

# Single Women: Problems and Prospects

Nirmala and Jeyaraj

*Lady Dock College, Tamil Nadu*

**Abstract:** After analyzing the notion of single women, the author addresses the problems and prospects facing them from an Indian context. Women should not view singlehood as inferior to marriage or having children. It is also a good option in life. But sufficient preparation is needed at different stages of life to be an empowered single woman. A new look at singlehood of women is needed today to enhance the status and role of such women in our society.

**Keywords:** Single women, reasons for not marrying, problems and prospects of single women, gender equality.

1. The status and problems of single women do not get much attention in our society. Occasionally, news items and articles appear on single women in newspapers, weeklies and other books. Their sociological, religious, biological and psychological problems are many and varied. They carry worries, burdens and undergo stress. In this essay, the problems and prospects of single women are highlighted for further research and study. Usually the word 'spinster' is used to refer to single women. It arose in a pre-industrial context. Unmarried women were doing the spinning at home before industrialization took spinning and weaving out of home. This word referred to the industriousness of women. It was a positive term appreciating the contribution of unmarried women. But it lost its positive dimension as many unmarried women lost their job of spinning at home. Unemployment affected their earning and settling down in marriage. As the days passed by, the term spinster was used in the sense of 'an unmarried woman beyond the age for marriage' (Jethani, 1994: 11). However, it is still regarded as a respectable term in the Indian society to denote an unmarried woman involved in the service of society. But it is not a comprehensive term. We prefer to use the term 'single women' or 'singlehood' or 'singleness' because it includes

unmarried women as well as other single women such as widows, unwed and deserted mothers, and divorced women. Many writers on gender issues accept these women into the category of single women. (Taylor 1994: Xv-xxi). Asha Mohan Sethi includes them in the category of single women from a practical point of view and writes, “single women in our country can be categorized as unmarried or once married but at present either divorced, separated, deserted or widowed. But if we go deeper into the problems, these broad categories have numerous subcategories. For example: Single Unmarried Women can be further classified as highly educated, moderately educated or uneducated, or/and gainfully employed, under-employed or unemployed. Women who are married but now are single by virtue of divorce, separation, desertion or widowhood, can be further classified as with or without children and dependents; educated/uneducated, employed/unemployed. This classification can go on and on with respect to their rural-urban or class-caste-religious backgrounds” (Sethi 1994: SWIP 15).

The concept of singlehood is directly related to marriage and a stable relationship with a husband and children in the context of family. When a woman avoids marriage or becomes a widow or breaks the marital relationship, she ends up in the category of singleness. Marriage is at the centre of the issue of singlehood. So the concept of marriage should be given more attention in the study of single women. Marriage is not just for sexual pleasure or having children or avoiding loneliness. It is a partnership and sharing of responsibilities. It is a lasting relationship in joys and sorrows. It is a commitment of a life together. Both men and women should have a right understanding of marriage, whether they are interested in marriage or in remaining as single persons.

## **1. Unmarried Women**

The percentage of unmarried women in India is low in comparison with Western countries. The Indian culture promotes the idea of being married and having children. Girls who are not married in Indian families are regarded as unlucky or unfortunate and having something wrong with them. They have been looked upon as a hindrance and burden to the family. Neighbours speak ill

of such girls who could not get married. Their parents are blamed for not working out the marriage of their daughters. On the other hand, girls who are dedicated to the values of their religions and remain unmarried are respected in the community. Sometimes, they are even regarded as sacred. While these two dimensions persist in our society, the former one of looking at unmarried women as a burden for the family and a stigma in the society dominates even today. Some of the key reasons for not getting married and remaining single are listed below.

## **Sociological Reasons**

Since the Indian society is divided into small fragments of caste, tribe, race and language, parents try to arrange the marriage of the daughters within the same caste or tribe or race or language. Inter-caste or inter-tribe marriages are regarded as breaking the social custom and religious tradition. Families belonging to the upper caste do not want to give their daughter in marriage to a boy belonging to a caste inferior to their own caste. They have to face a lot of criticism from the rest of their family members and community. They are also afraid of alienating themselves from their caste or being ostracized for crossing the caste and mingling with the inferior caste in marriage. It is difficult to find a suitable groom for their daughter within the same caste or tribe because the choice of a suitable groom is limited under the arranged marriage system. Some parents are so firm on caste and language that they are prepared to keep their daughters unmarried. For them the caste system is much more important than the marriage of their daughter.

Opportunities for socialization are less for women since many girls are not encouraged to go and study in co-ed colleges or to work with men or to attend parties and gatherings. Falling in love with a man is regarded as breaking the norms of the society. Most of the girls usually depend on their parents to arrange their marriage, within the same caste or region. Another problem is the failure in love. If a boy fails to marry the girl whom he loves and deserts her, then it is difficult for the girl to get married. Many parents and boys do not favour girls who were involved in an earlier love affair. Some girls carry the guilt of their failure, hate to marry and choose to remain

single. The psychological attachment of their first love with the person who deserted them may continue with the girls. The loyalty to him and the cultural binding could hinder her to accept marriage with another person. This kind of culture or views and psychological feelings should be challenged by our society by educating and counselling the girls, boys and parents if we want to improve the status of women.

### *Economic Reasons:*

The demand for dowry and gold jewellery and asking the parents of the girls to meet all the wedding expenses has made marriage a big financial burden. Only those who offer to pay dowry and jewels and meet the financial expenses of the wedding can arrange a marriage for their daughters. But many parents find it difficult to arrange a marriage. Girls also hesitate to incur such a financial burden in their marriage, leaving their family in a vicious debt.

Girls who are qualified and earn a good salary can get married. Even such girls are restricted by their caste and huge financial demand. Unemployment is also another reason for girls remaining single.

Some parents depend on their daughters for income now or to take care of them in their old age. Such parents hesitate to arrange a marriage for the daughters.

### *Religious Reasons:*

Good looking girls, with fair skin but obedient and holding on to traditional values, can get married. But girls who are dark skinned or who dress in modern fashion and do not cherish traditional values are not regarded as suitable for family and so are not preferred in the arranged marriage system.

Those families who believe in horoscopes, stars and rasi, omens and superstitions, look for a groom whose horoscope, birth star and omens match with their daughter's own horoscope and stars. Unless both of them suit and tally, marriage is not arranged for the girls. Sometimes it does not suit and tally at all. Such girls remain unmarried for life.

## **Geographical Reason**

Some girls are unwilling to marry a person who is employed in a distant place. They prefer to marry a person within the village or region so that they need not distance themselves from their families and the community. In order to continue in social bond with their community and culture and keep the family land or house undivided, they look for employed persons within the local area. This attitude makes it difficult for girls to get married to a suitable person.

### ***Psychological Reasons:***

Feelings of fear and uncertainty hinder some girls from getting married. They are afraid of losing their freedom after marriage or suppression by husband and his parents, death at pregnancy leaving the child motherless, and separation or divorce after some years. This kind of fear complex keep some girls from giving their consent.

### ***Global Reasons:***

Some, in the Western countries are concerned about the population explosion in the world. Others are worried about the suffering and pain their generation would undergo in this world which is full of nuclear weapons, pollution and violence. They choose to remain single in life after understanding the socio-economic, political and environmental problems.

### ***Family Reasons:***

A few girls wish to remain unmarried for life for some good reasons. They take this decision voluntarily after seeing the situation of their family. They choose to remain single so that they can educate their brothers and sisters with their income, arrange their marriages and take care of their aged parents. These women have no regret in remaining single. They draw satisfaction from supporting the family. Some others like to remain single for medical reasons.

### ***Dedicated Service:***

Others like to remain single so that they can give their time and money for the service of their religion and society. Some women who dedicated themselves to the service of Hinduism have contrib-

uted much and become key leaders. Jainism also encourages young women to dedicate themselves to religious service. A large number of young women within the Roman Catholic tradition have dedicated themselves to remain single and involve in social service through their religious institutions. Their decision to remain unmarried is for a noble cause in society. They draw meaning for their life through their dedicated service to humanity, nature and the Creator.

## **Prospects**

Some of the problems confronting single women at different stages of their lives cannot be ignored. At a later stage some feel loneliness and the lack of their own family. The question of who will take care of them in their old age also arises. Some of their family members try to get as much financial help as possible from unmarried sisters. This creates a feeling of being pressurized by the family members. Although these problems still confront single women, more facilities are available for them today. Those single women who earn a good salary, can buy their own flat or build a house, own a vehicle and enjoy life. Old age homes are also coming to their help when they retire or become old. Those who do not have money to support themselves in their old age depend on their own brothers and sisters to take care of them. They can enjoy their freedom and draw satisfaction from serving their family or involving in social service. They can also become foster parents for deserted children in orphanages and homes. The trend is changing recently, in that a few unmarried women get married to men at a late age for the sake of having a companion in life. Contemporary society is willing to accept such changes in the life of unmarried women and is beginning to support this kind of prospect.

2. In addition to these facilities, the concept of marriage itself is changing today. Past generations considered marriage important. Celibacy or singlehood was not acceptable. Some people went to the extreme of performing formal marriage ceremonies over the corpses of girls who died before marriage. They believed that a virgin could not attain salvation and marriage was necessary for spiritual fulfillment. (Jethani 1994: 15).

3. Some of these old values are promoted even today by the movies. But social conduct surveyed in different parts of India show a change in the 'familistic ideology' prefer the 'ideal of individualism' rather than marry a man and have children (Jethani 1994: 12-14). David Taylor observes, 'singleness is now becoming an option to be considered along with others (Taylor 1994: in *SWIP*. Xvii).

4. Urmila Jethani quotes from other studies: 'As more women remain single, the social stigma and isolation associated with spinsterhood declines, reinforcing singlehood as an alternative to marriage' (Jethani, 1994: 13). If this change in the concept of marriage, and facilities and securities for women develop, then singlehood will not be regarded as inferior to married life. Many more women may prefer to remain unmarried and lead a meaningful life.

## 2. Widows

Widows, with or without children, could be regarded as single women. A woman becomes a widow due to the sudden death of her husband either in an accident or heart-attack or often a prolonged sickness. But the socio-economic, medical, psychological consequences of the death of a husband on the wife and the children are enormous.

Some people blame the widow for the death of her husband, stating the horoscope or stars or rasi of the wife as the reason. They go to the extreme of cursing the widow and blaming her for the misdeeds of her previous birth (Rajalakshmi Das 1994: *SWIP* 164). The situation of some of the widows may be better since they may have a family, a job or funds to support themselves. But this may not be the case with other widows. In a traditional family, a widow, whether mother or sister or sister-in-law is looked down upon as an unlucky woman or a burden for the family. Initially the family members and relatives may show sympathy and concern for the widow, but in the long run they may not even care about the widows. Sometimes, it can go to the extreme of neglecting or exploiting her. Some of the family members or relatives on whom she depends may try to put pressure on the widow to sell land or house or cattle apparently for her upkeep.

One of the cruelties connected with widowhood is to compel her to die with her husband in the funeral pyre and be an example of fulfilling the religious ritual of *sati*. Although it is banned legally, some upper caste families want to practise it even today. Other cruelties rendered in the name of fulfilling religious rituals are forcing her to shave off her hair and remove the *mangalasutra* or *thali*. They are asked to wear a white dress as a symbol of widowhood and abstain from participating in the functions of the family. The main aim of the segregation of the widow is 'to prevent any kind of intimacy with man' (Darshan and Punia 1994: SWIP 77). These cruelties could create a psychological opinion in a widow that her life has come to an end with the demise of her husband and there is no point in trying to empower herself. (Vidya, Meena and Neelam 1994: SWIP 151).

Many widows neglect their health due to financial constraints, the burden of rearing and lack of support from the family and relatives. The shock of their husband's death, dependency, lack of planning to face the future and worries can cause various diseases such as loss of weight, rheumatism, asthma, indigestion, swollen feet, falling hair, skin irritation, headaches and nerve problems (Vidya, Meena and Neelam 1994: SWIP 117).

Another problem is not allowing the widow to marry again. If she cannot separate herself from the family of the deceased husband, then she could become a bonded slave to that family and be abused by the members of the family.

Today, some changes are coming up in society. Some state governments have changed the rule and have granted the pension fund received by the husband to be given to his widow. Local government offices such Corporations and Taluka offices are instituting a fund to give a small amount to deserted widows. NGOs are helping the widows to get back their rights over the land of the husband, transfer the pension to their name and to get counselling and guidance.

### 3. Divorced Women

Divorce is not common in the Indian society as compared to societies in the West or East. But it is more noticeable in the recent



days. Pinki Sharma says, 'The label of being a divorcee, badly stigmatizes the woman and subjects her to indignity, which is repugnant to the concept of women's honour, self-respect, social status, dignity and freedom (Sharma 1994: SWIP 128).

## Culture of Thali and Separation

Since divorce is considered a curse in our Indian culture, many families facing this problem do not want to settle it legally. Women who are facing this problem prefer to work out the 'separation' from their husbands as an unofficial arrangement rather than official divorce. Indian culture makes the *mangalasutra or thali* as sacred and a security for women. The realities and myths of the culture of *thali* need a discussion in gender studies. It has its own merits and demerits. While the culture of *thali* can be a protection, it could very well be an oppression too. E.V. Ramasamy Naickar (respectfully called Periyar), a social reformer of Tamilnadu, criticized the culture of thali (thirumangaliam). He encouraged his followers not to use thali for various reasons. For the culture of thalai belongs to Brahminical tradition and was imposed on the people of dravidian culture. Moreover, the culture of thali is a kind of suppression of women because it binds them to their husbands and deprives them their freedom to question his dominance, and cruelties. In addition, it can control the freedom of women who are facing the process of divorce. Periyar conducted weddings by exchanging garlands between the bride and the groom rather than blessing the thali and giving it to the groom to tie around the neck of the bride. The culture of thali has penetrated every religion in India. Within Christianity, the culture of thali is accepted by mainline churches and the blessing of it is included in the order of the wedding service. But Pentecostal churches have rejected the culture of thali and the exchanging of garlands, and now solemnize weddings by exchanging the Bible between the groom and the bride. However, the thali not only regarded as a blessing for married life but also as an identification mark of a married woman. Under the arrangement of unofficial separation, a woman can continue to have the privilege of wearing the *thali* and pose herself as married. She can pretend that she is still the wife of her husband who is now separated and try to avoid the suspicion of being looked at as a widow or deserted and left to the mercy of others. But

in the official divorce, they have to remove it or settle it with the husband.

## **Reasons for Divorce**

Some of the reasons for the increase in divorce rate in the Indian society could be listed below.

1. Alcoholic and drug abuse by husbands and the cruel treatment toward wives.
2. Lack of a child in spite of medical check up, treatment and waiting for a long time.
3. Husbands' psychological problems or vice versa.
4. Husbands who were advised by the doctors not to marry on medical grounds.
5. Husbands who are oppressive and not willing to give freedom to the wife.
6. Wives are neglected by the husbands and left to the cruel treatment of in-laws.
7. Financial constraints.
8. Husband living with another woman and having children.
9. Forcing wife to be a sex worker or smuggler to bring in money or yield to his own plan or vested interest.
10. Lack of honesty or loyalty to her husband and adjustment to family life on the part of women.
11. Long period s, of separation if the husband is working in a distant country.

Many of these reasons are common in societies world-wide. William Goode, who studied the problem of divorce, categorized these reasons for divorce in the technical terms of Personality, Authority or Cruelty, Complex, Desertion, Triangle, Home life, Consumption, Value, Non support, Drinking and Relatives (Goode 1956: 116- 119). The reasons for divorce should be analyzed objectively without showing favouritism or nepotism to the parties involved. In

our culture, women are blamed more often than men. Indian society looks at a woman as a quarrelsome person who is unwilling to be submissive to her husband. Since women are considered inferior to men in their thinking, they expect the wife to take all the blame and be tolerant to her husband.

## **Process of Divorce**

Divorce does not take place suddenly. It happens after a long period of tolerance and adjustment with the husband. It is a painful process. Each religion blesses the wedding of the couple and has its own approach to granting divorce. Christianity asks the couple to go to the court and obtain the divorce. Islamic religious leaders may ask the husband to say the word '*Thalak*' three times after carefully considering the problem and all the possibilities of living together. Only when this process fails, the '*Thalak*' can be pronounced. People belonging to Hindu traditions may approach the court or panchayat or community or family to grant divorce and settle the problem of the property. Divorce laws in India vary according to the religions. Some may like to go for an official divorce but others may negotiate for a separation and settlement of properties, funds and the care of the children.

What is important is the way the people who are facing the problem of divorce are guided by counselling. Professional counselling centres in the West play a major role in saving the marriages of many families. Such counselling centres are not developed in India, although a few are coming up in cities in the recent years. In Indian culture, the parents and relatives play a major role in counselling the husband and the wife, and try to save the marriage. When the problem becomes serious, many of them do not know how to handle it. We need to develop counselling centres with professionals who can give pre-marital counselling, marital counselling and post –divorce counselling.

## **Consequences:**

Divorce affects both the parties but women more than men. For, women have to face various problems such as social stigmatization, psychological trauma of losing the husband, rearing and edu-

cating children, lack of financial support and the question of re-marriage if they do not have children in the first marriage.

If the divorce is for a valid reason, then the divorced women need not feel bad for what has happened in life. She should accept the reality and proceed to establish her own life. She can continue her job and take care of the children. Families and society should show their concern and support for such single women who carry the burden of life particularly without having any employment or income.

#### **4. Unwed and Deserted Mothers**

Unwed and deserted mothers are found in different parts of the world. 'Unwed' means not married legally but living with a man who might or might not have been married to another woman. Living with a man and having sexual relationship could happen out of genuine love for the man or for the need of financial support and security. The relationship could have led to children. The man could have deserted her after living with her and severed the relationship. Usually such men do not even inform the women their whereabouts. The women who have been deserted by such men have no legal proof of their marriage or claim to financial support from the men. The unwed and deserted mothers may live with their parents or move out to another place for working in an estate or slums or in the construction of buildings. They feel that they are cheated by men. They do not know what to answer to those who ask about their husbands. Sometimes the children born out of this kind of sexual relationship could be abandoned or given to orphanages. At this stage these mothers are not prostitutes since they maintained their relationship with one man and led a family life. But they are in danger of being sexually exploited by others or becoming sex workers to support themselves.

The percentage of such cases may be more among young girls, particularly those who are still in schools and colleges in USA. The percentage may be less in India but this problem is found in some villages, tribal communities and estates of coffee, tea and rubber. Vinu Abraham highlights this problem in a village in North Kerala among the Muslim community (Abraham, *The Week* July 27, 2003:

20-21). The main reason for arranging the marriage of teen age girls hurriedly with unknown men coming to their village, is their fear of the stigma of keeping girls unmarried rather than the stigma of being abandoned wives. Fraudulent marriage brokers taking advantage of their fear of this stigma arrange the marriage with men already married and take a good commission. These men get a good sum as dowry and live with the women for a year and then disappear with the money and jewellery. Some of these girls have children out of this relationship but lack proof of their marriage. They are abandoned to despair. This trend is common in some slums where men and women live together for a period of time and then separate. The separated men or women develop relationship with other persons and live together for a period of time.

Some of the reasons for being deserted as unwed mothers are:

1. Too much socialization and love affair without knowing the motives and intention of men with whom they socialize and fall in love.
2. Some girls run away with the boys and start living with them because they are afraid that their parents would not approve of love and marriage. They may succeed or end up as unwed mothers and deserted.
3. Some girls may not be ready for a committed family life but like to continue as partners in a sexual relationship.
4. Quarrel and lack of adjustment during the relationship before the marriage resulting in abandoning women with the baby.
5. Very few women like to continue in sexual relationship with a known or unknown stranger who has moved into her place for work or business for the sake of financial support and security.
6. Lack of proper understanding about marriage, sex, family and children lead them to make this mistake in life.

These women who become unwed and deserted mothers carry a stigma in society. They are looked down upon by others. NGOs who work among these women know their psychological and sociological trauma and plight. Some of their problems are viz.

1. They carry the guilt feeling of losing their life and future.
2. They are unwanted by family members and society
3. Their future marriage with another man is at stake.
4. Children of unwed mothers have an identity crisis and carry the stigma
5. They lack financial support when deserted.
6. Their health can deteriorate.
7. Due to poverty, they go begging with their children.
8. They could become sex workers on the street or domestic servants or coolies or rag pickers.
9. Many resort to drugs, theft and smuggling.

Some of these women were taken to rehabilitation homes which care for them.

Their rights should be established and the men who deserted them should be brought to accountability. Prior marriage counselling should be given to all girls in schools and colleges. Should our society victimize them by looking down upon and neglecting these unwed mothers? What should be our attitude towards these single women? How can we help them lead a normal life?

## **5. Genetic Defect, Behavioural Problem and Singleness**

Some men and women remain single because of genetic defects or behavioural problems. In the case of some women, it could be psychological attitude of lesbianism. In other cases, women could be trans-sexuals who behave like men due to psychological problems and dress like men. It could be a problem of hormones too. These are very few in number but their problems are getting attention in media as well as in gender studies. Medical science tries to prove their problems from a biological point of view. Psychologists analyze their behaviour from their point of view. These women behave abnormally not because they want to deliberately show their rebellious attitude towards society. They cannot help themselves

because the defect is inherent in their body and mind at birth itself. Women who are normal but try to behave deliberately as abnormal cannot be included in this category of defective personalities. They can be corrected easily because it is not a biological defect. Discussions and debates are going on to understand people affected by genetic and psychological defect and formulate new laws and regulations. Religious institutions are in a dilemma to work out their stand on lesbians, homosexuals and trans-sexuals regarding their membership, employment, marriage and relationship. Should religions apply their views on them or approach them with an open mind and take decisions on the basis of new findings of medical science and psychology? Suppose we have such a defective daughter in our family, what would be our attitude towards them? Should we condemn them as unwanted or as sinners, or show our concern and support to them? Parents who have such a defective girl child should seek medical advice and counselling help. If the doctors advise the parents not to arrange a marriage for such daughters, it is better not to arrange that marriage which would avoid problems such as divorce and court cases.

## **Concluding Remarks**

Some research by students of social sciences on the issue of singlehood is being done in various academic institutions. People who are interested in this aspect of gender studies can refer to such research data (Jeyaraj 2002: 1-88). We have dealt with the problems and prospects of single women briefly in the above pages to conscientize our readers on singlehood. It is not easy for us to give solutions to their problems. Preventive measures such as educating women, enlightening them with the problems of marriage and family, encouraging them to seek employment and earn their own income and prepare them for every possible situation can help women face life in this world. Women should not view singlehood as inferior to marriage or having children. It is also a good option in life. But sufficient preparation is needed at different stages of life to be an empowered single woman. A new look at singlehood of women is needed today to enhance the status and role of such women in our society.

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