

Dilemmas Of Singlehood In Contemporary Pakistani Culture: A Qualitative Study Of Unheard Voices

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Abstract

Marriage has always been central to women's lives in Pakistan and to remain single is not only considered socially unacceptable but also perceived as non-compliance to the cultural hegemony of the institute of marriage. Pakistan is a country where marriage is considered mandatory and singlehood is viewed as anomalous particularly in the case of women. The present study put light on the experiences of those women who remain unmarried in a traditional society like Pakistan where women are generally seen only as wives and mothers. This study attempted to analyse the perspectives of never-married women with greater emphasis on the issues and challenges faced by them. The primary objective of this paper is to highlight the cultural and psycho-social aspects of singlehood and to voice the opinions and 'lived experiences' of the never-married female from their perspective. In Pakistani culture, women are generally expected to get married by their mid-twenties. The study was conducted with the help of a qualitative-phenomenological approach. It relied on anthropological methods of data collection from twenty never-married women over the age of thirty-five years. Findings revealed that respondents in this study acknowledged their latent desire to be married and having fulfilled lives, however, owing to some tragic socio-familial circumstances, such as financial constraints, the death of father and the responsibility to look after widowed mother and younger siblings, caste-based endogamy, lack of physical attractiveness, failure to find a compatible spouse, were identified as some of the contributory. Regardless of whether the causes for their single status were circumstantial or optional, unmarried women experience criticism, disgrace, loneliness, and feeling of being left out in a patriarchal societal setup where traditional gender role expectations bound women with marriage and motherhood.

Keywords: Singlehood, Pakistani Culture, Family, Qualitative Analysis.

تلخیص

شادی ہمیشہ ہی پاکستانی خواتین کی زندگی کا محور رہی ہے اور غیر شادی شدہ رہنے کو نہ صرف معاشرتی طور پر ناقابل قبول سمجھا جاتا ہے بلکہ اسے شادی کے بنیادی ستون کے ثقافتی تسلط کی عدم تعمیل کے طور پر بھی سمجھا جاتا ہے۔ پاکستان ایک ایسا ملک ہے جہاں

شادی کو لازمی سمجھا جاتا ہے، اس کے برخلاف، خاص طور پر خواتین کے معاملے میں، غیر شادی شدہ کو غیر ضروری خیال کیا جاتا ہے۔ موجودہ مطالعے میں ان خواتین کے تجربات پر روشنی ڈالی گئی ہے جو پاکستان جیسے روایتی معاشرے میں غیر شادی شدہ رہیں جہاں خواتین کو عام طور پر صرف بیویاں اور ماؤں کی حیثیت سے دیکھا جاتا ہے۔ اس مطالعے میں غیر شادی شدہ خواتین کے تناظر کا تجزیہ کرنے کی کوشش کی گئی جس میں ان کو درپیش مسائل اور چیلنجوں پر زیادہ زور دیا گیا ہے۔ اس مقالے کا بنیادی مقصد تنہائی کے ثقافتی اور نفسیاتی سماجی پہلوؤں کو اجاگر کرنا ہے اور غیر شادی شدہ عورت کی رائے اور 'زندہ تجربات' کو ان کے نقطہ نظر سے آواز دینا ہے۔ مطالعہ فکری کیفیتیں تجزیے کی مدد سے کیا گیا ہے اور ڈیٹا اکٹھا کرنے کے علم البشریات کے طریقوں پر انحصار کیا گیا ہے۔ تیس سال سے زیادہ عمر کی بیس غیر شادی شدہ خواتین کے سوانحی مطالعات کا تجزیہ کیا گیا۔ اس مطالعے کے جواب دہندگان نے شادی کرنے کی اپنی دیرینہ خواہش اور زندگی پوری کرنے کا اعتراف کیا لیکن معاشی خاندانی حالات جیسے معاشی تنگدستیوں، والد کی موت اور بیوہ ماں اور چھوٹے بہن بھائیوں کی دیکھ بھال کرنے کی ذمہ داری، ذات پات کی بنیاد پر تعصب، جسمانی کشش کی کمی، ایک مطابقت پذیری شریک حیات کی تلاش میں ناکامی کو کچھ معاون عوامل کے طور پر شناخت کیا گیا ہے۔ اس سے قطع نظر کہ ان کی غیر شادی شدہ حیثیت کی وجوہات حالانکہ وجہ سے یا اختیاری تھیں، غیر شادی شدہ خواتین کو پدرانہ معاشرتی حیثیت میں تنقید، رسوائی، تنہائی اور احساس محرومی کا سامنا کرنا پڑتا ہے جہاں روایتی صنف کی توقعات خواتین کو شادی اور زچگی کے پابند کرتی ہیں۔

کلیدی الفاظ: بڑی عمر کی غیر شادی شدہ خاتون، سنگل پن، پاکستانی ثقافت، کیفیتیں تجزیہ

Introduction

Marriage has always been central to women's lives in Pakistan. It is considered a religious and moral obligation that serves as a gateway to new familial roles and producing offsprings in many traditional societies (Marphatia, Ambale & Reid, 2017). Despite the controversial opinions about the advantages of marriage, social scientists have always emphasized its value to human beings' stability and security of family life (Al-Khouli, 1989; Trimmerger, 2005; Holden, 2007). The institution of marriage is considered universal and its role for the continuity of mankind is undeniable especially in the context of Pakistani society. Being married is considered more prestigious and celibacy is socially disapproved for both men and women (Sherif, 1999). However, the change in family needs more academic than political insights. Though little has been written on the contemporary idea of spinsterhood which has altered the context of social change (Simpson, 2005).

Singlehood is both optional; spinsterhood or caused by some other factors. Currently, singlehood is the fastest-growing demographic relationship in the world (Kislev, 2019). The journal of family history has devoted the term "spinster" to those women who

do not get married by the age of 35 and therefore unlikely to marry (Watkins, 1984). They are aunts but not mothers, they are daughters but not wives; their history the contrapuntal echo of family history. It is believed that marriage develops a web of expectations and obligations that bind the women as the bride, her partner as the groom, and through children; their families. It paves way for the spread of cultural values and worldly heritage over the generations. From this very stance, the questions of marriage in terms of its occurrence, arrangement, motivation, and compatibility are irrelevant; what matters most is whether one marries (Watkins, 1984). Sociological analysis reveals that never-married singles have always been subject to discrimination and stigmatization in various societies (Gordon, 2003). Marriage is considered a valued social institution that determines women's worth, ensures their security and wellbeing. Historically, marriage conferred prestige for women than being unmarried that connotes failure (Lewis, 1984). Married women have higher social status than single persons (spinsters) whose marriage could not be arranged on time, which is considered unfortunate (Lateef, 1999; Winkvist & Akhter, 2000).

Previous studies suggest that in Pakistan, like many other South Asian cultures, parents are hurried to arrange their daughter's marriage as the older their age at marriage, the greater the risks to their chastity and honour (Bhatti, 2014). Cross-cultural analysis reveals that if a woman is not married by late twenties or early thirties, she is likely to be pressurized by her colleagues, family, and relatives. Singlehood is perceived as a social failure and a cause of concern for most families (Situmorang, 2007). The necessity of marriage to safeguard the honour of women and also to establish a family unit leads to great pressure, particularly on women to get married soon after the completion of teenage (Anderson, 1998).

Apart from being a social norm and the cultural mandate, marriage is believed to be a religious obligation and the most desirable and inevitable act for all Muslim adults. While premarital sex is strictly prohibited, marriage remains the only socially acceptable and religiously approved sexual union meant for procreation (Hassouneh-Phillips, 2001; Sherif, 1999). Islam has encouraged marriage for those who have reached physical and psychological maturity. It should not be delayed unnecessarily if one can afford the means to establish a family. In Islam, marriage is considered among the signs of God's power and blessings, and as one of Allah's wonders. The Qur'an says, "*And among His signs is that He has created for you spouses from among yourselves so that you may live in tranquillity with them, and He has created love and mercy between you. Verily, in that are signs for those who reflect.*" (30:21)

Research on issues and challenges faced by single women is scant. Thus, the prime objective of this study was to explore single¹ women's experiences to understand their views with regards to the advantages and disadvantages of being single? What makes the

findings of this study more interesting is the fact that singlehood, particularly amongst Pakistani women, is somehow a new phenomenon. Traditionally women preferably get married at an early age. The estimates from the 1998 national census indicated that 63 percent of those above 18 years old comprise the married population. Although the recent demographic analysis from the 2017 census reveals that the number of unmarried women in Pakistan has increased upto 30% in recent years. Pakistan is one of the South Asian countries where most of the women get married between the age of 20-24 years (Nasrullah et al., 2014; Raj et al., 2014). A study compares the average age of marriage in Pakistan from the 1970s to 2010 i.e. 26 to 27 years (Jones &Yeung, 2014).

According to the national findings obtained from Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey (2012-13) age at marriage among women is rising; as the median age at first marriage increased from 19.1 years in 2006-07 to 19.5 years in 2012-13. As far as the proportion of never-married women is concerned, among the age group of 30-34 years, 7.2% of women are never married. While in the age group of 35-39 years this ratio of never-married women is 3.0% and among 40-44 years old, never married women comprise 2.1%. There are 1.3% of women of the age of 45-49 who never married. These figures reveal that the trend of being unmarried is increasing in the country (PDHS, 2012–13). The findings of the latest household and demographic survey published in 2019 show that a rise in the trend of singlehood; 35% of women age 15-49 have never been married, as compared with 49% of men (PHDS, 2017-18).

More precisely, concerns about physical and mental health and wellbeing of married women generally remain the focus of scholars and activists but the kind of psycho-social and cultural issues and challenges faced by unmarried women in Pakistan are seldom addressed. Therefore, this study aims to contribute by investigating this ‘new understanding’ of remaining single in a predominately ‘married society’? This paper will elucidate the experiences of single women from their own perspectives. It explains those causative factors that are responsible for delayed marriages and involuntary singlehood among women.

Review of Literature

The idea of spinsterhood was reflected in the article “The best of none”. In nineteenth-century New England, many women were reluctant to marriage which appeared mainly due to a paradoxical connection in terms of idealized love and marriage. In that era, singlehood was viewed in the proto-feminist stance (Simpson, 2005). Spinsterhood was placed in a religiously grounded context of Victorian elevation where marriage and love were also spiritually conceived in terms of morality and usefulness. They believed that they should stay as a moral imperative to attain higher goals in life with a change in the cultural conceptualization of spinsterhood (Berend, 2000).

Singlehood is more pronounced in the developed world; however, it is a globally spreading phenomenon. The number of single women is constantly on a rise in the developed and the developing world (Lynne, 2018). Evidence from Asian countries, including Pakistan suggests that there is a significant delay in marriages in recent years. Also, the rate of divorce has increased and the notion of spinsterhood is also on a rise (Kislev, 2019).

In the Pakistani context, a recent qualitative study provides a relational insight and transformation in family structure for family demographers. It reveals that the main socio-cultural factors of delayed marriageability among educated females are lack of suitable matches, dowry, caste, sectarian affiliation, and previous engagements. Also, the size and structure of the family are decisive factors in the singlehood of women beyond a certain age i.e. 30-49. In terms of personal traits, effective individualism and physical outlook play an important role (Sultan, Ahmad & Ayub, 2020).

In many traditional and patriarchal societies, women's singleness beyond a certain age is considered a misnomer. Such women are blamed for and often pitied for their status. So much so that, the blame can also be assumed pertaining to defects in her or her personal character. In some cases, singlehood is also associated with economic, demographic, religious, and personal causative factors. Different empirical studies on women's narratives reveal how socio-cultural factors limit their opportunities to marry and intercultural understanding of singlehood such as Silvia Walby's theorizing patriarchy which examines patriarchy; a structural determinant of singlehood that has not received much attention. Women are often blamed and pitied for their status based on their assumed character defects (Ntoimo & Isiugo-Abanihe, 2014). The negative implications of singlehood reveal loneliness and the absence of a social support network takes on certain significance as women experience aging and frailty (Baumbusch, 2004). The marital status of women may have serious implications in their well-being, social behaviour, and health which need detailed investigation in countries where the group of singles is growing demographically (Gasselman et al., 2017).

Singlehood marks a recent change in household and family formation which has been a locus of political and academic attention. Yet, there is little written on singleness in contemporary research. Some researchers explore the meaning and experiences of spinsterhood to the extent to which it has altered the recent context of social change. The Quantitative analysis generated out of the British Household Panel Survey shows that recent cohorts of women and men experience a prolonged span of singleness before getting married. Studies on singlehood's temporal analysis enable us to conceptualize social time. Studies on waiting single women offer their social life's organization in a temporal order. Waiting as an interactive setting represents and produces societal symbols, timetables, and collective schedules which is an unexpected delay and mark in

the transitory life phase (Lahad, 2012). The sociological works on singlehood coming out of the West include Gary Becker's argument that rising singlehood is a result of women's economic independence and Valerie Oppenheimer's theory that delayed marriage is due to the instability of men's economic conditions—assume economic rational decision-making as the basis of their arguments. The other major approach emerging from the West, namely, second demographic transition theory, sees singlehood as part of a global movement toward greater individualism (Nakano, 2018)

Structural change in families is reflected in contemporary debates which suggest a decline in marriage as its central aspect with concerns being raised by politicians, academics, and polemicists stressing that changing familial forms reflect a decline in commitments and obligations to others (Bellah et al., 1985; Goldscheider & Waite, 1991; Dennis & Erdos, 1992; Popenoe, 1993; Putnam, 2000). However, these are extremely politicized and ideologically charged debates that cover the causes and consequences of highly contested familial change in recent times. Concerns on the 'decline' and 'breakdown' in the family are supported by notions of the nuclear family as a natural and basic unit for enculturation of people that stabilizes families and hence seen as a prerequisite in stabilizing societies. Those who fail to conform to the social ideals have a long history of anxieties due to familial change, which is a dominant theme in literature since the 1990s. It is more inclined towards selfishness than selflessness and a move to individualism (Lewis, 2003).

Singlehood is taken in terms of waiting for an interactive setting producing and representing social symbols, collective schedules, and time tables. Singlehood is generally taken as a temporary and transitory phase of life and unexpected delays are avoided (Lahad, 2012; Lahad 2015). However, alternative representations of the single women who do not necessarily spend their life 'waiting for the one' are often absent from public view, there are studies that contribute to non-waiting by stressing how understandings of waiting inform hegemonic and alternative forms of temporal subjectivity and sociality. Women are expected to 'move on' and be active in their own self-governance, which adapts to conventional norms of femininity and reworks heteronormative life scripts to offer new subject positions for single women (Lahad, 2019).

There is a lot of literature challenging the normative conceptions of family. Within feminism, there lies questioning of marriage in a historical context whereby the family and relative positions of men and women within it is confronted as a political construction. More lately, much persuasive sociological work in hypothesizing the familial change with reference to wider social context exists (Giddens, 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995), whereby families are not the "passive bedrock" in wider societal structures, but they are reified as 'fluid context in intimate relationships' (Silva & Smart, 1999). Scholarship on families focuses on transformation in values, motivations, or

meanings cannot, therefore, be deduced from statistics on household and family. Moreover, this scholarship stresses the need for bringing familial changes under consideration, in relation and significance to the wider social context in which they happen (Morgan, 1996; Wright & Jagger, 2003; Silva & Smart, 1999). The debates on this issue serve as a backdrop in understanding the contemporary notion of spinsterhood.

With the second feminism wave, the Feminists analysed the cultural and material implications of marriage for women during the 1960s and 70s. Late modernity suggests that inter-related changes in which people relate with each other have a greater range of possibilities in terms of Sociological theorizing on transformations especially in personal relationships (Giddens, 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). Nonetheless, these works are focused upon the sexually-based, dyadic couple. Little explicit attention arguing 'decline' of family, has given attention to singleness. Most of the studies in past on single people were mainly carried out from a psychoanalytic perspective.

Reynolds and Wetherell (2003) suggested that on single women, academia has largely assumed that its psychology is "widespread with the postulation of deviance". However, it is believed that the increasing attention to difference and diversity in scholarship on familial change indicates the significance of allowing for the subjective connotation of different partnership statuses. Empirical studies on single women are based on the first-hand account of popular images of spinsterhood for women, however, it refers to the previous historical eras in the context of particular social contexts (Allen, 1989; Byrne 2000; Simon: 2010). In ethnographic writings and based on the personal narratives of the single women, the complexities and tensions experienced by them are narrated, negotiating singlehood as an adult woman and examining the ways gendered ideologies and expectations influence how they perform womanhood (McKeown, 2015).

Methodology

To achieve the objective of this paper, the study drew upon qualitative data gauging descriptive research methodology to document the socio-psychological experiences and emotions of never-married women. The data presented and analysed in this study is based on in-depth interviews³ conducted with twenty single women over the age of thirty-five to investigate this issue at length in district Rawalpindi located in the northernmost part of the province of Punjab. The respondents were selected through the purposive sampling method and only those females were chosen who were single circumstantially. The interviews for case studies were informal and face to face and the respondents were encouraged to express their views and feelings freely. Keeping the sensitivity of the issue and ethics of research in view, all respondents were assured that their privacy will not be compromised, and their identities will be kept anonymous and confidential. This study was approved by Department of Anthropology Quaid-Azam University Islamabad.

The prime objective of this study was to obtain a detailed account of those unmarried women who were involuntary singles. Three Key Informants helped to identify such women in the field. However, many women were inconvenient and uncomfortable sharing their experiences as well as communicating, only twenty could provide data in length. Since the nature of the study was specific to single unmarried women upon convenience, the sampling was convenient and purposive. The data and discussion in the next section are based on the thematic analysis of narratives drawn from their interviews.

Results and Discussion

The article begins with an overview of how single women are socially perceived and later it discusses psycho-social and cultural issues mentioned by single never-married during in-depth interviews.

Social Perception of ‘Single Women’

In South Asian society, women consider marriage as a desirable state. Studies reveal that despite being single, the majority of the women consider marriage as desirable indicating a positive attitude towards marriage (Hull, 2002). This is also true in the traditional cultural context of Pakistan where girls are raised within certain religious and social limits. They are socialized according to their expected gender roles depending on their lifecycle that begins from being a submissive daughter and later an ideal and compromising wife and a good mother. In the case of being never-married, their role and utility as a woman are regarded as deficient. Being in a marital union is perceived as a more recommended option for women with little cultural validation for celibacy. Respondents in this study highlighted this social dichotomy that being married means “more prestigious” in contrast to the negative image associated with prolonged singleness. Being in a marital bond is perceived as a socially desirable thing while remaining single means “being deprived or deviant”. This has been reported by Mustard (2000) who takes into account the derogatory terms that are used to describe single women such as “being at the margins”, abnormal, incomplete and unfulfilled.

Women in this study were found well aware of various negative labels assigned to them and they were unhappy with their negative social perception that is reflected through various derogatory terms such as lonely woman (*akaili aurat*), deprived woman (*bechaari aurat*), unfortunate (*badqismat*), spinster (*charri*), celebrate (*kunwari*) and so on, which are used by friends, acquaintances, and strangers. Single women face social stereotypes and stigmas for not being chosen. Single women are also perceived as incomplete persons as their inability to get married is regarded as their personal deficiency that they are lacking in some capacity due to which they could not qualify to be selected as somebody’s spouse. It is heart-rending when people around them believe that they might have

something wrong with them as they failed to get settled in life just like other girls. In the patriarchal culture, marriage is considered as an ideal norm and almost all respondents mentioned that they are subject to greater pressure to marry. People keep on interrogating them for not complying with the popular norm of being in a marital union and with time they learn how to be patient and show others that they are happy in their lives. Pretending to be happy and satisfied is the strategy women used to face keeping in their social surroundings.

Hurdles in Girls' Marriages

It is significant to mention here that all the respondents included in this study were involuntary singles⁴. They wished to get married but due to their social circumstances, their marriage could not be arranged. They expressed dissatisfaction with their lives as being single and mentioned various reasons and instances of discrimination that caused hurdles in their marriage. During in-depth interviews, women highlighted various reasons for remaining single depending upon socio-economic, cultural, familial, and personal factors. Interestingly, the majority of the respondents preferred marriage over singlehood and expressed their desire for compliance and social acceptance by embracing the dominant identity of "being married."

In Pakistan, consanguinity is very common, and a high percentage of women are married either with a first or second cousin due to its perceived benefits in strengthening family ties. A study conducted on the prevalence of consanguineous marriages in Punjab, reveals that 50.3% of the respondents have married their first or second cousins (Bittles, Grant & Shami, 1993). Caste and sect bound endogamous marriages are preferred because of prior familiarity, better compatibility between the spouses, and owing to the ease of pre-nuptial negotiations (Afzal et al., 1994; Hussain, 2005; Bhatti, 2014). The biggest reason documented in this study that caused postponement in marriage is the compulsion to marry within caste (*biraderi*). According to respondents, for finding a mate parents preferred their own blood (*khoon*) and if a suitable match within the family is unavailable the girls have no choice except remaining celibate. A woman (36 years old) from the Sayyad family said that consanguinity is their centuries-old tradition and there is no compromise on the purity of blood. Many good proposals that came from outside their caste were declined to maintain the sacredness of our tradition.

The second more compelling reason that was most frequently mentioned was a financial constraint and the tradition of dowry that turns daughters into a financial burden. Poor families who are unable to arrange expensive dowry items remain unsuccessful to attract good proposals for their daughters. This situation becomes worse for those families where girls are more in numbers. One of the respondents stated it in this way, "*It is a material world, and these days it is the wealth and dowry that determines the value of the*

woman.” In a few cases, orphan girls complained about the financial dependence of their family where they had to serve as bread earner to look after their widow mother and younger siblings. It became obligatory for them to sacrifice their own desires for the larger benefit and survival of their family.

Another factor that caused marriage discrimination was the lack of apparent beauty. Women complained that somehow, they failed to fulfil the mounted criterion of the groom’s family who has been visiting their houses, feasted themselves, and then rejected them on various physical characteristics such as dark complexion, short height, being overweight, etc. Most of the women agreed that if the girl is not attractive or she has some kind of illness (such as leukoderma) or disability (visual impairment) her chances to get married will be limited. A respondent, (aged 37 years) illustrated her situation as “*all my younger sisters are married. Mothers of sons are more concerned with outer beauty and superficial things and rejected me every time saying my complexion is too dark.*”

Another strong factor that emerged during the discussion with the respondents that deferred their marriage was the desirable traits of men required in mate selection. Women expect to see so many qualities in one person and desire their life partners to be financially stable, handsome, sincere, trustworthy, and better educated than them. Moreover, the similarity in caste and cultural background and values were added qualities that they considered important to ensure their marital happiness. The wish to have all these qualities in one person sometimes keeps them waiting for so long. Eventually, a time comes when proposals stop coming.

Psychological Problems of Single Women

The data suggest that prolonged singleness sometimes leads to an unhealthy state of mind among unmarried girls. Several studies reported that romantic relationships (such as marriage and cohabitation) are positively connected with individuals’ emotional health and sense of well-being (Kamp-Dush & Amato, 2005; Gore, 2014). Contrary to this notion, higher levels of depression, mood disorders, anxiety, maladjustment, isolation and feeling lonely, and other forms of mental health problems were mentioned as most deprecating by single women (Braithwaite et al., 2010; Adamczyk & Segrin, 2015).

Many studies have reported psychological, emotional, social, moral, and physical benefits associated with marriage that become more pronounced in societies where marriage and family life hold greater value (Scambler, 1997). Marriage provides intimacy, happiness, social support, tranquillity, and emotional strength to the spouses (Al-Isawi, 2003). Besides, marriage brings status, passion, prestige, security, recognition, and more precisely a sense of self-fulfilment. Married people tend to live longer and happier than unmarried ones (Scambler, 1997).

The biggest challenge single women faced were to overcome their feelings of loneliness that are unpleasant and distressing for them. Some of them shared heart-breaking personal experiences where they had to face discrimination and exclusion on family gatherings and coupled occasions just because they were single women. They mentioned that many times other people make them feel 'worthless' and 'less important'. People around them particularly older women bluntly ask about their wedding plans and then suggest various strategies to invite proposals. To avoid gossip and criticism sometimes single women intentionally avoid gatherings and social ceremonies. realistic manner and deal with their problems in the most effective way. A number of researches stress the advantages of being married over singlehood (Zaman, & Ali, 2019). Dush and Amato (2005) assert that marriage is an institution, endorsed by the legal system, religion, societal norms and has a strong power to provide a sense of identity or social status to people embracing this institution by making marital bond.

Women escape any questions on the topic of marriage. They always felt that others pitied them, considered them failures, or blamed them for their singleness. Respondents in this study said they try to engage themselves in domestic activities and spend time with their like-minded female friends, involve themselves in religious activities to avoid stress and loneliness. They complained about not getting enough support, care, and attention even from their immediate family members because of their devalued status. Single women develop low self-esteem when they compare themselves with their siblings who are happy and settled in their lives. Many women in this study discussed at length and freely talked about singleness as the absence of companionship when most of their friends, cousins, and sisters are married and having children. One of the respondents stated her grievance in this way, *'just because I am not married like my other sisters and cousins, people treat me just like a maid whom they can call anytime particularly on occasions like weddings, childbirth, feasts, etc. since I don't have a husband or children, people think I am a free woman whose only task is to serve others.'*

Many other women shared similar feelings regarding the indifferent attitude of their family members and relatives who are least concerned with their happiness, emotions, well-being, or any other needs they may have. Narratives of single women indicate that they feel dejected and subordinate in comparison to other married females. Societal and familial expectations supersede the hopes and interests of single women. Single women living in a joint family system with other married siblings around admitted to feeling more upset and sometimes jealous by observing the intimate nature of the interaction between married couples and spouses. One of the respondents stated her deprivation in this way, *"Eid is a festive occasion for everyone. People particularly girls celebrate it with great zeal. Unfortunately, in my case, it is more tragic than usual days. My married brothers visit their in-laws along with their wives and my married sisters come to their natal house. All of them dress up to the occasion but I am just confined to the kitchen. I never get time to change clothes. Everybody enjoys except me. I do not go anywhere. My*

family turns a blind eye toward me. I feel inferior and jealous. Why all these happy moments are not written in my destiny.”

Remaining single and passing out marriageable age leads to many types of social biases and stereotypes. The negative social stigma associated with unmarried women makes their lives even more difficult. Stigma denotes a social identity that is devalued in a particular context (Crocker and colleagues, 1998) and characterized as the violation of widely accepted social behaviour and norms (Goffman, 1963). The findings of this study endorse this notion that never-married women experience social stigma and criticism for their single status. They felt irritated when other people pass negative comments on them and perceive them as inadequate beings, lacking enough qualities which could have made them eligible to form partnerships. Women informed that many times people would call them unfortunate and pity them for being single. Sometimes they and their parents are also blamed for being too particular, choosy, and inflexible in selecting a mate. This negative remark about their constrained singlehood makes them feel depressed and angry.

The lack of romantic relationships and physical intimacy was another thing missed in the lives of single women. They expressed their latent desire to be in a relationship to receive care, love, and attention. They wanted to feel like somebody's wife. They desired to be chosen. One of the respondents said: *“I feel very low when I observe how my married brother loves his wife and how his love reflects on her face. It's not that I am jealous, but I do feel sad as I am passing my days and nights as barren and alone.”*

Conclusions

The analysis undertaken in this study elucidates those women who remain single owing to their specific social conditions, as a consequence of marriage traditions, or due to any personal issues do occupy a disadvantaged position in their families and overall society. Prolonged singlehood among women while living in a patriarchal society that places high emphasis on the timely marriage of girls may result in various psycho-social problems, such as loneliness, stigma, criticism, emotional insecurity, inferiority complex, and above all, feelings of regret for not achieving the identity of a chosen woman, etc.

Regardless of whether the basis of their unmarried position is voluntary or circumstantial, unmarried women are over and over again stigmatized and condemned for defying the normative structure and convention of society. Also, the waiting time or liminal and temporal domain of singlehood needs to be studied since it can have serious implications on the psycho-social health of women awaiting to marry and do not intend to stay single intentionally. Both intended and unintended spinsterhood and singlehood in women have negative and sometimes positive implications. The traditional socio-cultural context perceives these women as pitiful and disadvantaged, however many of the spinsters claim that they are living a peaceful, contented, and stress-free independent life. The study unearths

that most of these single women do not opt for spinsterhood rather economic, familial, social, cultural, and sometimes personal constraints barred them from getting married at the socially assumed right age. Delay in marriage often results in lifetime singlehood since society does not appreciate and accommodate women marrying at a late age or remarrying after getting a widow or divorced. These women face a series of issues that keep on appearing variedly in different temporal stages of their lives which are often assumed and ignored.

End Notes

- 1 The term single refers to those persons who are unmarried or not involved in any stable sexual relationship (Oxford Dictionary; 2010).
- 2 Single women generally refer to those women who have passed their marriageable age and yet not married. The determination of marriageable age for women depends upon the cultural context of any society in which they live. Societal standards define suitable age at marriage for both genders. Although the minimum age that is legally sanctioned for the marriage of girls is eighteen years in Pakistan but practically speaking girls in rural areas may get married before they attain their legal age, contrary to the urban girls, who generally get married by the age of 24-25 years as they need more time to complete their education. Therefore, in this study, those respondents were considered as 'single women' who remained unmarried up to the age of thirty-five years and above.
- 3 The data analyzed in this paper was collected by Ms. Ishrat Ansari as part of her M.Sc. fieldwork in 2017. We acknowledge her willingness and support for the preparation and publication of this paper.
- 4 Involuntary singles are primarily those single males and females who wish to marry/remarry but could not find a suitable mate (Stein, 1981).

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