

LIVING SINGLE - ACCEPTANCE AND FREEDOM OF UNMARRIED WOMEN

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Abstract

Singlehood has emerged as an intensely debated and still quite recognized style of life. Single is not a new concept in this era. It is considered a by-product of modern feminism, although men also remain single. This study was an attempt to find out the answer to the questions like how women get along with their decision to stay single which is indeed a question that merits investigation. What specific dynamics are in play or what are the experiential dynamics they pass through? What are the challenges faced by single women in terms of freedom and acceptance. The study has used case study design to understand the single life experiences so deeply. Each woman possesses different perception on the institution of marriage. Still, there are elements of stigma, isolation existing in society, towards the single women. As the study is of inductive nature, it is difficult to generalize the findings of this study and it is not attempted at all.

Keywords: Living Single, Freedom, Acceptance and Unmarried Women

Introduction

Marriage is perceived by sociologists as a system of roles of a man and a woman whose union has been given social sanctions as husband and wife. The equilibrium of the system requires adjustment between the two partners so that the role enactment of one corresponds to the role expectations of the other. Marriage is considered one of the most fundamental and traditional social institutions. It is not something that “comes naturally”. It is a cluster of customs and group habits, of attitudes, ideas and ideals of social definitions and legal restrictions. It binds man and woman to fulfil certain obligations (Bowman, 1960). In India, marriage was considered sacred because of several reasons; Dharma was the highest aim of marriage, performance of marriage ceremony included certain rites which were

considered sacred, union between man and woman was considered indissoluble and irrevocable and emphasis was on chastity of the woman and faithfulness of the man (Mondal, 2016). In contemporary urban society it is the highly individualistic and personal aspect of marriage which is emphasized. According to the late modernists, People now delay getting married not only because of needing to establish a career first, but also because of the increased cost of mortgages and weddings, and because of the increased fear of getting divorced – with cohabite the new norm before marriage. The Indian unmarried women have faced many problems in every sphere of the life and faced low status in the society.

Sociologist Peter Stein (1976) asserted that “the possibility that some people might actually choose to be single because they want to be, because they feel it would contribute to their growth and well-being to remain so, is simply not believed possible”. Social psychologists refer singles as “those who fail to marry” or who cannot “make positive choices”. To choose singleness means that a person perceives the rewards of that life style to be greater than the rewards of marriage and that any costs perceived are less than the costs that would be required of one in marriage.

According to Stolk and Brotherton (1981) and Mustard (2000), one can argue that the stereotype of “spinster” (and other stereotypes of never-married women over 30) are at least partly created because men are expressing prejudice toward never-married. Barbara Levy Simon interviews fifty American women, born between 1884 and 1918 who were never married, and examines their emphatic refusal to be “yoked by wifing,” as one woman expressed it. A spirit of independence pervades these compelling self-portraits as the women describe the day-to-day

activities, options and adaptations, as well as the stigma that shaped lives that defied the spinster stereotype.

Significance of the study

Probably the most fundamental thing is that people's attitudes towards marriage have change. The idea that marriage is a necessary tradition or a sacred duty has declined drastically, marriage is now seen as a choice. The institution of marriage has changed in accordance with changes in the society. The concept of marriage covers a wide range of varied situations with different social and legal arrangements (LayachiAnser, UAE University). When anyone raises questions about the meaningfulness or workability of traditional marriage in present day society, he or she is liable to be preemptorily judged as a foe of home, children or even the American way of life! Such judgement is not only unfair, but is utter non-sense because the question of whether an old system fits into a rapidly changing new world is a logical and necessary one (McCary, 1975). However marriage has its own relevance in a country like India where it gives more importance to family values. Yet, whether by choice or circumstances, not everyone lives as part of a pair. Some people live alone.

As social fact, "singleness" is not a suddenly appeared phenomenon. Its symptoms were seen from many years back. Remaining single is not a new concept in this era. Modern singlehood is far different from the past pessimism associated with it. It is the byproduct of modern feminism. Singleness is most prevalent in Europe and United States and has increased over the last decades. In this context the present study seeking answers to the questions like how do the unmarried women cop up with being single? How far they get social acceptance? Due to the changing trends on practicing the custom of marriage the present study has its own relevance. The study is focusing on the unmarried women beyond the age of 35. This study may contribute to a new understanding on marriage in the changing context.

Statement of the problem

Still there are a substantially significant number of women who opts out of marriage. How they get along with decision is indeed a question that merits investigation. What specific dynamics are played or what are the experiential dynamics they passed through? How free are they and how much are they accepted in our social context? The present study seeks to answers to these questions of freedom and acceptance of those who remain single.

Definition of the key terms

Singleness:

Single person refers to someone who is never married. This however exclude the under aged.

Freedom:

Exemption from external control interference, regulation, the power to determine action and taking decisions without any restraint.

Acceptance:

The state of being accommodation / shared / interacted.

Research questions

- ❖ Do unmarried women face any problem of acceptance from the surroundings?
- ❖ How free are they in terms of taking decisions, self-determination, exemption from external control and regulation?
- ❖ How do the unmarried women look at the institution of marriage?

Methodology

This study is qualitative in nature. Thus it demands a subject specific understanding. So the researcher chose case study design.

The case study research is concerned with the complexity and particular nature of the case in question. The present study entails the detailed and intensive analysis of each case. Through this case study design, the researcher seeks answers for the questions

which formulated on this peculiar topic. This study tries to explore the experiences of unmarried which are highly relative and vary from individual to individual. So there is less possibility for generalisation. The researcher is more focusing on the case specificity rather than making the cases are similar in their experiences. All cases are unique in their experiences, views, opinions on singlehood.

The researcher is also using non participant observation to understand the cases deeply. The observations are added to the analysis part where the researcher describes the experiences of each case.

Selection of cases

As it is practically quite difficult to get cases of this research, researcher used the non probability logic to select cases. Also this study did not anticipate any variation on the basis of area of study. Hence, the cases were selected unconcerned of any area in mind. So the researcher selected the cases purposively considering the framework of the study. The cases belong to the age group of 35 and above. Selected the cases belonging to different age groups to understand how the freedom and acceptance vary from age to age.

Data analysis

Used both thematic and thematic analysis for case analysis

Acceptance by the surroundings

People who live alone don't want to be alone or isolated," Mr. Klinenberg says. Single person or the unmarried are not leading a life of loneliness. They are not people who have to isolate by the main stream society. The surroundings should accept or accommodate them. The term acceptance has defined as the state of being accommodated or shared or interacted.

It is vivid that when a woman is not ready to get married everybody will be treated her suspiciously. Gradually this suspicion can seem in their every action to the single person. At the end the suspicion will cause to ask the question on the single's sexual life. She had faced questions against her sexuality. Most of the people have the doubt about the moral life of the singles. Another challenge in terms of acceptance which she has

faced being a single person is exclusion during any family function and social gathering.

The single women have the feelings of insecurity and displacement in their families when parents and siblings remark about their singlehood and make jokes or rude comments. Women feel scrutinized by friends, family members and others for their singlehood. Moreover she faces lack of cooperation from the relatives and neighbors. Ratra (2006) says that finding a satisfactory outlet for the sex drive, which is especially strong during early adulthood, is the most difficult problem the unmarried person face.

In an Eves weekly enquiry about the experiences of women at work, a woman scientist pointed out that "being the only working single women in my department, I have occasions to listen to such as 'working single women do not have any morals' or women are not meant for such a profession" (Balse 1973:38). Moreover, women in the certain professions are viewed as 'different people' by most of their male colleagues. While working with men, single women tend to develop intimate relations with any of them owing to prolonged and constant association, and can create all sorts of socio psychological problems if she gets involved with a married man. Once a woman becomes single, discrimination plays a routine in her life. In past, single women had no right to freely interact with other members of the society. In Brahmin caste, they had no contact with their own family male members (Gangadaran 1994). The community interprets everything from a different point of view in their case. Neither have they had the freedom of young unmarried girls nor of older married women. Moreover when a person is against the existing normative system, then he or she is considered as a deviant. If that person is a woman, she will be treated as a profligate. In the patriarchal society, it is quite difficult for women act against the existing order. Marriage is such an order. When she makes alternative for marriage she has to face oppositions, questions, arguments and even abusive words from the surroundings. There is a common blind belief exists among the Hindu community that a widow or a childless woman are not good omen during such functions like marriage. Like these stigmatized groups of people, single women are considering as a

bad omen. It is apparent that we are at the peak of modernity. But these kinds of evil practices and mind set will not change soon. This blind beliefs and practices will rule the mind of the society until the society should consider everybody as equal. All the cases have different experience on the acceptance by the family members, relatives, friends and society as a whole. Acceptance by the surroundings is definitely a challenge. Unlike other stigmatized or marginalized groups, single women are not lacking anything in terms of caste, class, etc. but here the fact is that single women are having single stigma. They are treating as a kind of deviants who are against the existing social order and rather than they have found out an alternative for marriage, that is remained single. For the relatives and often their parents have a feel that this is something not acceptable in the society. single stigma is the worst for women in their mid-20's through mid-30's, while women older than age 35 tend to be more content with being single and don't express as much dissatisfaction as do younger women. After that they do the feeling of alienation, isolation, rejection and so on. But we cannot generalize this fact to all single women. Single person should accommodate or interacted by others. They are not an excluded group. They have taken their decision to be single either due to their circumstances or their interests.

Freedom

Zygmunt Bauman in his book "Thinking sociologically" has explained chapter on 'oneself with others'. He explained that it is not an uncommon experience in our lives to resent being constrained by circumstances over which we feel we have no control. There are also times when we assert our freedom from such control by refusing to conform to the expectations of others, resist what we see undue encroachments upon our freedom, and as is evident throughout history and in contemporary times, rise up in revolt against oppression. Possessing feelings of being free and not free at the same time is, therefore, a common part of our everyday experiences. It is also one of the most confusing issues that give rise to feelings of ambivalence and frustration, as well as creativity and innovation. Our choices are not, of

course, always the product of conscious decision. Many of our actions are habitual and so not subject to deliberate and open choice. All cases have different level of freedom. The extent of freedom is restricted by the familial, occupational, educational and behavioral elements of each case. On the basis of these factors the freedom which the single person enjoying is varying. All other cases are showing such differences in terms of freedom and acceptance. The researcher could feel that each case is different in terms of the freedom they enjoy because they have different kind of behavior. Behavioral element is another factor to determine the level of freedom of individual. The researcher could find a correlation between the level of freedom and acceptance by the surroundings among some cases. that freedom is an essential element of every human being whether they are married or not. If a woman is married or not she will have all kinds of freedom to order her life, freedom to do the things which she wanted to do. Certain people believe that after getting married, both men and women are restricted to a boundary and they have no right to move beyond that boarder. Especially in the case of women, they are tied up with a thread called Thali. This may be one of the reasons other women are not ready get married and preferring singlehood. At the same time we cannot say that singlehood will bring more freedom to women. It is difficult to assume the level freedom of unmarried and married.

Opinions on Marriage

Definitely, it is needed to know the opinion of unmarried women on the institution of marriage. People will have different opinion on marriage. These different perceptions on marriage sometimes cause to make alternatives for marriage. Single women above a certain age symbolize a disruption of the sequential rhythm of our social lives. As Moore elaborates; "the sequential ordering of activities provides a priority schedule in the strict sense, which may reflect priorities in the loose sense of relative values." (Moore, 1963;48). Indeed such clichés and images reflect such rigid form of sequential ordering, representing and producing temporal orders. Singlehood is still, to a large extent, discursively framed as a liminal, temporary state; a transitory stage on the way to couple- hood and family life. Lifelong singlehood marks an unexpected disruption and a normatively liminal state that has unexpectedly

become permanent. Singlehood is still socially unacceptable and incomprehensible, as it defies conventional conceptual frameworks and social timetables. It is apparent that all cases have subjective elements on singlehood to share with the researcher.

Conclusion

The present study was an attempt to know the life of single women from an insider perspective. The existing social practices teach us that marriage is an inevitable and important institution which paves the way for the establishment of families. On the other hand, people moving away from the institution of marriage are not a new trend. Celibacy has a long tradition. All over India marriage is encouraged and singlehood is not discouraged and considers it as something unusual. But marriage is definitely an individual's choice. Nobody can pressurize anyone to get married. But the reality is not so. Both men and women are under pressure to get married at their mean age of marriage. The situation is more so in the case of women. They are facing more pressure to get married. For them it is very difficult and a challenging one to be single in their whole life.

All cases are different in terms of the level of freedom which they enjoy, the acceptance which they get from their surroundings and opinions on marriage. When a woman is opted out from the traditional and conventional institution, she has to face several questions from the society on her singlehood. On the other hand she has to maintain an ability to stand with the married people. It is relevant to say in the present context that singleness is becoming a part of changing life style. The cases of this study had taken their decision to be single years back. They have different experiences and perspectives on their own single life. They are seeing the level of freedom differently. There is a connection between self dependency and level of freedom.

In the life of some cases, the level of freedom can contribute to the life satisfaction. In a nutshell researcher can say that single life is not a deviant. It is something like a part of the normal life. Singlehood also has to celebrate like the marriage. So it is necessary to get an understanding on the singlehood. It is clear from the previous studies and

statistical inferences that the numbers of unmarried are increasing. Definitely women are also part of this growing trend. Just as men, they are also taking decisions to be single in their life. Of course there is an aspect of gender here. The traditional clichés do not allow the women to be alone. They are socialized to be under the feet of their husbands.

All our traditions and customs are glorifying the system of marriage. Thus the women face the pressure to get married more than that of men. Often womanhood is celebrated through marriage. In this context, researcher undertook this present study to throw some light on to the lives of single women. The study itself shows that there are differences in the lives of single women. But at the same time it can be said that in the matter of acceptance, there is some kind of similarities in experience in the lives of single women. The society even in the most modern times, glorifies the institution of marriage and consider singlehood as something abnormal. Single stigma is a problem which is faced by many of the cases in this study. But the depth and visibility are different from one case to another. . With the growing number of singles and changing perceptions on marriage, the present study has relevance. As marriage, singleness has a value of its own. Singleness would not be treated as a normal behavior, until the marriage is glorified as the norm.

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