SOCIAL-CULTURAL STIGMAS AND ENCOUNTERS FACED BY 'STILL UNMARRIED' WOMEN AND THEIR FAMILIES

Nayab Bukhari, Social Activists,
BEC. E-Commerce Technologies, Sydney, Australia
Email: nayab@nayab.ca

Mehwish Riaz,
PhD Student, Int. Institute of Islamic Thought,
International Islamic University, Islamabad

Abstract:

   Marriage is an important institution of human society that binds two humans socially, morally, and religiously. Due to recent trends and transformations in society, most women do not prefer to get married or are not eligible to get married as per various socio-cultural norms and demands. This research is focused on the issues single women face — from social unacceptability to finding accommodation to finding places to interact safely with each other which — are not being addressed by society or the state. The purpose of the study was to explore women's experiences of being stigmatized by society as leftover and to find out sociocultural constraints faced by still unmarried women and their families. In this regard, the sample of 10 still unmarried women aged 35 and above was selected by using the snowball sampling technique for conducting in-depth interviews. For thematic analysis, it was concluded that still unmarried girls are not only facing problems by themselves but their families too are faced with various social pressures Theoretical considerations of social, economic, and demographic factors promoting delayed marriage. All this requires an identity shift to reframe single as a positive social identity which begins by raising awareness about singlism. The findings of this study may promote positive social change by raising awareness about singlism.

Keywords:
Singlehood, Socio-cultural Stigmas, Still-unmarried

Introduction

Marriage is one of the important parts of a person's life. In our country marriage has always been considered an important establishment of human society. Due to various social-cultural reasons as well as personal choices, many individuals decide not to marry. Today's single Pakistani women are not inevitably leftovers as many of them merely don't want to marry, or have built their high demand for the selection of a man. A grounded theory study to explore how women experience singlehood and what explains how they experience singlehood was chosen to allow the narratives of single women to be told in their voices.

In many ways, single women are under constant social surveillance. They are continuously being questioned: So what's new? Are you seeing anyone? What are you waiting for?! They are always being warned that they are liable to miss their train or die alone. The traditional attitude is that those who remain single are deviant or in some way inadequate for normal adult roles. But there is an emergent new style of singlehood that opposes this view. An increasing number of individuals are pursuing singlehood consciously and voluntarily. Today's single Pakistani women are not inevitably leftovers as many of them merely don't want to marry, or have built their high demand for the selection of a man.

In the patriarchal social system of Pakistan, a man has various demands for his partner such as beauty, wealth, education, family-oriented, etc., which may or may not be fulfilled by every woman. On the other hand, well-educated and economically independent women also have certain preferences in choosing a man equivalent to their qualifications and social status. The 100% match-up with every one choice is the leading cause of not getting married by most of the girls in Pakistan.

The unreasonable factors may lead to various personal and social and personal complications. Unfortunately, without considering the actual reason women are still unmarried up to 30 or 40 years of age, the social circumstances stigmatize such women as leftovers and feel pity for them. Irrespective of whether a **woman** is beautiful, talented, **or** economically **well-settled**, it is disgraceful for the parents and society if she is still unmarried. Many feminists' perspectives have debated on established discourse for unmarried men and women. Whereas a man who remains unmarried is thought of as independent or intelligent, a woman who remains unmarried is assumed to be desperate, at once a figure of pity and scorn. An unmarried man is called a bachelor—and you might even find him on a list of eligible bachelors—but apart from the antiquated 'maiden' or 'spinster', no courteous term for an unmarried woman.

Pakistan is facing a problem of late marriage in urban areas. As a result of being unemployed after higher education for a long duration, our boys and girls are facing problems in getting suitable partners. Even the parents of their highly educated daughters find it difficult to get a suitable match for their daughters. In this critical situation, the girls after their reasonable education are compelled to go for further higher education or for a white-collar job. Naturally, with higher age, high quality, and their best job they prefer their partners to be on the same level, age, and with the same type of qualification and good job status. Thus, with no better match available both boys and girls live a solitary and bachelor life for a longer duration.

Literature Review

Marriage creates bonds and strong ties among families as it is an important social institution in Pakistani society. According to Saleem, et al (2015), "marriage is a bond between a female and a male who start living together and share livelihood, having sexual, social and cultural intimacy". In the institution of marriage, the bond of intimacy is empowered by the birth of a child which on the other hand declines due to infertility, and late marriages practiced by both men and women in society are one of the root causes of this issue.

In Asia the amalgamation of 'social-structural and socioeconomic modifications have facilitated the approval of " freedom of choice" of young people, particularly young women, there is an alteration of the focus of marriage decision-making away from families to young women and men themselves. The main factors

have been the shift in women's attainment, economic stability, and urban environment, all these factors have led to 'increasing acceptance of individual freedom of selection while at the same time diminishing the social, cultural, and economic need of marriage (Tsuya, 2001).

Link and Phelan (2001) gave additional insight into the connotation of stigma. According to their view stigma process is that categorized individuals experience discrimination and status loss which could bring more bad consequences for their psychological, psychical, economic, and social well-being. Although the stereotypical construction of never-married is changing, mostly in developed countries but still marginalization and stigmatization are still how single women are treated in many counties (Byrne & Carr, 2005; DePaulo & Morris, 2005; Hertel et al.,2007; IsiugoAbanihe, 2000; Sandfield & Percy, 2003). Singleness is seen as defying norms of femininity, marriage, and motherhood hence attracting many practices of social stigma and stereotypes (Byrne, 2000, 2008; Byrne & Carr, 2005; Ibrahim & Hassan, 2009; Simpson, 2003). An unmarried woman is mostly seen as hostile to marriage or to men, unattractive, lesbian, unwilling or unable to find someone to date, swinger, or loner. A study directed in Germany additionally demonstrated that older singles are more targets with native stereotypes than their cooperated partners (Greitemeyer, 2009). Negative generalizations and disgrace against singleness are one result of the unavoidable belief system that hetero marriage and parenthood are definitive characteristics of achievement in a lady's life. DePaulo & amp; Morris (2005) attest that one of the most significant ramifications of the philosophy of marriage furthermore, that the family is enemies of the singles slant, which they allude to as singlism. Singles are made targets of contrary stereotyping, relational dismissal, financial impediment, and segregation.

There was a time when Asia was noted for early marriages but now in recent years delayed marriages have been marked. This is true, especially in East and Southeast Asia, where in many other counties marriage age has risen by several years (smith 1980:Xenos & Gultiano 1992; Jone 2004). The longest delay in marriages has been witnessed in the cities, where economic and social change has been greatest.

Reasons given for the change in the delay of marriage are different and complex which could lead an individual not to marry at all. The aspects of the marriage market have played a vital role in delaying marriages in some counties (Casterline, Williams & Mcdonald 1986; Preston & Strong 1986). However, the wide nature of delay in marriage or promotion of singlehood suggests that more fundamental factors and forces are at work. Mass education, rapid socio-economic development, and family system have been connected with increased individualization and singlehood, new economic opportunities, and concepts of the purpose of marriage (Xenos & Gultiano 1992).

The role of education plays a major factor associated with the female age of marriage in Pakistan. A number of researches have proved that women's education levels are closely connected with age at first marriage of females (Karim 1984, Afzal et al. 1994, Aryee 1985, Gangadharan and Maitra 2001 and Psacharopoulos and Woodhall 1985). It is also argued that an increase in the level of women's education has led to a rise in age at marriage (Gangadharan and Maitra 2000). Studies have shown that education has a huge effect on marriage timing and that leads to higher age at marriage for educated females. Given that education level generally increases as age increases and that age is positively correlated with marital postponement, it seems reasonable to suggest that education level would be positively correlated with later age at marriage. While studies have explored whether higher education for women could be predictive of marital postponement, no studies have been devoted specifically to any reason or factor other than education level related to delayed marriages (Shehzad 2017).

As per the Pakistani Population Survey (2016), women and men are marrying later as compared to the past because they are influenced by socioeconomic factors. Governments across the

world have been encouraging and facilitating women to be part of public services and in policy making. As a result, women are distracted and are not concentrating on getting married timely.

Another important perspective highlighted by Shahzad (2017) is fertility, women's age at marriage is strongly connected with fertility and therefore increases or decreases fertility in a society. As women make up half the country's population it is important to examine whether their delayed age at marriage affects levels of the number of children and fertility in different spheres of society undermining the county's potential for reduction in fertility.

Theoretical Framework

Third third-wave feminist movement is described using a wave metaphor that tries to deal with social change and transformation that arose from feminist research and action over the period (Parry & Fullagar, 2013). The third wave looks at women's lives as intersectional and demonstrates how class, race, gender, ethnicity, culture, and nationality are all important factors that influence women's lives as a whole. That fits in with this research as well where women based on their gender, race, and socio-economic status play a significant role in the delay of marriage, so there are lots of factors that are being constructed at the micro level and practiced at the macro level of society and as a consequence women are the ones who suffer because of their gender. As the wave of feminism incorporates transformation and social change it can relate to the present study which highlights how change is coming and society is accepting singlism as well.

Significance of study

The issues single women faced — from social unacceptability to finding accommodation to finding places to interact safely with each other — are not being addressed by society or the state. Moreover, the theoretically oriented study of singlehood is still missing, and the notion of singlehood has only rarely been considered an analytical concept deserving of sociological attention.

Objectives:

- To explore women's experiences of being stigmatized by society as leftover.

- To find out socio-cultural constraints faced by still unmarried women and their families.

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research design to conduct in-depth interviews with single women to explore the reasons for not getting married and the societal response toward them. The study was conducted at Fatima Jinnah Women's University Rawalpindi/ the sample of a maximum of 10 still unmarried women aged 35 and above was selected by using a snowball sampling technique for conducting in-depth interviews. The interviews were audio recorded which was transcribed and translated into English. The collected data will be described through a thematic analysis technique.

Results

Socio-cultural encounters

Mankind has a pragmatic way of interval, development of discernment, and technological progression. The conversion of a community to a society is based on framing a set of rules in accordance with its establishing individuals' congenital culture, distinguished ethnicities, and permissible galaxy for development. This indicates that every society, whether civilized or unpolished, is recognized by its prudently excogitated principles known as its norms reflected in sociocultural practices and standards.

The findings of the study revealed the sociocultural impediments and standards causing delayed or never-married status among women in Pakistani society. The following diagram illustrates the interrelated factors contributing to singlehood:
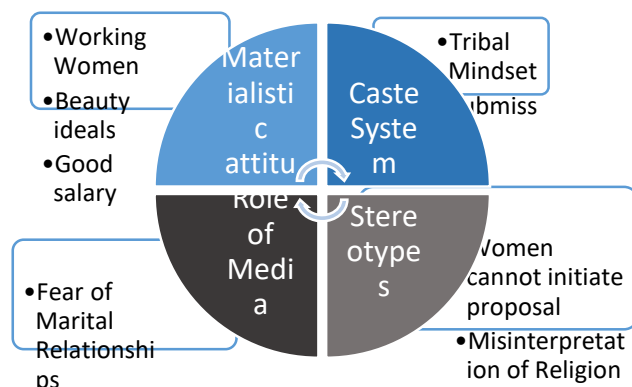

Figure 1. Social Cultural Detriments of Singlehood

a) **Materialistic Attitudes**

b) The majority of the respondents stated that many social standards contributing towards singlehood such as job, elder women, good family background, pretty face, and overall physical appearance matter most. These standards have penetrated our society and are not only harmful to women but also impact families and societies. Concerning elderly women aged 35 & above, the social perception that such women are mature is due to which their mind setup cannot be tamed or changed, also there are medical and reproductive health issues in elder women. By elaborating on the social standards of selecting women mates, one of the respondents stated:

c) *In our family in many cases proposals are initiated by women, we look for a good match and then they try to find a mediator and go forth with it. And I think whoever has power in society gets to choose who they want to marry. Woman in my family married a boy of her choice, and she sent the proposal to him, he does not do much, and he lives in her parents' house…so you see when people have power they use it for such matters.*

d) In Asia the amalgamation of 'social-structural and socioeconomic modifications have facilitated the approval of " freedom of choice" of young people, particularly young women, there is an alteration of the focus of marriage decision-making away from families to young women and men themselves. The main factors have been the shift in women's attainment, economic stability, and urban environment, all these factors have led to 'increasing acceptance of individual freedom of selection while at the same time diminishing the social, cultural, and economic need of marriage (Tsuya, 2001).

e) Another respondent illustrated:

f) *Firstly, they (Pakistani men) are looking for a young, fragile mind that they can mold in shape or form. As they say (The more softwood is more easily it can be molded), secondly, the age of fertility is important 18-36 years is said to be fertile and they want to marry someone from this age bracket thirdly, they think women of 35 and above are crazy (they are out of their minds,* demag kharab ho chukka hai in ka*) they are either so independent that they can live without a*

man, or they have gotten more education. Crazy in another way that men think that they have suppressed sexual desire for so long and they might not be suitable for marriage now, another aspect is a man can't digest the notion of a pious /virgin woman who is above 35. They think they must have had something in the past that they are concealing.

g) The findings show that women are economically empowered, and educated due to which men get insecure of their domination over them. These are the fear they have that they cannot control women. Such social standards are unrealistic and we need to get out of these, this is the reason why women are unmarried. One of the respondents related women's economic status with the preference of selecting a mate by their male partners:

In my view, I think the girls who have just completed their studies and have entered the job market, are earning at a basic level, these girls are preferred by the men and their mothers, but the ones who have built their careers over the years, who are now on a good position and they now have decision-making power, these are seen to be a threat by men and their families, I am a case in front of you. And I do think I am a threat to them …. Because now we know who we are! We have our voice and our own distinct opinions and to be honest, my opinion about men who judge women based on their age and career is not at all good! So any girl who is a working woman, who has spent her good 4 to 5 years at work is a threat to men. The findings show that young girls are in demand, who are fair, in height, and have a good job. Even if their son is not at all pretty and does not have a good job. Because society is becoming materialistic! We have a sick society and that too because of us! We have these standards embedded in our minds. If we look for perfection then we can't find a good match for a girl or boy. These standards are useless, we don't see a person's conduct but we see their jobs, business, etc. we are becoming more materialistic. Every person is different, sometimes you have a pretty face but you are not smart, and sometimes you have a good social aura but not a pretty face..

Everyone is different we need to acknowledge that.

Stereotypes

The stereotypical mindsets of society with respect to inter-caste marriages, working but submissive girls and beauty standards are also playing a role in increasing delayed marriages or never-married women. One of the respondents highlighted the stereotypes of the male perspective as:

They do not prefer older women like me because they can't mold us, they can tame and mold young ones but the elder one… we are at that stage of life where we cannot even change ourselves. They can train the young girls about cooking cleaning etc. but they cannot train us, and for us unlearning things is very difficult at this point.

Another respondent stated:

People like submissive girls they don't like girls who are independent and empowered. Weight, height, color of skin, caste… everything! Is in consideration. We have the wrong standards! People sometimes tell another party my salary to make it more attractive which is so wrong!

Concerning women's choices toward such standards, some of the respondents mentioned that they never thought about such standards to get married. They do not have high demand concerning the financial stability of their male counterpart, physical outlook, and life standards, etc. There is a wrong perception of society towards elder women will not conceive, they are strong and empowered they cannot be controlled by are few barriers. Although the stereotypical construction of never-married is changing, mostly in developed countries but still marginalization and stigmatization are the ways in which single women are treated in many counties (Byrne & Carr, 2005; DePaulo & Morris, 2005; Hertel et al.,2007; IsiugoAbanihe, 2000; Sandfield & Percy, 2003). Singleness is seen as defying norms of femininity, marriage, and motherhood hence attracts many practices of social stigma and stereotypes (Byrne, 2000, 2008; Byrne & Carr, 2005; Ibrahim &

Hassan, 2009; Simpson, 2003). An unmarried women is mostly seen as hostile to marriage or to men, unattractive, lesbian, unwilling or unable to find someone to date, swingers or loners.

h)   Role of Media

Many of the respondents stated that the media is trying to show a different picture nowadays, but it will take a lot of time to change the perception of society. If we see print media and Urdu novels we find women characters who are not   reality-based and they are   superhumans. Women like them don't exist in real life. Media now sometimes show independent women images.   Usually,   independent   women are shown married but married women can also be independent! And they don't show that image.

One of the respondent mentioned:

i) *Media is disseminating negative images in terms of beauty standards and shockingly people 40 years old are getting married with 20 year old! I have seen so many incidents like that and the media is portraying the same thing. Respect for relationships has declined… and they show the school-going girls getting married.*

j) Another respondent also stated:

k) *Although girls today want a novel love story life it's not reality. We should look for a decent human being nothing else. The media does not show a positive picture of elder women, they are shown as troublemakers for sisters-in-law. There is a need for more acceptability of elder age women,*

l)   **Misinterpretation of Religion**

Religion is also misinterpreted while defining social-cultural and religious practices of mate selection and initiating marriage proposals by men or women. One of the respondents stated;

People wrongly quote and misinterpret religion to force one to get married. …I see people coming to me and saying that someone has done black magic on me, I am pretty and still not married I should go to someone (peer) and tell him to give me some (taweez)

On the other hand, religion is also quoted to convince women to accept older male partners as stated by one of the respondents:

Interestingly, when I was asked once to get married to a 10-year-old man, they quoted Hazrat Khadeejah's (AS) example, so this is how it is used to convince you to accept inappropriate people in life. If religion was influenced then we would have been married long ago…people nowadays use it for their benefit.

On the contrary, many good things about religion are not highlighted by society such as initiating the proposal, We know Hazrat Khadija (RA) sent a proposal to the Prophet (SAWW), but we don't quote that. But this is a national stigma women can never initiate a proposal. A respondent stated:

In our society our culture dominates religion, let's suppose if I get a proposal from a younger guy, I will not have an issue with it, and my immediate family will not have any issue. Religion does not give any age restriction except puberty. But we don't follow this notion.

Conclusion

Still, unmarried girls are not only facing problems by themselves but their families too are facing various social pressures. The presence of unmarried sisters at home demands that brothers must wait for the sisters to get married before they bring their partner home. Consequently, as a result of this, they reach the age of forty or even fifty when they hardly get married. In this state of affairs, it is observed that they live the glamour of a bachelor's life or a strictly religious devoted life. Most parents want their daughters to get married in their community/caste and will always not allow their daughters to be married in another community. As a result, they wait for a long for a proposal to come from the same community/caste.

Theoretical considerations of social, economic, and demographic factors promoting delayed marriage on a national. This requires an identity shift to reframe single as a positive social identity which begins by raising awareness about singlism. The findings of this study may promote positive social change by raising awareness about singlism.

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