as I live in joint family(R-14)

I don’t consider myself single as live in joint family, I am the only earning member in the family, I am bearing the responsibility of my 2 brothers, one is heart patient and the another one is blind and 2 sisters, one is paralyzed and one widow, all are senior citizens (R-6)

The response of these women indicates that majority of women hesitant to consider themselves as single because in Indian society ideal womanhood is being married and connected to a man in a marriage type relationship. And those women who do not conform to normative conceptualization of Indian womanhood are constructed as abnormal. Being the status of single considered something abnormal. So despite having higher education and economically independent majority of respondents had a desire that society consider them as normal and to project an ideal image to conform to the social norms of normal womanhood.

Reasons of singleness

There were several reasons found for remaining single; these women were economically reasonably well placed to remain single as except one woman, all were working and earning a good salary; majority of the women revealed that they had studied for a relatively long time, had postponed marriage and being highly qualified and overage difficult to get the suitable match thus ended up single; few women reported they concentrated on building their career and paid less attention to relationship and two women narratives showed that circumstances didn’t allow them to get married as their family economic condition was not good and they had to take up a job to bear the responsibility of their siblings and sacrificed their dreams for the sake of

their family. When asked about their childhood dream about marriage, most of the women opined that like every normal girl they too had the dream of getting married and settled down but circumstances didn't make it possible. Only three women said that from the childhood they were not interested in marriage, they always wanted to be self-reliant and live life independently. It reveals that in most of the cases singleness is not voluntary, it is circumstantial.

I am voluntary single. As I was busy in making career so never thought of getting married. I changed 3 cities for job purpose, due to instability never got chance to decide about the marriage.(R-7)

Due to higher studies, I didn't get a suitable good match and I didn't want to do compromise but when I faced a lot of humiliation and problems I decided to compromise, everything got final but in the last I withdrew, as I thought that now I am facing lots of problem what could be the situation if my problem would get doubled. What would happen if the partner would not be compatible life would become more worsted. If I would have get the partner of my qualification and good family background I would have done marriage, but unfortunately it didn't happen to me.(R-11)

Yes, I chosen myself to remain single, as my parents didn't able to bring a suitable match for me and getting married in different caste one should have good looks, I was lacking in it. They could not blame me for not getting married and infect they are happy with my status because they themselves failed to find a suitable match for me.I belong to a very poor family my father was newspaper vendor, as I became graduate I immediately took up a job to support my family financially. (R-2)

It is circumstantial, as I was the only earning member in my family, I had to run the family, and all my siblings were dependent on me, so I didn't marry(R-5)

Like every girl I do wanted to get married which I dreamt from the childhood.(R—5)

Like every girl I also wanted to get married and wanted to have a beautiful home comprises of a perfect life-partner and kids but circumstances were not in my favour and it didn't get possible. (R-8)

I never thought about marriage as I was busy with supporting my family financially. (R-1)

On being single

Perception and attitude of society towards you?

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As I am living in the joint family, it doesn't happen to me. People saw me with great respect that madam has done lot of sacrifice for their family. All are helping towards me.

No I don't think that society treats you differently if you are single, infact it all depends on the kind of personality you have, you have to make your personality so strong that nobody would dare to talk to you unnecessary, make a distance from you.

Yes I initially faced lots of humiliation both at home and workplace because I chosen to remain single. My parents keep forcing me to get married but for the last 2-3 years they stopped asking. I was a very brilliant student of science, when I got second position in college merit no one from my home came with me to take result as for them my brilliancy and my academic achievements didn't matter, they just want me to get married after having minimum qualification. When I go to any social function, relatives keep on asking when you are getting married, if you have someone in your life, let us know, we will convince your parents. In Social functions, everyone come with their respective partners so I feel little awkward to go alone, now I stopped attending social functions. My father was very strict and always kept me inside the four walls of home and I hardly go to play outside with other kids when I was in childhood, because of the strict atmosphere at home I became very fearful and Introvert, now when I have to deal with societal pressure of marriage, which I find very difficult to deal with that. Even when I used to study a lot at home my father used to say like this- "kitabomeydoobkarkyahasilkarlogi, shaadikaroaurgharbasao." He discouraged me for higher studies. My condition has improved when my brother has got baby girl of his own. She is a girl of new generation and very sharp, she hardly listens to others, now they could realize that girl could be like this.

Sometimes society treats differently which really hurts. They usually think that we have no responsibility at home and will be given more responsibility. When I used to wear good clothes and go to office then neighboring women said that as she has no responsibility that's why she spends all the money on herself and wear good clothes and live lavishly, it shows that I am not a human being, I could not have wishes and right to live a happy life, I cannot spend on myself. If I would have a family, then only I could live a happy life.

I never bother about the society. I stayed 29 years in hostel so I never face such kind of problem, when I was warden, students gave me lot of respect, recently I shifted to a society in my own flat, there I always keep the door open,

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society has an interest up to when you keep the things in closet, when you keep everything open they hardly want to know anything. So my life is an open book, there is nothing to hide. The society where is I live people hardly invite me in any religious function not because of my status but because of my religion, as I belong to Muslim religion, they think that I will not come to attend their religious ceremony, it's their prejudice, otherwise I don't have such kind of feeling. In another sense, it is good for me that they don't invite me, so I ne Society keeps asking that why you have not married, if you are single no body recognize your work, your intelligence doesn't matter only status matter.

Why she is single, might be her character is not good or some physical problem she is having, like that. Even its very difficult to survive as a single woman in society, as I got a good government job as associate professor outside surat, I hired a row house in Ahmadabad but I faced daily lot of humiliation, my neighbourhood keep asking me why you have not married, and daily I had to face their suspiciously staring eyes. When it became very difficult to tolerate, I finally resigned from there and came back to my home and join another job in south Gujarat University. Peoples usually promote in their career but I had to demote myself as I was associate professor in earlier job but now I joined as an assistant professor, almost Rs. 16,000 losses every month in salary. That much loss I had to bear because of my status. Now here as I live with my family, no one stare at me like this.

Society keeps pressurizing that get married by saying 'hameyshadimeykabbularahi ho'. Sometimes they also gives examples of others that someone got married at the age of 40,42 so you can also like that. Because there would be someone in the old age who can take care of you. Always, it is the women itself who often talk like this.

Sometimes I keep quiet and sometimes I shout on them. But according to her sindhi community is little progressive as compared to other communities, it gives space to single women and accept the women as single. She said it depends on your neighbor, if they are good you feel good as single. She said when you are moving towards the old age you started think of getting married followed by regret for not getting married is also there. But along with that thinking fear is accompanies that if you marry in this age, what happen if adjustment would not be there.

Positive aspects of singleness

So far as positive aspects of singleness is concerned the majority of women

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reported the most important positive aspects of singleness is that you get enough time to make progress in career; to pursue hobbies as having no familial responsibilities. One self is able to live their life at their own and give hundred percent to career and become self-reliant. Without being pressurized and facing any conflict between responsibilities and duties demanded by families and the expectations of their employment, which very often-married women faces.

Positive aspect of singleness that you could give enough time to your carrier, if I would have done marriage I could be able to write 30 books, which I wrote myself. They would be with the society when I would not be here, after my death. I write in Jan kalian newspaper also. (R-1)

Negative aspects of singleness

While inquiring negative aspects of singleness the facts reveals that the most negative aspect of singleness is to face humiliation and staring questioning eyes of the society all the time. At the same time being single, everything has to be managed alone whereas if married responsibilities are divided. Two women reported that it is difficult for single women to get rented house, as property owners did not want to rent their properties to single women as unmarried women were suspected to indulging in unacceptable practices. Informants also told that as people would also talk or gossip about single women's behavior and type of people they invited to their homes, their privacy in rented properties was limited. Sadly, buying a house or apartment was often not an option for many due to limited and single earning, forced them to buy a property and invited financial trouble. Feeling lonely and depressed sometimes is another negative aspect narrated by few women. But five women were not reported any negative aspects, they were happy with their status.

As I am working, my office timings are 10.30 a.m.-5 p.m. and this is time when most of the work like paying electricity bill, getting gas cylinder, and bank work has to be done. As I am single I have to do all these work at my own, as my office timings are same, I can take excuse daily to do all extra work. So sometimes it becomes very frustrating not because of office work but the outside work have to perform alone and forced to juggle between office and household management. And generally people have the perception that being single you have to do nothing at home, they don't realize that everything we have to manage alone and cooking for one person and cooking for 2-4 person, don't make any big difference.(R-7)

No negative aspects as I am very happy with my friends. I am not talking about colleagues, I am talking about friends, sharing same wavelength. (R-2)

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Yes, I do experience loneliness and depression sometimes; to overcome this I do meditation and prayers. I follow a spiritual guru too. I also read good motivating book which gives me inner strength to face the society. Earlier I was very weak emotionally but after meditation and spirituality I became much stronger. If I am here it is because of the power of mediation and books readings.(R-17)

Discrimination at work place

Majority of women revealed that they face lot of discrimination and bad attitude towards them at workplaces. Being a single means having more energy and commitment for work as having less familial responsibilities and enough time to devote to career, if progress is made, colleague's people feel jealous and make loose talks about their character and especially women colleagues.

I felt harassment more from my women colleagues and those colleagues who are at very senior position, I don't know why she feels insecure despite of the fact that she is at higher position than me. If I get some reward or some position then I heard them saying that she must have compromised somewhere (she must have offer some sexual favor). It is the women who used to talk like this about me, these kinds of attitudes break me from inside, lower down my spirit. Women colleagues advise me that don't get ready too much "agaretnasajkarrahogi to esey he log pechechypadegey, esliye simple rahakaro" . Now I have started remain simple, otherwise I was very fond of wearing good clothes and jewelry, which I gave up because I am single, I don't have right to look good. I killed my inner women myself. (R-8)

One woman narrated that once official picnic is planned. One colleague commented 'Aapkakyahai, aap to ek hi ticket meyaajayegey'. Usually when official picnic is planned everyone takes their family along. When I received such kind of comments, it hurts. Another kind of discrimination one women reported that when during examination we go for squad duty then married women colleagues used to tell the cab driver that 'madam to akeleyraheteyhaiesliye madam kopahley pick up karnaursabseybaadmey drop karna.' We have more family duties to perform at home so drop us first at home. These kinds of discrimination usually we have face at workplace. Another incident was that I showed my books which I have written myself to my married women colleague then she said 'aapkakyahai family ki responsibility hainahiesliyeyeh hi kaamkarogey, hamey to office seyjaaney key baadetneykaamhoteyhaighar par, time hi nahimiltahaikikuchlikhpaye.' It shows that nobody recognizes your academic work and contribution if you are single.

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Once a lady colleague came to me and said that '*madam aapkonahilagatakiabbahut age ho chukihai koi bachchaaapkigodimeykheley*'. These kinds of treatment and attitude women respondents reported to receive at workplace.

Are single women marginal?

What is the social situation of a single women in the given social structure can be best understood in the light of the process of marginalization. However, the concept of marginality is itself difficult in interviews; women from different background are likely to understand and interpret it in variety of ways. But Marginality was interpreted through the respondent's reactions in different social situations, how they feel when react when they come in social contacts: being excluded, forgotten and invisible, being made to feel uncomfortable, or experiencing discomfort regardless of other's people's reactions in a particular situation. This was often explained in terms of couples and families socializing with others in similar positions. But broader references to 'couple's society' can be read as reference to familism. This is particular evident in comments by women who said that they did not experience a sense of marginality personally. Even though they generally considered single women to be marginal. Majority of the respondents revealed that their friend circle mostly include unmarried friends. They find similarity in their status and feel comfortable in interacting with them. They deliberately made a protective network to deal with the marginality. The locations of these women served to protect them from societal pressure; their own network, often deliberately and consciously constructed over the years, operated a buffer zones providing further safety.

I don't feel odd. But I think it's because I am with other people and a lot of people I know are in the same position. I think if most of my friend were couples I would feel much more peculiar.(R-6)

When I am at my workplace I don't feel odd, but when it comes to attend any social function like marriages and any gathering for celebrating festival, I generally avoid because everyone comes in couple, and going alone there I feel isolated and have to face the questioning eyes of the people .(R-11)

As I live in the institute campus, but when it comes to social gathering or celebrating children birthday party people often forget or avoid to invite me as I don't have a family and they considered me a misfit and stranger, at that point I feel that if I would have a marital family then would have been considered a part of the society. I see myself on the edge. I see the mainstream as being sort

of typical, family structure, wife, two kids, that sort of thing. I don't see myself as being part of this group. (R-14)

Conclusion

Let it be sum up by the fact that validate the capacity for Indian women to live as single women, despite the limitations imposed on their lived experiences by patriarchal social constraints and normative ideologies of appropriate womanhood. For many, the reasons for remaining single are similar, such as career aspirations, educational background, rejection of socially prescribed female roles, and retaining individual and independent identities. However, as female social identities and sexualities are multiple and complex, the modes of being and live experiences of informants are specific to each. The ways in which Indian women negotiate their lives as single women enable them to redefine their individual circumstances within broader socio-economic contexts ideologies of Indian womanhood. The experiences of the investigators while initiating interviews with women who were unmarried, the investigator understand that understood that being single in India is socially perceived as abnormal and improper. From continually being told that all women marry the investigator realized that she was researching a sensitive, yet emerging issue. Although social perceptions of single women still generally regard unmarried women as abnormal and ill-fated, single women are beginning to shape and negotiate their ways of being in contemporary Indian societies. However, the circumstances are slowly but unquestionably changing with new options, opportunities and hope for women to emancipate themselves from patriarchal domination.

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