

Psychosocial Experiences of Spinster Women in Pakistan

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| Keywords | Abstract |
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| Spinster Women, Unmarried Women, Psychosocial Experiences, Psychosocial Well-Beings, Social Expectations, Emotional Well-Being. | <i>This paper examined the psychosocial life of spinster women in Pakistan. The researcher used exploratory qualitative design by selecting a sample of eight unmarried women, who were selected by purposive sampling techniques. The demographic information sheet and a semi-structured interview protocol were used to collect the data. Thematic analysis was used to find out the theme, subtheme and code. The data produced five significant themes, namely, the present social life, the concept of singleness, the way society perceives unmarried women, dependency experiences and coping strategies. These themes bring out the issues of social stigma, emotional issues, and cultural pressures on unmarried women in an Asian cultural society. The research highlights the importance of increased social awareness, psychological support and empowerment programs in order to improve the general well-being of the unmarried females in Pakistan.</i> |

INTRODUCTION

Marriage is a major landmark that is associated with social identity, respect, and belonging as perceived in most societies. Spinster women (Unmarried ladies) who have not found a spouse after the stipulated age tend to be criticized, judged and subjected to societal influences. These can subject them to various psychosocial difficulties. A spinster is more or less a woman who has not gotten married after the stipulated age. Another historical definition of spinster that has been given by the American Heritage College Dictionary involves a woman whose job is spinning (Khalifa, 2011). Even though the word is used neutrally, on the literal sense, it is frequent with negative social connotations.

Late marriage is still a very delicate and rarity in Pakistan, since there are strong cultural demands of marriage. The median age at first marriage rose by a small margin, 19.1 to 19.5 years, the national statistics indicate that there was a slight increase in median age at first marriage between 2006-07 and 2012-13. In the same year 7.2 percent of women aged 30 to 34, 3.0 percent aged 35 to 39 and 1.3 percent aged 45 to 49 years mentioned never having been married (Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey, 2012-13). It is also reported that over the past few years, the population of unmarried women has grown by approximately 30 percent and this may be attributed at least in part to the spread of female education (Nasrullah et al., 2014; Gangadharan & Maitra, 2000).

In this culture, single women have to face stereotyping and stigma. They can be described as isolated, incomplete, or social exiles (Thatal, 2021). The most important challenge that has been stated to affect single women is the pressure to get married (Sharp & Ganong, 2011).

Marriage is a universal social approval requirement in the Pakistani society and therefore women who are above 30 and fail to get married are usually viewed as upset, faulty or incapable of performing the conventional gender roles. Perceptions like this can cause the development of assumptions on poor adjustment, unhappiness and even mental imbalance (Stolk & Brotherton, 1981).

Studies indicate that having good self-esteem is the key towards long-term readjustment of unmarried women (Patterson et al., 2003). Spinsters have been linked with low self-esteem, which has been identified to increase their susceptibility to physical and psychological challenges (Tabasum et al. (2021). The emotional health is directly related to the stress associated with being unmarried, especially the stigma surrounding the fact that women were not married by the time the expected age. The loneliness, anxiety, and deterioration in the overall wellbeing may be promoted with the help of negative social labeling (Garima & Kiran, 2014).

Theoretically, the Social Learning Theory proposed by Bandura (1977) describes the influence of the societal norms and observed behaviors on the beliefs of women concerning marriage, femininity, and self-worth. Simultaneously, in a parallel manner, the Stigma Theory according to Goffman (1963) explains that labeling unmarried women as abnormal or incomplete may result in social isolation and mental instability. These theories combined depict the ways in which cultural education and social stigma have a combined influence on the lived experiences of spinster women.

There is an increasing pile of international and regional literature that has documented the plight of unmarried women. Nanik et al. (2024) in Indonesia have revealed that even though there are positive perceptions of single women, negative stereotypes like loneliness and insecurity are prevalent even between generations. In the rural Indian state of Assam, the Majuli area (2019) noted that the unmarried women frequently encounter financial, social, mental and housing related problems. The same observation can be made in Pakistani studies: Sultana et al. (2021) found that unmarried women above 35 feel the pressure of socio-family ideals in terms of attractiveness, financial issues, and family commitments, which frequently result in shame and social isolation.

Social support is also significant in studies done in South Asia and elsewhere. Indicatively, AD (2015) discovered that family, friends, and workplace networks were very important to unmarried women in Kerala, but younger singletons were better supported in comparison to the older spinsters. In another study, Sharp and Ganony (2011) added that single women who carried on with their lives went through invisibility and unwanted invisibility in the social setups- constant reminders about their marital status added to the strain of emotions.

This cross-sectional study of 504 never-married Saudi women aged 30 and above investigated the links between insecure attachment, mental health (including social anxiety and emotional distress), and life satisfaction. Lower insecure attachment was linked to better mental health, less social anxiety, and higher life satisfaction, although these effects were smaller than significant sociodemographic characteristics such as education, income, and age. Age moderated the relationship between insecure attachment and life happiness. Overall, the study shows that single women's psychological well-being is influenced by a variety of emotional, social, and demographic factors within Saudi Arabia's changing societal context (Almalki, 2025).

This study investigated how unmarried, straight, middle-aged Filipino women navigated their singlehood in the Philippines' collectivist and marriage-oriented society. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis with seven women aged 41-58, the findings demonstrated changing attitudes of singlehood, with a steady transition from optimism to emotional tiredness, melancholy, and discouragement. Participants expressed sentiments of incompleteness and discontent while marriage remained the prevalent social expectation. Overall, the study demonstrates how cultural norms alter the emotional significance of singlehood across time (Mendez, 2025).

This phenomenological study looked at the lived experiences of professional unmarried women in Kalinga province, Philippines, including their perceptions of success, difficulties, mental health, and social well-being. The findings revealed that societal pressure, occupational discrimination, and cultural expectations about marriage all contributed to anxiety, sadness, stigma, and social isolation. Despite these obstacles, women developed coping methods such as self-acceptance, self-care, staying active, seeking support from family and friends, and participating in faith-based activities. Based on social role and intersectionality theories, the study examines how gender, marital status, and professional positions interact to affect unmarried women's experiences (Quimosing-Ocay et al., 2025).

There are a number of researches that have been carried out in other cultures with comparable trends. Ali and Shoukry (2017) have discovered that never-married working women were more likely to report about low self-esteem, aggressive behaviour, and poor quality of life. Studying the British South Asian women, Brar (2012) found that the psychological distress can be attributed to the pressure of getting married and the conflict between the expectations of culture and own aspirations. According to Macvarish (2006), single women were often faced with social exclusion and have devised ways of coping with the negative stereotypes and still preserve and uphold their identities.

In general, the literature is able to show that unmarried women do face serious psychosocial problems based on cultural beliefs, family expectations, and attitudes on the part of the society. These results highlight the necessity to learn more about the experience of spinster women in Pakistan where the tradition of marriage is still strongly embedded in people. The current research would add to this emerging body of research by examining the psychosocial realities of unmarried women in the context of the collectivist cultural setting in Pakistan.

Objectives

This research study had the following objectives:

1. To explore the psychosocial experiences of spinster women in Pakistan.
2. To look into how societal attitude and social interaction influenced their emotional well-being and social identity.
3. To identify the coping strategy of spinster women.

Research Questions

According to the study objectives, the following were research questions:

RQ1: What were the psychosocial experiences of spinster women in Pakistan?

RQ2: How did social interactions and societal attitudes affect spinster women, and what coping techniques did they employ to deal with these challenges?

RESEARCH METHOD

This research used exploratory qualitative research design to explore the psychosocial experiences of unmarried women, known as spinsters in Pakistan. To capture participants' subjective meanings, feelings, and lived experiences in their sociocultural context, a qualitative technique was used. This methodology allows for a full analysis of the societal stigma, psychological challenges, and personal interpretations associated with long-term singlehood.

Sample and Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling was used to choose participants, ensuring the inclusion of women who could provide relevant, experience-based information consistent with the study's objectives. The sample consisted of eight single Pakistani women aged thirty to sixty who had never married.

Women under the age of 30 and above the age of 60 were excluded, as were those who were divorced, widowed, separated, or had major physical or mental health conditions that might restrict communication or participation. The sample size was deemed enough because data saturation had been achieved and no new topics arose during the last interviews.

Table 1: Demographic information of the participants

| S.No. | Participants | Age | Education level | Occupation |
|-------|--------------|-----|-----------------|-------------------------------|
| 1 | S1 | 40 | Matric | Unemployed (Households Works) |
| 2 | S2 | 38 | Bachelor's | Teacher |
| 3 | S3 | 44 | MPhil | Research Assistant |
| 4 | S4 | 56 | PHD | Associate Professor |
| 5 | S5 | 32 | Masters | Teacher |
| 6 | S6 | 52 | Masters | Parlour |
| 7 | S7 | 48 | MPhil | Administrative Staff |
| 8 | S8 | 34 | Bachelor's | Teacher |

Data Collection

The data were gathered by semi-structured interviews which were in-depth and face to face to make the participants feel free to share their information. An interview guide was developed to explore psychological and social barriers, family expectations, cultural views, and emotional reactions to unmarried status. Interviews were conducted in a private, comfortable location to encourage openness and remove social constraints. Each interview lasted approximately 45-60 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' explicit consent to assure data accuracy and completeness.

Data Analysis

The data were evaluated thematically using Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework (2006). The analysis involved the following steps: (1) familiarization with the data through

repeated transcript readings, (2) creation of initial codes, (3) topic search, (4) theme review, (5) theme definition and labeling, and (6) completion of the final report.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim. Meaningful sections were categorized to identify common emotional responses, social constraints, and psychological problems. The codes were arranged into subthemes and larger themes that accurately represented the participants' life experiences and were directly relevant to the study's objectives.

Ethical Considerations

The participants of the study were informed of the purpose of the study, the potential risk, and the benefits and signed the written consent. All the confidentiality and anonymity were provided through the use of pseudonyms. To minimize the degree of discomfort the interviews were conducted in a confined setting which was quite private to facilitate the interaction and the participants also had the right to get support in case they required. Finally, all the protocols of the ethical considerations were fulfilled.

RESULTS

The research results were structured in the form of themes, subthemes, and codes, which demonstrated the experiences of spinsters in Pakistan.

Table-2: Emerging Themes, Subthemes, and Codes

| Themes | Subthemes | Codes |
|--|----------------------------------|---|
| Current Social Life | Social Anxiety | Uneasy, Avoidance, Criticize, Staying Away, Left Out |
| Perceptions of Singleness | Emotional Decline Over Time | Emotionally Drained , Hopelessness, Discouraged, Single |
| Assumptions about Unmarried Women | Social And Emotional Stereotypes | Labeling, Stigmatization, Feeling Sorry for, Incompleteness |
| Perceptions of Dependence on Unmarried Women | Expected Dependence | Reliant on other, Hopelessness, Control, Undermining |
| Coping Strategies | Social/ Emotional Supports | Talk, Family, Support, Help |

Main Theme 1: Current Social Life

Participants stated that their social activities were limited due to nervousness, fear of criticism, and exclusion from gatherings. Others frequently misinterpreted their decision to remain single, resulting in anxiety and avoidance of social events this demonstrates that societal pressure and criticism have a significant impact on their social participation and sense of belonging, resulting in isolation and emotional distress. Social anxiety is more than just discomfort; it prevents meaningful social connection, interfering with daily life and relationships.

Subtheme: Social Anxiety

Spinster women complained of being uncomfortable in social life and having a preconception about life. They used to skip family events or marriages so as not to be judged.

Whenever I meet relatives and family members, they enquire me why I am not married; I feel embarrassed and unwelcome. (S1)

I make efforts to evade attending weddings; everyone stares at me as though I have no completeness. (S3)

Main Theme 2: Singleness Perceptions

Over time, participants' excitement about marriage and social acceptance faded, resulting in emotional exhaustion, melancholy, and discouragement. Being single in a society that values marriage created an ongoing sense of incompleteness and dissatisfaction. This theme investigates how prolonged singlehood in a culturally constrained environment might affect mental health by contributing to loneliness, low self-esteem, and slow emotional degradation.

Subtheme: Decline in Emotions with Age

The unremitting social pressure and lack of fulfillment resulted in numbness and hopelessness.

I had originally believed that things were going to work out. I am numb now, now that I had had to wait years and listen to what people said about me. (S1)

Even though I believed that I would have a chance to get married, I do not believe in this today, as the years pass by. (S4)

Main Theme 3: Assumptions about Unmarried Women

Participants reported experiencing societal labeling, pity, and feelings of incompleteness. These preconceived notions generated feelings of inadequacy while stressing the emotional cost of stigma. Social perceptions about unmarried women typically resulted in negative appraisals of their personal worth and ability, which influenced both their self-perception and social identity. This subject exemplifies how cultural ideas can foster internalized stigma and psychological distress.

Subtheme: Social and Emotional Stereotypes

The unmarried ladies were considered unlucky, incomplete or unfulfilled in their emotions.

One of the reasons why people believe I am unlucky in love is that I am not yet a married person. (S1)

This makes me feel that the society perceives me as an incomplete person because I have not married. (S7)

Main Theme 4: Dependence Perceptions

Despite their independence, participants indicated society assumed they needed others to make decisions and provide help. This perceived dependency undermined their autonomy and reinforced social hierarchies. The assumption that individuals conform to established gender standards created a tension between their actual independence and public perception, contributing to unhappiness, pessimism, and emotional suffering. This subject stresses how

cultural expectations can impede personal independence, especially among capable and self-sufficient women.

Subtheme: Expected Dependence

Individuals believe that I require my brother to make my decisions. (S2)

Although I work and live independently, the society still perceives me as a person who has to be taken care of. (S1)

The reason why they believe that I am powerless is because I did not get married. (S8)

Main Theme 5: Coping Strategies

Participants sought social and emotional assistance to deal with cultural expectations and stigma. Sharing their feelings with trustworthy friends, family members, or colleagues allowed them to feel understood, validated, and eased emotional stress. These encounters provided a safe space for people to express their difficulties, seek advice, and get support, supporting them in managing the negative stigma associated with being single.

Subtheme: Social/Emotional Supports

I talk to my close friends when I'm depressed about being single. (S2)

When I feel lonely, my sister always listens and offers advice. (S5)

My colleagues' praise and emotional support keep me motivated. (S1)

DISCUSSIONS

This study investigated the psychosocial experiences of unmarried women in Pakistan by looking into their psychosocial aspects and coping strategies within a collectivist cultural environment. The findings demonstrated that participants' contemporary social lives were heavily influenced by social anxiety, which was characterized by emotions of unease, avoidance, criticism, and exclusion. Women generally avoided family reunions and social occasions in order to avoid criticism and intrusive questioning, demonstrating how social interaction has become a cause of psychological strain. Almalki (2025) identified similar patterns of social anxiety and emotional suffering among unmarried women, emphasizing that social discomfort and emotional strain are normal effects of long-term singlehood in marriage-oriented society.

In this study, perceptions of being single were found to be a changing emotional process rather than a static state. As social pressure continued, participants reported a slow transition from initial optimism to emotional weariness, despondency, and uncertainty. Mendez (2025) found that middle-aged single women in collectivist cultures underwent a similar transition, which this trend strongly resembles. Participants' self-esteem was damaged and internalized stigma was reinforced by negative presumptions and stereotypes that exacerbated their misery by labeling them as pitied or incomplete (Nanik et al., 2024). Such labeling reflects cultural myths that link womanhood with marriage. Despite these obstacles, women actively sought coping mechanisms, particularly social and emotional support from trustworthy connections. These coping reactions are consistent with recent a phenomenological finding

that emphasizes self-acceptance and supporting networks as important resilience mechanisms (Quimosing-Ocay et al., 2025). Overall, the findings emphasize the interplay of stigma, emotional deterioration, and adaptive coping in defining unmarried women's psychosocial experiences in collectivist societies (Almalki, 2025).

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the psychosocial experiences of unmarried women (spinsters) in Pakistan, revealing how cultural norms, societal expectations, and stereotypes shape their social identities and mental health. Participants had social anxiety, avoided social engagements, and felt lonely and hopeless, but they showed resilience by asserting their independence and seeking social assistance. The findings emphasize the ongoing influence of stigma and beliefs of dependency on people's autonomy and self-esteem. Promoting social awareness, supportive policies, and empowerment efforts is critical for reducing discrimination and improving the mental health and well-being of unmarried women in collectivist societies.

Implications and Recommendations

The paper highlights the need to raise awareness, empathy, and social inclusion among the unmarried women. The programs should be introduced by policymakers and community leaders to ensure financial independence, career growth, mental health, and mentorships. Overcoming the adverse societal perceptions will help in improving the state of psychological wellbeing as well as empowerment. Encourage social awareness campaigns and capacity-building programs with the aim of enhancing societal acceptance of single women and eliminating negative stereotypes. Single women who are emotionally distraught should receive mental health services, peer support groups and psychological counselling. Government and community organizations ought to establish empowerment programs to help single women to pursue their careers, earn income, and integrate into society.

Limitations and Suggestions

This study was constrained by its small, purposively selected sample of eight individuals, which, while appropriate for in-depth qualitative examination, limits the findings' transferability. The sample consisted primarily of educated and employed women, which may have excluded the experiences of unmarried women from other socioeconomic or rural backgrounds. Data were gathered through self-reported interviews, which could have been influenced by social desirability or recall bias. Future research should use larger, more diverse samples and longitudinal or mixed-methods designs to better capture the changing psychosocial realities of unmarried women in Pakistan.

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