

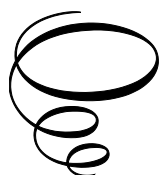
Case Studies from Social Science Research in India

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Edited by

Meghna Vesvikar

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Problems Faced by Never Married Women in Mumbai.....	1
Meghna Vesvikar, Asst. Prof., CSWNN	
The Maternal Healthcare Practices and Treatment-Seeking Behavior of Tribal Women in the Borivli Taluka of Mumbai: Case Narratives	41
Dr. Anita Panot, Assoc. Prof., CSWNN	
The Effects of Family Functioning Patterns of the Quality of Life of People Living with HIV/AIDS.....	88
Dr. Anita Machado, Asst. Prof., CSWNN	
Self-Perception and Coping Strategies of Married Women Affected by Domestic Violence in Mumbai.....	106
Sonia H. Rodrigues, Asst. Prof., CSWNN	
Asset Mapping as a Community Development Strategy: An Exploratory Study in Raigad, Rural Maharashtra.....	126
Roshni Louis Alphanso, Asst. Prof., CSWNN	
Methodological Primer on Documenting “Values-Driven Management” in Voluntary Organisations.....	140
Dr. Ronald Yesudhas, Asst. Prof., CSWNN	
Research-Based Planning for Youth Led WaSH Intervention in the Mumbai Slums.....	153
Dr. Ronald Yesudhas, Asst. Prof., CSWNN	
Internet Addiction, Sexually Explicit Material, and their Perceived Effects among Adolescents in Ernakulam.....	165
Reny Rajan, Asst. Prof., CSWNN	
Simmy Xavier, Social Worker, Providence Home	
Opinions of Student Social Workers about Male Children in Conflict with the Law	174
Anshit Baxi, PhD Scholar, CSWNN	

Going Forward: An Overview of CSWNN's Contributions to Research	191
Dr. Yamini Suvarna, Member, Advisory Board, Research Unit, CSWNN	

PROBLEMS FACED BY NEVER MARRIED WOMEN IN MUMBAI

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India has traditionally been a patriarchal country. In all its institutions and structures, patriarchy is reflected in power and resource allocation. Marriage is one such social institution.

Except during the pre-Vedic era, in which women were supposed to be emancipated, India has had restrictive traditions, laws and customs for most of its history, starting from *Sati* and *Purda* to not acknowledging that marital rape exists. Caste and religious boundaries remain deep-rooted, even for educated and well-to-do partners. Dowry still has a strong presence, albeit disguised. Also, adjustment issues with new families and new lifestyle choices such as food, clothing and career are generally foisted on women due to stereotypical notions. Also, serious concerns like domestic violence, marital rape, incest, sex-selective abortion and female infanticide are not always addressed or even acknowledged.

The economic changes brought about by the structural adjustment program have had a significant social impact on India as well. Women are becoming exposed to newer ideas such as individualism, personal liberty and an internal locus of control. These factors create a dichotomy between traditional and modern lifestyles and choices, which people of both genders have to navigate. For example, the idea of house-husbands, though widely accepted in the West, has never really taken root in India.

Also, marriage is competing with newer social institutions such as live-in relationships and single parenthood through adoption, surrogacy, etc. Interestingly, though adoption has long been practiced in India, adoption by single parents – male or female – is still not as welcome a decision. Surrogacy, too, though an industry in Gujrat, is not a norm. This socio-cultural schism raises doubts about both the relevance of the traditional social structures as well as the feasibility of new lifestyle choices.

In a country where even today there's an adverse girl/child ratio in some of its richest states, one sees changes in many social institutions, for instance, family and marriage. Women are marrying at a later age, divorce rates are increasing and some women are not marrying at all.

Being Unmarried

Being unmarried means not having a husband. It could be because one is not of marriageable age; one has not yet found a suitable candidate for love or arranged marriage; one has been widowed, deserted or divorced; or because one has not married at all despite being above the legal age of marriage. All the above forms of singlehood refer to the absence of a man in a woman's life on a more or less permanent basis. The implication is that a woman's life has little intrinsic value and that she acquires it only through the presence of a man. As a result, all the above forms of singlehood are perceived as deficits in the woman's life, but none more than never marrying. Finding a groom, becoming widowed, etc. can be seen as somewhat outside one's control, but deciding not to be part of this game is a contravention of all social norms, and society may not take it kindly, especially Indian society.

Never married women can be questioned about their personal choices by anyone, anywhere, to any extent. Even celebrities and successful women are not exempted. Their 'failure in life' is actually even more publicly dissected. Men, however, celebrities or otherwise, are exempt from this social scrutiny. Indian society is collective in nature and this extends to the personal choice of marriage. A common Indian belief is that a marriage is not between two individuals but between two families. Another reason for Indian society's insistence on marriage could be that in such a patriarchal and misogynistic society, marriage provides a woman with physical and economic security as well as social status, which would not be so easy for a never married woman to acquire.

Perspectives on Singlehood

The decision about marriage, according to a sociological perspective, depends on factors such as structural forces, cultural ideologies and institutionalized inequalities (Shirley, 2007). Marriage provides a socially sanctioned outlet for sexual relations between individuals, which leads to reproduction, which ensures the survival of society. Families socialize

children and shape their socio-cultural norms, values, beliefs and attitudes. This includes gender roles, which affect the division of labor.

If viewed from an economic perspective, marriage is beneficial. The Marxist perspective rests on the following assumptions. First, people have rational preferences between outcomes, and these are associated with values. Second, individuals maximize utility. And lastly, people act independently on the basis of full and relevant information. Thus, the formation of new households as a result of marriage and the associated decisions regarding production and distribution can be economically analyzed.

A feminist perspective on marriage, on the other hand, believes that biology, at times, determines destiny, but it need not always do so. Men are physically stronger than women, who are further incapacitated by childbirth and breastfeeding, which reinforces the gender-based stereotype that women belong in the home. On the marriage market, women are made to feel like low value, perishable goods. To find a taker, for marriage or sex, they need to conform to stereotypes much more than men, for example, wearing makeup and high heels. Also, women are encouraged to marry men who are older, better educated and richer, making their position in marriage doubly subordinate.

The Changing Context

Marriage has changed more in the past 30 years than in the previous 3,000 years. The perspective on marriage has shifted from it being an economic and political transaction to expecting love and happiness. This has also led to the emergence of new family structures and marital ideologies. Singlehood has increasingly become a choice of women who feel that marriage is not necessarily the pre-requisite of being 'happy' in life nor does it guarantee love (Coontz, 2005).

In order to understand why some women never marry, it's necessary to understand the Indian system of marriage, which has been slowly changing, though with deep shifts. Traditionally, the elders of the family would identify suitable spouses for their children from their pool of distant family and social acquaintances. Older relatives and mediators were also part of the process. Marriages were usually within one's own caste and preferably with a person of the same, if not higher, socio-economic status. Inter-caste and inter-religious marriages are frowned upon, as they challenge social structures.

With increasing education, urbanization, economic freedom and globalization, people today come in contact with numerous others outside their traditional social circles, especially the young. Most of these young people also experience reduced familial and social control due to their increasing financial independence and urban lifestyle. This further reduces traditional taboos of caste and religion.

Many women in India remain unmarried, mostly for religious reasons, such as Hindu and Jain sadhvis, Christian nuns, etc. During the freedom struggle, Gandhi exhorted women to remain single and dedicate their lives to the nation; however, women who remained unmarried for this reason have always been few in number. In addition to these women, there are also women who choose not to marry for personal reasons such as not finding a suitable husband, wanting personal liberty, etc. This is a predominantly urban trend among middle and upper class women, mostly with higher education and a certain amount of family acceptance.

Factors Influencing the Decision to Not Marry

In the past two decades, the age of marriage has been rising for both men and women. As mentioned before, some of the factors contributing to this phenomenon are increasing education and non-traditional employment resulting in financial independence and reduced familial control, especially if one is living away from family. Many urban women have been in romantic relationships while studying or working, even more so as the age at marriage increases. As a result, they are now better able to understand their own needs and assess whether these will be met in the institution of marriage.

Other factors such as the reduced impact of society and religion, the media's promotion of single celebrities and their parenthood, and a freer economic and political environment are creating a need to acknowledge new values such as greater individualism. Education exposes people to new ideas and makes them question existing values. One's experience in relationships, positive or negative, also shapes one's attitude and expectations about self and others. As clarity of thought develops, feedback from other social groups such as peers also comes into play. Friends and peers, being of similar ages and at similar stages of life, often give more accepting and current feedback about relationship concerns.

The past decade or so has also seen the rise of a new genre of literature – chick lit. Protagonists like Bridget Jones in the Helen Fielding series

showcase their different kinds of relationships at various stages of their lives – from being single to being in disastrous relationships, engaged, married and widowed. Contemporary looks at urban, educated, financially independent women's lives, such as in the books by Terry McMillan, are also, at a certain level, an acknowledgment of this demographic and their lifestyle choices.

Problem Statement

Globally, marriage is considered the cornerstone of the basic unit of society – the family – and hence, also the best possible way of procreation and child rearing. The need to belong, love and be loved is also fulfilled by this institution. In India, marriage also provides physical and financial security as well as social status for women. It is also the only sacrament for women in Hinduism. Yet, there is a 68% decadal increase of never married women, according to the 2011 census.

Finding a suitable husband, getting widowed, divorced or deserted has an element of chance and, therefore, an individual cannot be expected to have total control over such situations. Hence, society has a less censorious opinion about these women regarding the absence of a man in their lives. Never married women, however, have, of their own volition, decided not to have a man protecting them. This outright refusal to play by the established rules draws the wrath of self-appointed guardians of morality. According to the census data, these women are aged between 35 and 44 years – old enough to understand the difficulties that could ensue if they decided to go it alone. So why are privileged and upper middle class women, of their own choice, making a decision that could further marginalize them?

A qualitative study on the topic of problems faced by never married women is, therefore, conducted to explore the reasons they never married, the issues faced by them while taking this decision and the problems they face in the family and wider social circles. It's also important to understand the impact of singlehood on the research participants and its policy implications, if any.

Literature Review

The basic premise of a heterosexual marriage is a man and woman in search of a life partner. However, this premise needs a more nuanced

understanding as it is affected by both economic and sociological phenomena. Economist Gary Becker argued many decades ago that marriage can be analyzed within an economic framework. Marriage is voluntary, and men and women compete when they try to find the best mate. Borrowing Becker's concept, a survey by Pew Research Centre, USA studied the 'supply' side of the marriage market and focused on the sex ratio (number of males to number of females) among unmarried adults. In other words, how many eligible men and women are there, and how do they compare in terms of key demographic characteristics?

Both quantity and quality of available unmarried adults matters in the marriage market. Previous research suggests that the pool of economically attractive men is linked to marriage formation patterns. Survey findings suggest that today's unmarried women place a high premium on finding a spouse with a steady job: 78% of never-married women say this is very important, compared with 46% of men.

Looking at the overall marriage market, which includes both never married and previously married adults (those who are divorced, separated or widowed), the sex ratio is fairly balanced. Among unmarried Americans aged 25 to 64, there are 97 unmarried men for every 100 unmarried women in that age group.

The above findings present only two important demographic characteristics, age and income. The actual marriage market is much more complex. For example, only about half of never married adults (53%) say they want to get married, and a much lower share of previously married adults (21%) say they would like to marry again. Moreover, 17% of unmarried adults aged 25 and older are currently living with a partner. In reality, the pool of eligible men and women on the marriage market could be much smaller than the one presented by this study (<http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/09/24/chapter-3-marriage-market-for-all-unmarried-adults/>).

The effects of remaining unmarried also differ with geography, culture and personal characteristics and cannot be viewed as a monolith. For example, Najah Manasra studied the influence of remaining unmarried on Palestinian women's self-perception and mental health status. These women were aged between 25 and 50 years and reported moderate and above average rates of psychological distress. Unemployed and poorly educated participants were likely to have more psychological problems than employed and highly educated women. Other independent variables included family composition, place of living and the age of the participants.

There were multiple reasons for remaining single in Palestinian society, which included sociocultural, psychological, financial, familial and personal factors. On the other hand, most of the research participants approved that marriage is better than singlehood despite its difficulties and excessive responsibilities. The majority of the research participants were harassed, restricted in living and movement and were censured by their families and society in general, which augmented their feeling of estrangement and alienation in their society. The research participants of the current study varied in their feelings and self-perception as a reaction to remaining unmarried. Some were proud, satisfied and assertive about themselves, while others had feelings of sadness, inferiority, worry, oversensitivity, loneliness, insecurity, pessimism or uncertainty about their future and their families. Somatization, withdrawal, interpersonal difficulties, aggression and escape mechanisms were common reactions and behaviors reported by the research participants. Some research participants believed they were more fortunate or less fortunate than other women in their communities. Being educated, employed, independent, assertive and getting one's family's support and understanding had a positive influence on the self-perception of the research participants in the current study. Despite the negative feelings that were reported by many research participants, very few had ever consulted a mental health professional or sought counseling (<http://hdl.handle.net/2086/4958>).

The demographic characteristics and choices of unmarried women, however, vary globally. For example, in the USA, unmarried women have children, which would be unthinkable in India where even adoption by single women is viewed as a peculiarity. The percentage of US births to unmarried women has been increasing steadily since the 1940s and has increased even more markedly in the last decade. The study 'Social and Economic Characteristics of Currently Unmarried Women With a Recent Birth' conducted in 2011 by Rachel M Shattuck & Rose M Kreider states that 4.1 million women aged 15–50 gave birth in 2012, 35.75% of who were unmarried at the time of the survey compared to 30.6% in the previous year. The birth rate for unmarried women in 2007 was 80% higher than it was in 1980 and increased by 20% between 2002 and 2007. Trends in non-marital fertility reflect changing norms regarding sexual behavior and family formation. The increase in non-marital fertility may be due to both an increase in pregnancies conceived outside marriage and to a decrease in marriage rates overall. Women and men who have children outside marriage are younger on average, have less education and have lower income than married parents. 57% of these women had less than a high school degree while 8.8% had a bachelor's degree. Also, the

number of women giving birth decreased with each sequentially higher income level. 68.9% of women giving birth earned less than \$10,000 per year but, in contrast, just 9% of women earned \$200,000 per year or above. Most of the women in the study were 15–19 years old and only 17.4% were aged 35–39. Racially pre-dominant were African-American women, followed by Hispanics (Shattuck and Kreider, 2011).

Indian society also sees not marrying as a personal deficit, more so for women than men. But the reasons here for women never marrying are vastly different. In the case of unmarried women, as compared to men, it is expected that if they are of child-bearing age, they should keep their 'character' spotless. They should not be in romantic relationships, they should shoulder all family responsibilities unquestioningly and they should preferably earn their own living so that they are not a 'burden' on their family. This benchmark is unrealistic because it does not take into account the various reasons the women did not marry. They could have personal reservations about marriage, they might have witnessed marital discord in their immediate or extended family or they could disagree with the gendered norms of marriage in India. However, society does not acknowledge these micro, mezzo or macro factors. This could be why, though depression is the leading cause of disability for both males and females, the burden of depression is 50% higher for females than males. In fact, depression is the leading cause of disease burden for women in high, middle and low income countries. The study titled 'Depression & Life Satisfaction among Married and Unmarried Women', conducted by Ruchi Sundriyal and Dr. Ravindra Kumar in 2013, indicates that unmarried women have higher depression rates but greater life satisfaction than their married counterparts. The age range of married women respondents in Sundriyal and Kumar's study was 26–50 years and for unmarried women it was 20–37 years (Sundriyal and Kumar, 2013).

Previous studies, such as the one by Ronald Kessler and Marilyn Esses in 1982, found that married people have comparatively low depression rates because they are, for several reasons, emotionally less damaged by stressful experiences than are non-married people (Kessler and Esses, 1982). In 2004, Ito, Sagara and Ikeda investigated the mental health of married people in relation to satisfaction in the marital relationship, occupational life and household income. The association was strongest for those of child-rearing age. Satisfaction in the workplace was as important in the marital relationship for women who were employed full-time (Ito, Sagara and Ikeda, 2004). Walker et al. had similar findings. They found that marital satisfaction is important for health and wellbeing, although

determinants of satisfaction among older couples are unclear (Walker et al., 2013).

The popular Indian periodical India Today, in its 21st October 2019 issue, published a cover story titled ‘Single and Happy’ on the new, growing trend of independent Indian women embracing the unattached life, even at a price. They are single by choice, not because Mr. Right didn’t come along, and are putting up with priggish societal norms to celebrate their freedom. They don’t want to trade their individuality for marriage. They focus on their careers, celebrate their friendships, indulge in their hobbies, make life-changing choices like adoption or being single biological mothers and, most importantly, are fulfilled in their lives. The 2011 census recorded a 68% decadal increase in the number of never married women aged 35–44 years with a 27% overall increase in the number of women in the same age bracket over the same period. Their education and jobs, along with increasing migration to expanding cities and policy decisions like legal freedoms for LGBTQIA+ communities, cause many women to opt to remain single, with friendship becoming an alternative to kinship. Except for a select few who experienced domestic conflict growing up, almost all the women had made a conscious decision to see themselves beyond marriage, enjoying the economic freedom but, more so, the freedom to be oneself. However, there’s an important class dimension. Only privileged or upper-middle-class women can exercise such a choice, because in the patriarchal Indian setup, marriage is still the ultimate safety net, and parents are worried about how their daughters will traverse a lonely middle age and beyond. Societal judgment, though, continues like the different levels of a torture chamber. Common questions/comments include: ‘There must be something wrong with her,’ ‘She must be mentally ill,’ ‘She is over-educated’ and ‘She is past her expiry date and can end up only with a widower or divorcee.’ Society has failed single women by placing in front of them unnecessary hurdles like labeling, not renting them houses, intrusive questions and social control. This judgment permeates into the workplace, too, with not just men but even the women joining in (Sinha, 2019).

The most important point here is that, wherever they are located geographically, never married women are always answerable to everyone for their behavior and choices, be it family or society. The study ‘The Discursive Climate of Singleness: The Consequences of Women’s Negotiation of a Single Identity,’ conducted in 2003 by Jill Reynolds & Margaret Wetherell, first suggests that singleness is best viewed as *socially constructed*. It’s not a natural fact or social arrangement but has

shifting patterns of meaning and social relationships that vary culturally. They then suggest that singleness is a **social category** that should be seen as *discursive* not *cognitive*. Such categorizations are revealing about the social order. These categories aim at providing orderly and accountable frameworks in social life. Singleness, too, has a few fixed categories like ‘widows,’ ‘divorcees’ and ‘separated,’ but there could also be others like ‘ever single’ and ‘single again.’ These categories, in turn, have institutional and identity consequences. The authors’ third premise is that singleness should be studied as a **discourse**. It’s a set of complex meanings and practices. The discourse of singleness produces knowledge, forms of truth and expertise that are related to power. For example, there is a peculiar accountability associated with the conduct of single people. Such a discourse naturalizes as well as pathologizes and creates patches of visibility as well as invisibility. The authors’ fourth proposal is that singleness should be studied as a set of personal narratives and subject positions related to history, social practices and ideology because these become a personal identity project for single women. This process is also political and, hence, feminists need to develop further strategies of resistance and develop a collective voice, which will help women position themselves in more enabling ways (Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003).

Rationale

The literature review portrays numerous aspects of single women’s lives. Sundriyal and Kumar’s study indicates that many Indian unmarried women suffer from depression, though they have higher life satisfaction and are on an average 15 years younger than their married counterparts (Sundriyal and Kumar, 2013). Ito et al. state that, due to the physical, emotional, and financial security that marriage provides, unmarried women face greater emotional stress, especially in the child-rearing stage of their lives (Ito et al, 2003). There is an interesting contrast – a study by Sinha shows though never married women in India are usually better educated and richer (Sinha, 2019). The opposite is true in the USA, based on a study by Pew Research Centre. Most of the unmarried women in the USA who had a birth were less educated and poorer and racial minorities. The last study, by Reynolds and Wetherell, provides the most sensitive understanding of the context of singleness. It concludes that singleness as a social category often pathologizes certain aspects of a woman’s life, which she then has to negotiate. The study also believes that the most common view on singleness – dysfunction versus self-actualization – is highly polarized and should be resisted to enable single women (Reynolds

and Wetherell, 2003). In conclusion, the review underlines the need to ask why educated and richer Indian women of all age groups are choosing to remain single if singlehood is connected to a lack of wellbeing and is also socially disabling at times in India.

Objectives

The study aims to:

1. Identify the reasons for women never marrying
2. Understand their and their family's views on singlehood
3. Understand the impact of singlehood on the research participants
4. Identify the policy implications of singlehood

Key Concepts: The study explored certain concepts with the initial understanding based on the literature review. The process of data collection explored these concepts further as perceived and understood by the research participants. The following are the important concepts of the study:

1. **Marriage:** Marriage is legally defined as a state of being united to a person of the opposite sex as husband or wife in a consensual and contractual relationship recognized by law. However, in India, even in cities, many marriages are performed traditionally and are not always registered. For the purpose of this study, marriage is broadly defined as a religiously or legally sanctioned relationship with a person of the opposite sex.
2. **Never married woman:** In relation to the operational definition given above, a never married woman is defined, for the purpose of this study, as a woman who has never married a man in the religious or legal sense.
3. **Problem:** For the purpose of this study, a problem is broadly defined as a matter or situation regarded as unwelcome or harmful and needing to be dealt with and overcome.

Research Design: Most Indian studies clubbed all categories of not-married women under the umbrella term 'single,' including widows, deserted women, divorced women, women currently not in a romantic relationship, women in religious life, etc. Given that the research questions were of a personal nature, the number of research participants was small and the topic a hitherto unstudied phenomenon in India, the research design was exploratory and interpretive. An interpretive design was

selected as it is based on the assumption that social reality is not singular or objective, but is, rather, shaped by human experiences and social contexts. It tries to derive a theory about the phenomenon of interest from the observed data. It focuses on understanding the profile of never married women in Mumbai and their reasons for not marrying. An interpretive design provides a socio-historic context by reconciling the subjective interpretations of its various participants. Because it views social reality as being embedded in and impossible to abstract from social settings, this design 'interprets' reality through a 'sense-making process' rather than a hypothesis-testing process.

Sources of Information

The study made use of both primary and secondary data. The primary source of data was never married women in Mumbai who are financially independent. The minimum age was 27 years. Secondary data included articles from journals and government agency reports for literature review.

Sample Design

The universe of the study consisted of the researcher's network of friends, colleagues and referred research participants. The criteria applied to select research participants were that they should never have been married in the legal or religious sense, be living in Mumbai, be financially independent and above 25 years of age. The sampling frame consisted of eleven women, from which ten women were selected as they were the only ones willing to participate. Thus, purposive sampling with inclusion criteria was used.

Tools of Data Collection

Data were collected using in-depth interviews (IDIs). Interviews were conducted in public places such as coffee shops and book shops with sufficient time and privacy. The purpose of the study was explained to the research participants, and their doubts, if any, were clarified. Data were collected in the month of September 2019. The questions broadly focused on their reasons for not marrying, their age at the time of taking this decision, familial and societal reactions, one's own concerns, etc. The broad domains of enquiry were:

1. Reasons for not marrying
2. Age at the time of deciding not to marry
3. Familial reactions to the decision
4. Experiences with the family related to the research participant being 'never married'
5. Experiences with society related to the research participant being 'never married'
6. Research participants' concerns regarding being single

Data Processing and Analysis

The interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed. The responses were coded and emerging themes categorized.

The concepts were compared against each other, and when they appeared to pertain to a similar phenomenon, they were classified into categories. Coding was done (i.e., data was broken down, conceptualized and put back together in new ways) and theories were built from the data. This study utilized open coding (i.e., analysis by naming and categorizing of phenomena through close examination of the data).

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is the most common form of analysis in qualitative research. It emphasizes pinpointing, examining and recording patterns (themes) within the data. Themes are patterns across datasets that are important to the description of a phenomenon and are associated with a specific research question. The themes become the categories for analysis. Thematic analysis is performed through the process of coding in six phases to create established, meaningful patterns. These phases are familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes among codes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the final report.

Experiences of the Researcher

The research participants were very open about discussing their singlehood and the reasons thereof, which came as a pleasant surprise to the researcher who was expecting that they would require a lot of convincing and handholding in order to discuss the issue.

The biggest concern of the researcher was that the number of never married women she knew or could contact through other sources was rather small and, therefore, a quantitative study would be difficult. Though the research participants knew some other never married women, the latter were unwilling to discuss the issue. The researcher, therefore, decided not to contact these women. However, the current set of research participants provided a varied sample by themselves.

Significance of the Study

The study was not only an exercise in research but was also significant. It provided insight into understanding why a somewhat marginalized section of society in a traditionally patriarchal country would willingly refuse the physical, financial and social security provided by marriage.

It highlighted the reasons behind women not marrying and the processes and experiences they underwent before and after taking this decision. It described their views on marriage, traditional gender roles and being unattached to a supportive male. It described their lived realities of both positive and negative reactions by family and friends as well as social perceptions. The study can help laypeople understand this small but highly stereotyped group in a more scientific, less pre-conceived manner. The findings can also be of use to social work practitioners and academics in understanding contemporary social trends in the context of social institutions and gender roles, identifying the problems faced by these women and suggesting government as well as social work intervention. To an extent, the study was also an instrument in validating the research participants' choices and experiences.

Ethical Concerns

1. Informed consent was taken from the research participants. They were informed that they could skip any questions they did not wish to answer and could withdraw from the study at any point during the research process.
2. The researcher strove to take an unbiased viewpoint. This was done by consciously exploring and putting forward multiple/all relevant perceptions without over-emphasizing any.
3. The researcher was flexible in approaching topics and interacting with the research participants.

4. The interactions during the data collection were honest, and there was no manipulation of the data.
5. The researcher was also concerned that if the research participant had remained single due to a traumatic experience in the past, questions on being single could re-open the trauma; however, this was not the case in any of the research participants. In the event that this happened, the researcher would stop the interview immediately and give the research participant the contact details of personally known psychologists. The researcher would make contact the next day to enquire about her well-being and continue with the interview only if the research participant were willing.
6. The researcher conducted the IDIs in public places that are considered good locations to unwind, such as book shops, cafes and malls. This was done in order to ensure the research participants' comfort and privacy.
7. The researcher did not offer any monetary compensation for the IDIs. However, food and beverages were provided by the researcher during the interview as a token of thanks for the research participants' time and effort.
8. Confidentiality was ensured by not mentioning the research participants' names in the data or report.
9. Throughout the research process, two strategies were adopted to signal the researcher if and where she was going wrong in the process. These strategies were:
 - a) Rephrasing, transcribing and cross-checking with the research participants whether the researcher had written/interpreted the quotes correctly. The views of the research participants were represented as accurately as possible.
 - b) Being self-aware. The researcher was aware of her own feelings and perceptions that had the potential of influencing the research process. During data collection, the researcher maintained a record of her own emotions/feelings/reactions. The researcher, thus, tried to witness herself during the research process; she was aware of how she was interacting with the research participants and giving meaning to the relationships and feelings. Whenever it was felt that some personal feeling might influence the data collection, it was analyzed objectively to see whether this was the case and if yes, then to what extent or how it would affect the data collection process or acceptance of the research participant and her views.

Scope of the Study

The study was an initial attempt to find out why a small number of financially independent women in Mumbai across age groups had not married and outline their socio-economic profile. The focus of the study was also to understand how society perceives these women. Never married women are a numerically small category in India. This study will add new information to the existing body of knowledge on Indian women, such as their reasons for never marrying and its impact on them, familial and societal response, etc. and help formulate new theories in this regard.

Limitations of the Study

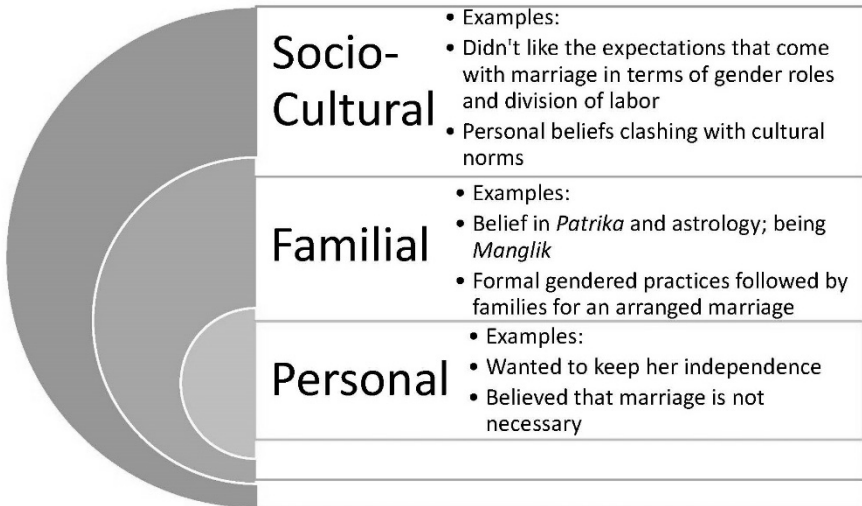
The number of research participants in this study was limited to ten as the researcher had limited contacts who could connect her to these women. Also, they all belonged to one geographic location and a specific socio-economic status.

Results

Reason for not Marrying

The reasons for the research participants not marrying were neither single nor simple. There might have been one dominant reason for women not marrying but many other factors that contributed to it. When asked to explain the reason for not marrying, the reasons ranged from general or broader level factors such as societal beliefs regarding astrology and *Patrika* to micro-personal level factors such as not getting a suitable proposal. Some of the reasons were a combination of social and personal factors such as the research participants' dissatisfaction with the gender roles inherent in an Indian marriage. One was a *Manglik* and, hence, hadn't found a suitable match in spite of searching through all possible sources. A few had not yet found a suitable prospective partner either through a romantic relationship or through efforts toward an arranged marriage. The figure given below presents the reasons for not marrying at three different levels:

Figure 1: Reasons for not marrying



Though this figure clearly demarcates the levels, in real life they interacted with each other. No factor worked in isolation. For instance, a woman's strong belief in gender equality is linked to her expectations regarding her husband, and that in turn is linked to the fact that she did not find a suitable person to marry. Gendered norms are created and nurtured by society, but, in many cases, the person became the problem because he/she had very different and strong opinions on certain topics.

Micro level reasons for not marrying, such as wanting to keep one's independence, were not likely to change because they are related to the individual's experiences and the attitudes shaped by these experiences. For example, a research participant who had seen a very unhappy marriage among her extended family believed that if a woman has sufficient financial security, she does not require the social sanction that marriage provides. Mezzo level factors, such as the family's response, could change, but that usually happened in response to specific events. For example, one research participant clearly told her family that she did not want to parade herself in front of less qualified men who not only earned less than her but were also very judgmental of her looks. As a result, her parents decided to stop all formal methods of looking for a prospective groom for an arranged marriage. Macro level factors were not likely to

change soon because they provide a sense of security and continuity to people.

The personal reasons for not marrying had a short temporal dimension. If they found a prospective partner who did not believe in gendered norms, all the research participants were willing to marry. The mezzo level reasons such as family would also change in the near future – as the research participants acquired more financial and professional stability and with their increasing age, their likelihood of getting married decreased; their families, especially their parents, resigned themselves to their daughter not marrying.

Besides the above mentioned properties and dimensions of reasons for not marrying, the data also revealed that there might be differences in the **actual reasons** and **communicated reasons**. Some of the research participants shared that their family members and friends understood their position but lacked the courage to take such a stand. Their support was somewhat limited and mostly in theory. This support may not have been available when hard decisions were to be taken or when the research participant was facing questions from their relatives or acquaintances regarding the reasons for her not being married yet. Hence, when they decided to remain single, the research participants had to constantly negotiate their ways of how and what reasons are to be communicated in various situations across levels.

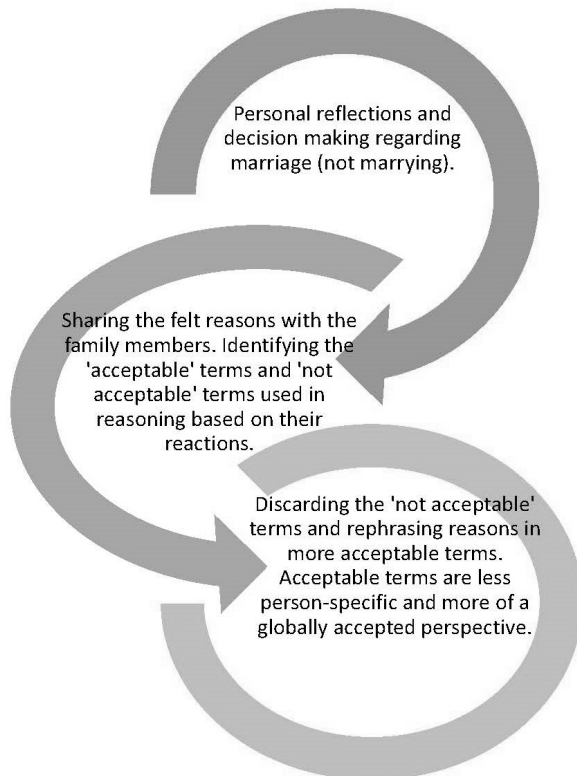
The first round of negotiation happened when the research participants decided to share their decision with their families. These negotiations happened based on verbal and non-verbal cues as well as the research participants' own knowledge about their families. These negotiations were covert (i.e., they happened without open acknowledgment as 'negotiations').

Since society views singlehood as a deficit and is not restrained in commenting on it, the parents were likely to disagree with the research participants' decision. Hence the research participants had to create new political meanings of singlehood, mostly feminist, with which to convince their parents. During the initial discussions (first round of negotiations), the actual/real reasons such as financial independence, belief that solo life is more conducive to personal growth and autonomy, or relationship preference were communicated to the family. The research participants tried to convince parents and friends that being single had substantial advantages including greater agency and financial freedom. Whenever these reasons were not supported or perceived to be 'right' ones, the

research participants tried to navigate the discussions in ways that would make their families more amenable to their decision in consequent discussions (second round of negotiations).

Thus, when real or actual reasons met resistance from the family members, there was open or implied suggestion to ‘rethink’ the decision not to marry. This led some of the research participants to ‘rephrase’ their reasons in more politically empowering terms that did not project them as ‘lacking’ or ‘weak’ to the others. Quoting their reasons using a feminist framework helped these research participants stand firm on their decision and also communicate their decision to others. The figure given below shows this sequential pattern of communicating the decision of not marrying and reasons thereof to family and others.

Figure 2: Sequential pattern of negotiated communication of reasons for not marrying



In addition, both physical and mental spaces were re-negotiated, for example, who can enter the rooms and houses of the research participants, who is allowed to discuss the topic of marriage with the research participant and whose queries she is not interested in answering, etc. A certain quid pro quo was fixed wherein both parties would stick to specific roles and would not rock the boat because any dirty laundry related to the decision of not marrying should not be aired in public, even accidentally. This arrangement solidified with age: as long as most of the research participants were within the age bracket for child bearing, the policing of their bodies, behaviors and activities was stronger. Once they were past the age of child bearing, as long as they had not created any 'scandal', society tended to put them up on a shelf and ignore them.

Deciding to not Marry

When the Decision is Taken:

"I can get married anytime so right now I'm enjoying being single."

The research participants' families started the discussion on marriage when the research participants were 21–26 years old, with graduation, post-graduation and 1–2 years of work experience being the chief milestones for the research participants, according to their families. The subject of marriage was initiated when the family felt the research participant had reached the required milestone. Once the topic was broached with the research participants, it was followed by the parents presenting a few prospective grooms for the research participants to meet and get to know. Sometimes, the parents accepted the help of friends and close relatives. The process took off when the research participants agreed to meet their prospective grooms. It was after a few unsatisfactory meetings that the research participants began the initial questioning of the institution of marriage. After numerous such encounters, they decided to stop the process.

Most research participants were in their 30s when they consciously stopped efforts to locate a spouse from their end. The age ranged from 30 to 38 years. However, in most cases, it was a fluid thought process based on their experiences, rather than a spelt-out action. These research participants are open to the idea of marriage even today but only on their terms.

Process Through Which the Decision was Made:

The factors that facilitated the research participants' decision not to marry were education and career. Whether the research participants were staying with their families or were living independently was not an influencing factor in this decision.

It was always the parents who initiated the process of formally seeking proposals for marriage. The research participants' consent was asked before the process was initiated. A few of the prospective grooms met some of the research participants' criteria but not all. The research participants were not part of the process where the potential proposals were obtained and discussed. The parents' ideas of what is a good prospect always overtook the research participants' ideas because the underlying feeling as reported by the research participants was that they "had to listen to their parents who gave them life and raised them." The parents mostly shared information that they thought was pertinent, chiefly, if the prospective gentleman smokes or drinks, his salary, how many of his siblings depend on him, will his parents stay with them after marriage, etc. The research participants' opinions were solicited, but their concerns were also downplayed when they did not match those of their parents.

The research participants had no issues with the process of an arranged marriage. It was the entitlement that many grooms and their families expressed in terms of the roles they expected the research participants to follow that bothered them. Most of the research participants did not believe in the non-scientific aspects of the process, such as horoscopes, but just went along with them in order to not be obstructive. A few research participants faced challenges in the process because certain things about them made it difficult for them to be accepted in the social milieu (e.g., their qualifications, salary, jobs, views on gender and marriage, etc.). In such cases, sometimes the parents tried to downplay these factors and emphasized the need to compromise and put others' needs before theirs, but it did not work. After each prospective groom was rejected, the search for the next one would simply start again. All the research participants met prospective grooms who were not the best fit and some who were rejected outright. When the latter began to outnumber the former was when the research participants started questioning the compulsion of marriage. This deliberation included reflection; discussions with friends, relatives and extended family; and more in-depth assessments of the prospective grooms and their families before gradually bowing out of the whole process of husband seeking. The finalization of their decision to not marry

was better measured in experiences they had rather than in time. For example, the younger research participants were often less sure if their decision regarding a prospective groom was the right one. They met fewer men, took more time to finalize the decision about each man and waited for longer intervals than the older research participants before meeting the next candidate. The final decision of not taking any more proactive steps was usually after about 5–7 years of trying, at the age of 29–34 years.

The identifiable process elements in this decision making included the parents' and research participants' socialization, socio-economic status, educational qualifications, exposure to other communities and religions, power structures within their families, the insecurities and fears of both and the research participants' jobs and views.

All the research participants were working, and this indicates that their economic independence was a strong factor in their choices. A few had deliberately delayed marriage as they wanted to focus on their careers.

Most of the research participants had been educated to at least a master's level and held jobs in middle and senior levels. A majority were in the development sector, either practitioners or academics. Thus, their exposure to social constructs and their ability to critically analyze social concerns were well developed. Therefore, the main antecedents of not marrying were education and a stable, well-paying job. The research participant may or may not have been staying with their family.

Two research participants shared that they had witnessed the inherent gender bias that permeates married life in their close family. The mother of one research participant had stopped working after marriage and had to change her lifestyle to suit her new role. Another research participant shared that her cousin's marriage had ended on a very bitter note when her husband's infidelity was uncovered. For these two research participants, these instances had also played a role in their questioning the assumed 'happy ever after' of marriage and their decision not to bow down to social pressures to marry. Comments about their looks, character and sexuality were perennial, with a healthy dose of conjecture, and could get internalized over a period of time. No research participant had actually experienced anything negative with respect to domesticity; thus, their decision to not marry came from a detailed, critical observation of gender roles in their primary social sphere – family and peers. Given that their dissatisfaction was personal, they had to create convincing reasons for staying single in a society that emphasizes marriage over personal fulfillment. These experiences

usually took place in the formative stages, such as during late childhood and teenage years, and during one's higher education, where, though they may not say much, they were observing and absorbing a lot of unsaid material as well. The decision to stay single was usually taken after completing one's education and having held a steady job for a few years – in other words in their late 20s or early 30s.

The Participants in the Decision Making Process:

The first people to whom the research participants communicated their decision were their parents since they were the initiators of the process and also the people who invested a substantial amount of time, energy and resources in it. The research participants also believed that since their views may not be easily accepted by other people, their parents would be the most supportive.

If singlehood had been the result of a traumatic experience or having heard about it, certain topics and people were off limits for discussion and even maintaining good relations with. Parents were told not to discuss the topic with certain relatives or acquaintances.

Family's Response to Research Participant's Decision not to Marry

"You are the cause of my unhappiness."

"You are raising my BP and sugar."

"You will become aggressive later."

"I want to understand what you are thinking."

Most research participants had discussed never marrying with their friends, but announcing their decision to their parents was universally met with dismay, though the parents came to terms with it in time. Some parents were still in the process of acceptance at the time of data collection (i.e., they had not yet accepted the decision of the research participants).

However, even after the choice had been made, the parents remained concerned for life, if not outright worried. Only one parent did not express worry regarding the decision. The reason behind this lack of worry was the parent's belief that the research participant's brother would take care of her when they died.

Research participants who were previously in relationships that failed reported that their parents were happy with their daughter's choice and sometimes even relieved, especially when the parents had friends or relatives facing domestic violence. This reiterates that the first parental response was one of concern.

The research participants usually took the decision of not marrying in their early thirties, when they were more or less set in their groove – they had had the education they wanted and a job that gives stability to their lives. Their parents, on the other hand, were near retirement and did not want a nagging concern in their lives, especially when there was little time left to fulfill their own remaining desires, if any. Thus, the parents tried to come to terms with their daughter's decision in any way they could, and her life's personal and economic stability helped. Thus, meaning making with notions of power happened not just on the part of the research participants but also their parents.

In most cases where the research participant had a brother, the parents were less worried because it was presumed that after them, the brother would look after the research participant. How sincere the brothers would be after the parents' demise could not be known, however, nor could how the research participant would respond if things did not go well with her sole blood relative. This created another power dynamic for the research participants to navigate. The same sense of parental relief was not visible when the research participant had a sister.

Thus, three factors seemed to influence parental acceptance of their decision not to marry. These factors are:

1. Economic independence (job) of the research participants
2. Earlier relationship-related experiences of the research participants
3. Research participant having a brother

The figure given below shows the reasoning of the parents behind these factors: