Foundation University Journal of Psychology
Vol 7, No.1 (January, 2023)

FUJP Open Access Journal

Research Article DOI 10.33897/fujp.v7i1.425

Experiences, Challenges, and Coping Strategies of Never Married Single Women in Pakistan: A Qualitative Analysis

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Abstract

Objective. Intimate relationships have their own vital position in any psychological and social wellbeing hierarchy. This study aims to understand the reasons why some women over 30 years of age remain single, and the social dynamics associated with their marital status.

Method. The study collected data through semi-structured interview of 8 educated Pakistani women aged between 30-36 years, living in Karachi. The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis approach was used to explore the causes of singlehood.

Results. The transcribed interviews were analyzed, and common themes and phrases were identified. Five main themes were derived namely similarity/affinity, freedom, ambition, match making process and unpleasent life experiences.

Conclusion. Study findings highlighted that principal reasons for being single are compatibility factor and safeguarding ambition/freedom. Family pressures, lack of support to travel/live alone and social commentary are the main challenges faced by single women. Self-help strategies and virtual support groups are the major coping mechanism employed.

Keywords. *Singlehood, relationships, stigma, sociology of time, social identity, feminism, marriage.*

Foundation University Islamabad

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Introduction

The institution of marriage holds significance in almost every human society. In collectivist societies like those of South Asia, arranged marriages are the norm which may be influenced by several socio-economic factors (Pande, 2014). Age is one such factor, and in Pakistan, early marriages are highly encouraged (Shahzad, 2017). As mentioned by Tabassum (2016), a relatively small percentage of women, 5.33%, by age 30-34 and 2.55% by age of 35-39 had never been married according to the data collected in 2012-13.

These never married women are a part of a heterogeneous group of women called single women. This group also includes widowed, divorced or separated women. However, in the context of this study, the term 'single' would refer to never married women who are not in any other intimate relationship. Concerning the marital state, as Hancock (2017) suggested, the word 'single' implies a deficiency – an absence of marriage. This deficiency is experienced by women of different cultures in different ways based on the social and cultural constructs of their society (Darrington et al., 2005). The experience, however, is defined by an umbrella term – 'Singlism'. This term was applied by DePaulo and Morris (2005) to express the stereotypes and discriminatory behaviours faced by unmarried people in almost every society.

It is important to understand here that 'Singlism' arises from the very essence of the stigma associated with those who are different. Goffman (1963) defines stigma as an 'undesired differentness' from what is the norm. This stigma arises from the societal view of what constitutes the womanhood norm. Womanhood in collectivist societies is defined as being able to (1) have an intimate, marital relationship with a man, (2) become a mother, and (3) accept economic dependence (Byrne, 2014).

Reasons for Singlehood

The absence of a relationship requires a multi-faceted analysis. Mainly singlehood is categorized into two classifications: voluntary and involuntary singlehood (Adamczyk, 2017). Formers are those who remain single by choice, and the latter are those who despite having the wish to marry are unable to find a partner. Undoubtedly, the difficulties with relationships and constraints factors – the involuntary factors - are associated with negative feelings such as depression and loneliness among both men and women.

Apostolou's (2017) study elaborates on the reasons for remaining single for both men and women under three main domains: difficulties with relationships (personality factors), freedom of choice and constraints. The personality factors include issues like lacking confidence, being shy, not knowing how to flirt as well as inflexibility and not being willing to compromise. Freedom of choice factor is associated with pursuing goals and remaining in casual relationships. This category mostly includes those who voluntarily stay single.

The reasons that women quote for their singlehood also differ in terms of the societies they live in. Ntoimo and Isiugo-Abanihe (2014) reported that for western women, incompatibility between career and marriage, failure in past relationships or being unable to find the right match, and the perception that marriage would curtail their freedom are offered as the main reasons for being single. Whereas, for Indian women additional factors associated with collectivist societies such as parental objection, financial constraints and loss of parents are also reported (Prabhakar, 2011).

Studies on Pakistani women such as Tahir (2012); and Iram and Muazzam (2016) elaborated that in Pakistani society, women's marital status is the key factor which has a vast influence on self-esteem of women. Sultana et al. (2021) pointed out that multiple family pressures such as socio-economic constraints, patriarchy, responsibility of other family members, strong caste system and demand of attractive physical appearance are the main reasons for many Pakistani women to remain single.

The age bias is evident here as well. As Barak (2014) noted that spinsters – single women beyond the prime age of marriage - are often depicted as 'Cat Ladies' in western media across all genres. Cat Lady is one who showers her affection on cats as she has failed to have her own family and children. Singlism also adds to the detrimental effects of a lack of intimacy and romantic relationship faced by single people.

Coping Strategies

Trimberger (2005) emphasized that single people can provide for their lack of emotional loneliness through strong a social network which she categorizes as "pillars of support" -nurturing home, satisfying work, satisfaction with their sexuality, connections to the next generation, a network of friends and possibly family members, and a feeling of community.

The experiences of Singlehood and Singlism differ according to societies and cultures (Jordal et al., 2013). As suggested by Tahir (2012) and Sultana et al. (2021), there is an acute necessity to analyze the dimensions of singlehood among Pakistani women. Thus, this qualitative analysis aims to provide a direction towards spreading awareness and understanding about the social experiences of single women in Pakistan.

Method

Participants

Altogether 8 single Pakistani women between 30-36 years of age took part in this research. The participants were selected through the snowball sampling method.

All participants were working women and belonged to middle or upper-middle class based on their annual household income. Specific operational criteria of 'single women' quoted by Ibrahim and Hassan (2009) in a study on Malay women has been adopted. It defines singleness as (1) never married, (2) over 30 of age, (3) not cohabiting, and (4) childless.

Given below is a table of demographic details of participants gathered when questioned about their background:

Table 1

Demographic Details of Participants (N=8)

Participant	Age	Profession	Socio-economic Class
1	34 years	Author	Upper - middle class
2	30 years	Editor/Manager	Upper - middle class
3	31 years	Journalist /Student of Urban Planning	Middle class
4	32 years	Documentary Filmmaker	Middle class
5	30 years	Lecturer	Middle class
6	36 years	Teacher	Upper - middle class
7	30 years	Teacher	Middle class
8	30 years	Journalist	Upper - middle class

Material and Procedure

The participants were interviewed individually for on average an hour and a half each. The language used, (Urdu or English), was based on the preference of the participant. The interview was designed after reviewing international guidelines of University of Florida (Stofer, 2019) for qualitative data collection. Keeping their interview guidelines in consideration, major categories for the interview were developed, such as reason for being single, challenges, coping mechanisms used. Within each category a main question was framed, and probes were developed after conducting one pilot interview with a colleague. An ice breaking question was added in the beginning asking about the interviewee's background. A generic question was added at the conclusion, asking about societal factors that contribute to the challenges, to ease out the focus on personal details and end the conversation on a macro level discussion.

The interviews were audio recorded (with consent) and then transcribed verbatim.

Thematic and interpretative phenomenological analysis was then used to interpret the transcripts. Meanings and similar patterns were discovered from the raw data based on personal experiences of participants. Then major themes were identified from their responses. There were five core questions that were asked during the interview.

Considering the cultural milieu of Pakistani society, The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was chosen to understand better the intimate reasons and challenges associated with the single status. The quotes of the participants mentioned in this document were translated in English wherever required to maintain consistency.

Results

The overall analysis of the content of the interviews reveals some major themes about singlehood for Pakistani women. The specific themes revealed for each area are as follows:

Table 2

Reasons for Being Single (N=8)

S. No.	Themes	Coding Response
2.1	Similarity/Affinity	• Mental affinity with spouse • Want communication in relationship • At least bachelors (education similarity) • Must have enough salary to manage a family (financial similarity)
2.2	Freedom	• Not willing to compromise • Self-awareness of rights • Don't want to lose freedom
2.3	Ambition	• Want to pursue career • Want to live a purposeful life
2.4	Matchmaking process	• Not many proposals /mother is not social • Got rejected or rejected proposals based on socio-economic factors • Religious rituals - *Istekhara* (A method to pray to Allah to give you any indication through dream about the suitability of proposal) was negative
2.5	Unpleasant life experiences	• Financial crisis in early life • Anti-marriage sentiments due to broken family/father's death early in life • Failed dating relationships • Broken engagement

2.1 Similarity/Affinity. The concept of finding a spouse with whom one has affinity was common among all interviewees. It was further elaborated to include dimensions of mental, educational and financial similarity. There was also a common mention of how age and age-related exposure altered preferences for a spouse.

"Obviously, when you reach a certain age, whether a male or a female, your references have developed so much that you are not looking for a man who is cool and looks cool, but you are looking for a man who understands you."– **Documentary Filmmaker, 32**

The women who are slightly less established refer to the additional financial or educational similarity.

"Once I had a proposal…. and I was earning more, and he was looking for a girl who could work after marriage and support his mother and nurse her … in future also one could not foresee any financial or professional progress on the guy's side and on this basis, we rejected the proposal which was taken as an offense by relatives in the family." – **Lecturer, 30**

2.2 Freedom. A core theme arising out of the transcripts is a wish to live on their own terms. Most of the participants shared the feeling that marriage, especially with an incompatible person, would curtail their freedom.

"Like when I think about marriage I think of a blank wall, I don't see anything beyond it, and I also feel like it's going to be the end of me." – **Journalist/Student of Urban Planning, 31**

Not all women shared the opinion that marriage would curtail their freedom entirely. However, all were apprehensive about falling for the wrong person who would clip their wings. "(I need) to know that this person who seems reasonable to me is he really proud of me and does he understand that I won't leave work, even if it's not to earn money, it could be planting trees or anything else for that matter, but I won't sit at home." – **Documentary Filmmaker, 32**

2.3 Ambition. Most women were of the view that marriage is likely to hinder their goal to pursue a career and explore opportunities of personal and professional growth. "I am not saying people should marry my CV, but they should know what I have done and what I am not ready to give up." - **Documentary Filmmaker, 32**

"I want to study; I want to grow as a person and as a professional. I can get along my responsibilities with work and my studies." – **Lecturer, 30**

2.4 The Matchmaking Process. A few women reported being single not by choice but by circumstances. With dependency on factors such as ethnicity, caste, socio-economic background, religious beliefs, and sect etc. to match with the proposal being the main decision makers, opportunities were missed.

"The main reason behind my still being single is my sect, the belief system we follow… my father diligently follows the AhleSunnat teachings. So, my family would say no for the proposals (that were from different schools of thought). Another reason where other side said no is that we belong to the Bihari caste. There is a general concept that Biharis are 'taiz' (cunning)." – **Teacher, 30**

"It wasn't like I had any opportunities because my mother is not very social. So, no one approached us." – **Editor/Manager, 30**

2.5 Unpleasant life experiences. More than half of the women in the sample of this study reported having faced traumatic or disappointing past experiences in inter-personal relationships either early or later in life which contributes to their still being single.

"It started when my father passed away. Fights erupted between my married brother and unmarried elder sister and somehow my brother ended up leaving us, and I was like his marriage had ruined my family." – **Editor/Manager, 30**

"I had to give up on so much different things of life (financial crisis in family that began when participant was in primary school and remained till her adult life) that now I am in no position and no mood to give up on anything." – **Journalist/Student of Urban Planning, 31**

For others, intimate relationship failures have led to a conviction of focusing more on personal and professional growth than finding a spouse.

"When my engagement broke off, the core reason why the engagement ended was mental compatibility. I set my priorities then." – **Lecturer, 30**

Table 3

Challenges Faced by Single Women (N=8)

S. No.	Themes	Coding Response
3.1	Family pressure	• Resistance from family and relatives • Expectation to compromise on everything /to settle for less • Emotional exhaustion • Ambiguous family expectations
3.2	Being alone	• Housing challenge • Travelling challenge • Sexual exploitation • Moral Policing
3.3	Social commentary	• Religious suggestions • Body shaming • Pity

3.1 Family pressure. This was the overarching theme in almost every discourse. Most of the women felt that with time the family support starts to dwindle, and they are constantly being told to compromise and 'settle for less'.

"..ultimate pressure is one which comes from parents side. Deep down knowing that you have been a cause of trouble for them, that was a painful thing." – **Lecturer, 30**

"Relatives keep telling my mother that don't be too picky, why are you so concerned with guy's education, he is not educated but is employed, and if someone is not earning well, they say things like it will get better tomorrow." - **Teacher, 30**

Some women also shared that they received ambiguous expectations from family over the years with reference to ideas of marriage, education, independence, job, family's honour etc. that now the challenge is mainly to counter the confused demands of their family.

"For years and years, you trained us that way. You've made us so professional that we've built-up walls around and it's difficult to be vulnerable." - **Documentary Filmmaker, 32**

"My family gave me independence; they gave me freedom. Then when I started deciding myself, it became a problem." - **Journalist, 30**

3.2 Being Alone. Remaining single means doing things on your own without the support or company of a spouse. This includes living alone and travelling alone. Latter was an issue faced by almost all the women interviewed.

"Single woman living alone in Karachi is itself a huge challenge, a volume should be written about it." – **Journalist, 30**

Living alone also meant being sexually exploited by a relative for her:

"My mother would say that either move abroad, or if you want to live in this society then get married, otherwise apne hi hath saaf karte hain (relatives will take advantage of you). I thought it was all nonsense; but it wasn't nonsense until I faced it." – **Editor/Manager, 30**

Everyday travel to work is also no less than an obstacle for these women.

"When you try to step out to work, first question is if you get late how you will reach back home. You are a woman; how will you travel. If you had a husband, he could have picked and dropped you from work." – **Author, 34**

"I have seen women on motorcycles but have also seen how people treat them. Travelling has always been a challenge. If you know how to drive a car, people say you are independent, but even you cannot get any maintenance work done without maame chaache ki source (reference of a male relative), no mechanic will do your work honestly (will charge more)." – **Editor/Manager, 30**

"If you get a career opportunity and you want to move to another city, it is discouraged, but if a married woman's husband finds work there, then she is supported, offered moral and emotional support." – **Journalist, 30**

3.3 Social commentary. Nearly all women shared that they come across distant relatives and even random people who feel no qualms in commenting about their single status, making them realize that something is missing in their lives.

"….and then the next question will be (by relatives or acquaintances) you will be alone for the rest of your life, you won't have kids, family. This is a huge challenge because you are constantly pitched in about this." – **Author, 34**

"Everyone would step in and say read this 'wazifa' (religious scripture), or read this verse of Quran for 7 days, you'll surely get married." – **Teacher, 30**

This social commentary goes to an extent to involve expressing pity and body-shaming the women.

Table 4

Societal Factors of Singlehood Among Women (N=8)

S. No.	Themes	Coding Response
4.1	Patriarchal setup	• Daughters are a burden and should be married off before parents die • Woman must be owned by someone, cannot exist on her own • Woman needs a man to survive
4.2	Religious interpretations	• Single people will sin • Girls should be married off early
4.3	Source of entertainment	• Lot of free time, free entertainment source • Women are seen as fair game
4.4	Pre-set paths	• No place for mental compatibility • Fixed norms and paths to follow • Your achievements are termed as your flaws
4.5	Culture	• Caste issues • Women react different when they want to marry off a daughter as compared to when they should marry off a son

4.1 Patriarchal setup. This theme emerged in every participant's conversation. The points revolved around the concept that woman needs a man to provide her security in form of a father, brother or a husband.

"..like women is someone's property or someone in association with someone else, she is neither an individual nor independent. She is someone's daughter, wife, so she has no say, including her marriage – **Journalist/Student of Urban Planning, 31**

The underlying economic dynamics of this patriarchal setup were explained by one of the participants.

"Women will continue to suffer till they get financial independence because everyone fears financially independent woman. Single financially dependent woman has no value, and she is told to go get tea for everyone." – **Documentary Filmmaker, 32**

4.2 Religious interpretations. Morality and chastity are intertwined with religious doctrines and are used against single people in the most biased manner.

"People think that single people are prone to commit sin if they are not married off, as if married people don't sin ever, they don't indulge in extra-marital affairs." – **Editor/Manager, 30**

4.3 Source of entertainment. Some participants strongly believed that interference in other people's life is solely a source of entertainment and single women are an easy target as they are already vulnerable due to lack of support from their families.

"People give meaning to their lame lives by criticizing someone and they feel happy by teasing single people. Sadists…" – **Editor/Manager, 30**

4.4 Pre-set paths. There as certain milestones that are set by the society and one is expected to follow those set paths.

"You are born, then you study certain subjects and get degree in certain disciplines, then at certain age you should get engaged and then get married, then within certain time you should have your first child etc." – **Lecturer, 30**

4.5 Cultural aspects. The arranged marriage culture is also sometimes a barrier for women who want to get married but are rejected by the mother and sisters of the potential spouse at the very first stage due to age or looks or academic background.

"A woman in our society reacts differently if she is a mother of a daughter as compared to when she is a mother of a son." – **Teacher, 30**

Table 5

Strategies Employed to Overcome Challenges (N=8)

S. No.	Themes	Coding Response
5.1	Resistance	• Taking stand for the first time • Rejecting proposal • Coming up with milestones to achieve
5.2	Self-reliance	• Not letting relatives in anymore • Staying physically fit • Humour • Training mind not to care/Self-counseling
5.3	Seeking support	• Therapy • Social media support system/online friendships

5.1 Resistance. Plain resistance was one of the most opted for coping strategy by these women to ensure that they are not married off under pressure. Some took a stand the first time their parents asked them to go through the arranged marriage process and give up on their requirements. Whereas others had to keep struggling each time there was a rishta (proposal) scene and put up a strong defense. Some even took refuge in coming up with new milestones to achieve before they'll be ready for marriage.

"You have to see how to deal with your family, like my family was easy, I just keep coming up with different reasons." – **Journalist/Student of Urban Planning, 31**

"I clearly told them to let it be and when time comes, I will let them know and I'll decide for myself." – **Documentary Filmmaker, 32**

5.2 Self-reliance. It propped up in conversations of participants of this study that they use humour to defend against the society's taunts. Self-counseling is another strategy that was shared by couple of participants which helps them with staying positive and shut out external negative messages. Some totally shut out the external voices by staying away from relatives.

"I would rather advice that as a single woman, don't let relatives in..." **– Editor/Manager, 30**

"I have made this thing in my head, that I should not let this thing affect me, that I have other things to do." – **Journalist/Student of Urban Planning, 31**

5.3 Seeking support. Not everyone is good at self-counseling and so there was one participant who shared that she sought help through therapy. Also, online friendships according to her were of greater help than real life relations.

"I have survived because I was very lucky, pure fortune that I had mental health professionals, they were god send." – **Teacher, 30**

Discussion

The very expectations from single females and the idea of adapting to the groom and his family's wishes lead to the compatibility factor, which was mentioned by almost every participant. The next most quoted reason for being single was to safeguard ambition/freedom. In Pakistani society, it is common to be as high as asking the woman to completely alter her lifestyle and leave studies/career to become a housewife. However, as the social construction of reality suggests, much of our world perceptions and decisions are based on social and interpersonal influences (Galbin, 2014). The women who value their independence and ambition are thus perceived as defying the norms and must move against the tide of the societal influences.

Moving on to the challenges faced by single women who demand to live on their own terms, it is important to first understand the patriarchal setup of Pakistani society. They remain single involuntarily because they are a misfit in these structures that expect women to work at home, with their labour remaining unpaid resulting in economic dependence and to view other close relationships such as family and friends being secondary to the relationship of husband and in-laws. Exploitation by men is also another aspect due to which women prefer remaining single than to try finding a spouse on their own because the patriarchal structures give a clear path to a man who exploits, and the woman must bear the consequences. The family pressures, lack of support to travel/live alone and social commentary mentioned as challenges by single women all have their roots within these patriarchal structures of Pakistani society. Religious interpretation as mentioned under societal factors are interpreted in a way to justify, and the caste system helps maintain the existing status quo.

Most of the strategies employed by participants of this study to overcome the challenges are based on self-help or finding virtual support system consisting of people who face similar situations. The overall society structures and interpersonal relationships hardly offer any comfort to women who choose to remain single, voluntarily or involuntarily. The references made by participants about resorting to self-counseling and professional therapy can further be explored regarding the psychological and mental health concerns and issues that accompany the single status.

None of the participants mentioned any workplace related prejudice or challenge that they might have come across. In fact, for almost all participants of this study, work was a source of independence and refuge where they were allowed to express their own identities. It is a unique insight into the cultural norms of Pakistani society in which family life holds the utmost importance and influence on a women's existence.

Conclusion

Overall, this study can help identify the social and cultural judgments faced by single women in Pakistan, the economic challenges that arise due to the stigma associated with the single status and the psychological stressors added to everyday lives. The study underlined that compatibility factor and safeguarding ambition/freedom are the foremost causes for being single. Whereas family pressures, lack of support to travel/live alone and social commentary are the key challenges encountered by single Pakistani women. Coping mechanisms such as self-help strategies and virtual support groups are majorly reported to be employed to deal with the problems as a result of singlehood phenomena. The sample only refers to educated women from middle/upper class based in Karachi. As social and cultural factors play a major role in the experiences of single women, the change in demographics may result in similar or different findings. Also, a broader sample may help with statistical analysis of the data.

Declaration

Funding. The study is not funded by any funding agency in the public or private domain.

Conflict of interest. The authors have no conflict of interest to reveal.

Acknowledgement. Authors are much grateful to all the participants who have participated in the study.

Availability of data and materials. The data and materials employed for this research are accessible and can be provided by the authors if demanded.

Ethics approval and consent to participate. The study is conducted after fulfilling the requirements of formal permission and consent from participants.

Competing interest. The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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