

“DON’T MARRY, BE HAPPY!” – HOW SINGLE WOMEN IN MALAYSIA VIEW MARRIAGE

Azman Azwan Azmawati
Women Research and Development Centre/School of Communication
Universiti Sains Malaysia,
Penang, Malaysia
azwan@usm.my

Intan Hashimah Mohd Hashim
Women Research and Development Centre/School of Social Sciences
Universiti Sains Malaysia,
Penang, Malaysia
hashimah@usm.my

Noraida Endut
Women Research and Development Centre
Universiti Sains Malaysia,
Penang, Malaysia
noraida@usm.my

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to explore how single women in Malaysia who have never been married view marriage and related issues. Two-hundred single women between the ages of 24 to 66 were interviewed in this study. Participants reported their view on gender and marriage (42-items), social expectations related to their marital status (12-item) and their marital plan. Participants reported moderately traditional view about gender and marriage experienced some level of expectations to get married and although they generally felt positive with their current status of being single, they were still open to the idea of marriage. Ideal characteristics of a partner include kindness, sincerity, responsibility and maturity. Findings indicated realistic but open expectations related to marriage.

Keywords: single women, gender, marriage, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Academic research on singleness in Malaysia is still under-developed although the number of single Malaysian women did increase significantly over the years. Empirical researches on singleness within the contexts of Malaysia were mostly related to demographic, work and professional lives of single women. Studies on the marginalization and stereotyping of Malaysian single women are not much researched as discussion on singlehood is still considered as ‘taboo’ according to the cultural norms and people’s beliefs, despite the fact that singlehood is now becoming increasingly prevalent within the contemporary Malaysian society.

Jones (2004) stated that in the past, marriage was close to universal in most Asian countries however this is no longer the case. Over the past two decades some dramatic changes have taken place in Southeast and East Asia; non-marriage for women is becoming much more common, and in

many of the big cities, it is even more common than it is in Western countries (Jones, 2004). The meaning of marriage as a form of relationship and a type of behaviour has undergone substantial change in the last half century in many Southeast and East Asia countries. (Situmorang, 2007). Meanwhile, Williams et al (2006) observed that in many parts of the world there have been important changes in marriage behaviour, as entry into marriage is being delayed and increasing proportions will never marry. Increasing delay and foregone marriage among other things reflect or contribute to increasing individualism and evolving gender roles and statuses. In Southeast Asia, the proportion of women who remain single past their childbearing years have been increasing. The figure tends to be higher among women with tertiary education. It is also apparent that the older never-married woman is a relatively new phenomenon.

Jones (2009) argued that the effect of education and changing patterns of labour force participation are central to marriage changes. These are two main reasons and motivation for delayed marriage. Jones (2009) further suggested factors for delayed marriage in the region of Southeast Asia as:

1. Perceived Desirability of Marriage which includes expansion of education, increasing uncertainty in the labour market, rising divorce rates, increasing urbanization and work pressures and changes in perception of sexuality.
2. Disincentives to Have Children.
3. Marriage Squeeze.

In essence, studies discovered that two forces are giving women more autonomy: education and jobs. Changing married patterns are the result of improvements in women's education and income, Education changes women's expectations. Better education is also the other main trend changing marriage - female employment. (The Economist, 2011).

In Malaysia, the total women's labour force participation rose from 45.8% in 2006 to 49.5% in 2012 while the participation of single women who never married in the labour force was 47.7% in 2006 to 47.3% in 2012. (Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, 2013). Currently, Malaysia families face many challenges as a consequence of the changes in family structure and size. These changes are due to the changing demographic trends such as the changing age-structure of the population, decline in fertility rate, delay in marriage and mobility of the populations ((Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, 2004).

According to reports from the Department of Statistic (2011), there are changes in the trend of marriage for the last few decades. Socio-economic growth especially in education has a great connection with development and modernization process that lead to the rising number of women delaying their marriage. This is due to the desire to pursue their studies as well as gain freedom in managing life especially in career development. The mean age of the first marriage of Malaysian is 25.1 in 2000.

Hence the main objective of this paper is to investigate and understand how does single women feel and perceive oneself as their view on gender and marriage, social expectation related to their marital status and their marital plan. The discussion will be based on how single women construct

their own identities in relation to their status as single, family/people's expectation and their plans on marriage.

BACKGROUND ON SINGLENES

In the context of this paper, single women refer to those who are never married. In Malaysia, the minimum age for marriage is eighteen years of age for male and sixteen for female but must with consent from parents or guardian for those who has not completed 21 years of age.

Byrne's (2000) proposed 30 years of age as the cut off point for marriageable age in her four definitional criteria of singleness to define singleness. According to Byrne, singleness can be defined as women who are never-married, over 30 of age, not cohabiting and childless. The age of 30 seems a turning point as women are reminded of their failure to meet conventional expectations of marriage and motherhood (Adams, 1976; Burney, 1979; Peterson, 1981; Stein, 1981 in Byrne 2000). The cut off age of 30 as marriageable age is also because at this age most women are married and those who chose to remain single are highly likely to stay single due to their economic independence.

Cargan & Melko (1982) in their studies demonstrated that most people, on learning that someone is unmarried, assume that it is not by choice. Unmarried women, particularly, are seen as being incompetent or unattractive. Marriage, in an economy dominated by males, is still seen as a form of success, while a single woman is regarded as a failure.

Situmorang (2007) in her study quoted Katjasungkana's (2004) on being single :

A single woman is often perceived either as and 'old maid' who could not get a man because she is unattractive, handicapped or incompetent; or a 'city single' she does not want a man because she is highly educated, ambitious, single minded, determined, active and a career person. These social stigmas are also found in Indonesia, and as in most societies, they bring difficulty to the lives of never-married women.

Gordan (2002) argued that defining 'single women' is increasingly becoming difficult as statistics based on marital status are usually compiled on the basis of the categories 'single', 'married', 'divorced' and 'widowed'. In demographic research however, the category of 'never-married' is used. Singles include, for example women who are divorced. When conducting her study on single women, Gordon (2002) adopted Stein's (1981) typology of singles on the basis of elements of permanence and choice;

(i) voluntary temporary singles – young people who are not married, divorced people who are postponing remarriage and people who have never been married but are not actively seeking marital status ;

(ii) voluntary stable singles – those who have chosen to be single and those unmarried and divorced people who are not actively seeking marriage;

(iii) involuntary temporary singles – single people actively seeking marriage; and

(iv) involuntary stable singles - people who are divorced, widowed and those who never married but wished to do so – common to them is that they have come to consider singlehood as likely to be permanent situation.

Her main concern was to distinguish between voluntary temporary singles still hoping to form partnerships and those who had chosen to be single and planned to remain so (Gordon, 2002).

Meanwhile Byrne (2003) claimed that many studies of single women, such as by Blanchard, 1985; Bonds-White, 1987; Duggan, 1993 and Hartz-Karp, 1981 presented singleness as a deviant identity to marriage while demonstrating that women can be satisfied with the single life-style. Byrne's study was geared towards understanding and conceptualizing single women's self-identity and social-identity. She was keen to study the human capacity of choice and agency, and the role of self-identity in facilitating this capacity. Her main question was on "who am I and where do I fit?" Consequently, the theoretical work of Mead (1934), Giddens (1991), Taylor (1985) and Foucault (1988a, 1988b) in particular guided the constituent elements of the model of identity presented by her.

Byrne's research focused on the consequences of dominant social identities for the composition of self-identities and she further argued that self-identity is consequential for effecting transformation in social identities. These premises are adopted by this study in developing the themes and questions targeted for the participants as it is similar with what the study is investigating.

WOMEN AND SINGLENESS IN MALAYSIA

Malaysia has advanced remarkably in terms of socio-economic development and the Malaysian women in general too have made significant progress in many realms of life. Some 48.9% or 12.3 million of the total population in 2003 were women, with 7.7 million on the working bracket of 15-64 years. The total number of women in the labour force has increased from 37.2% in 1970 to 42.2% in 1980 and in 2002 it rose further to about 46.0% (Ministry of Women and Family Development, 2004). The policies, strategies and programmes for the progression of women are included in the socio-economic development plans for the country. Inspired by the declaration of the Women's Decade from 1975 to 1985 by the United Nations, the Malaysian government has made a pledge to intensify the participation of women in the development of the country. Consequently, more women are now in the job market. The increase in the number of employed women indicates that they have advanced significantly over the years.

Single women, while increasing in number, are an understudied group. Within the academic setting, a debate on singlehood in Malaysia is not a popular topic and hence, discourses on such issue are difficult to come by and not much substantial survey research can be found. Relevant studies are mainly confined to issues on population research. However, it is indeed a very popular topic within the popular mass media and consequently has become a major issue for the popular women magazines and newspapers in general. Being single after the prescribed marriageable age becomes such a popular topic because 'single' suddenly becomes a 'problem' for a tradition that gives importance to marriage and especially in a country whereby Islam is the official religion.

Explanations about singleness in Malaysia are limited. A study was conducted in 2011 to explore single Malay Muslim women voices in Malaysia. (Azman Azwan Azmawati, 2011). The study demonstrated that single Malaysian Malay women interviewed are very independent, value their freedom in making choices, generally satisfied and happy with their current life-styles and do not feel traumatized living within the context of such cultural setting. They decide what is best for them and do not feel the pressure to comply with the society's prescription. Through education, they achieve economic independence which in turn contributed to their self-identity/self-concept. Hence, they are able to challenge the dominant social identities which mostly subscribed to the idea of a woman's life is never complete without marriage (Azman Azwan Azmawati, 2011).

THIS STUDY: VIEWS ON GENDER ISSUES AND MARRIAGE

This paper is based on an empirical research on the experiences of single women – women who have never been married in Peninsular Malaysia on their state of being single. This study is a part of a larger investigation on single women focusing on the construction of self-identity. Specifically, the larger study investigated single women's perceived meaning of self-identity and self-concept of singlehood, social experiences, relationships, preservations of self-autonomy, resistance to cultural and traditional expectations and religiosity. This paper and data presented is based on preliminary findings from interviews through structured questionnaire on two hundred single women between the ages of 24 to 66. The respondents were recruited through personal contacts and 'snowballing method'. Interviews through questionnaire were with the consent of the respondents.

METHOD

A structured interview schedule was used to collect data from 200 single women throughout the nation with the exception of Sabah and Sarawak. Firstly, respondents were asked to rate their views on gender issues and marriage. This is to gauge single women's perceptions on gender issues and their conviction on marriage institution. This is also to investigate the roles and responsibilities assumed in a marriage from the single women's perspectives. These variables were measured using 5-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree, Slightly Disagree, Agree, Slightly Agree, Strongly Agree on 42 items. The items are :

- being married is better off than being single,
- given a choice I would prefer to be married off,
- those not married lead an incomplete life,
- a divorcee must quickly find a partner,
- marriage is required by religion,
- women can ask hand for marriage from men,
- single women must seek parents blessing to get married,
- marriage is for life,
- divorce must be avoided,
- domestic issues must be kept as a secret,
- the status of women and men in a marriage is at par,

- the status of women and men in a marriage is not at par but complement each other,
- in a marriage there must be a head,
- men must be the head in a marriage,
- the task of a marriage head must be based on who contributes finance the most,
- both women and men must head a marriage together,
- I would rather be the head in a marriage,
- I feel important because I get equal share as the head,
- only husband can divorce a wife,
- wife cannot ask divorce from her husband,
- husband has the right to allow/disallow a wife to leave the house,
- husband has the final decision on children,
- major decisions in a marriage must be made by the husband,
- all decisions must be discussed by husband and wife,
- all decisions about children's well-being must be discussed between husband and wife,
- supporting a family is a husband main task,
- taking care of children is the main duty of a wife,
- preparing food is a wife duty,
- domestic chores are the duties of a wife and daughters,
- outside jobs like paying the bills must be done by the husband,
- it is most appropriate for a father to attend PTA,
- only one person should take care of a family financial,
- a husband must eat before a wife does,
- family spending must be taken care of both husband and wife,
- taking care of domestic finance is the job of a husband,
- decision on buying assets must be made by both,
- a son have the right to be given more,
- a wife must always be soft,
- a husband must always adopt the approach of not assuming to much domestic tasks,
- a husband must always be strict,
- a wife cannot be selfish,
- a son is most appropriate to help the father and a daughter help the mother.

Secondly, respondents were given an open-ended questions on their marriage plans such as why are not currently married, do they have the desire to get married and the reason why, criteria for a future husband and how would their lives change in a marriage. This is to inquire into the specific experiences and self definition of single women in view of marriage plans.

Thirdly, respondents were asked their experiences related to social expectations using 5-point Likert scale ranging from Never Experience, Rarely Experience, Sometimes Experience, Mostly Experience, Always Experience– on 12 items. The items are:

- My family prefers if I am married.
- My family wants me to live with them.

- My family pressures me into marriage.
- My family wants my financial help.
- My family depends on men.
- My family can't function without me.
- People around me prefer me to be married off.
- People around me want me to stay with my family.
- People around me pressure me into marriage.
- People around me think that I have the luxury of time.
- People around me think that I am rich.
- People around me expect me to shoulder most of the responsibilities.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

How do single women in Malaysia feel about marriage and gender issues in a marriage? This study demonstrated that the highest means reported by the respondent are these five items

- marriage is required by religion,
- marriage is for life,
- divorce must be avoided,
- domestic issues must be kept as a secret,
- all decisions about children's well-being must be discussed between husband and wife

The first three items suggests that single women complied with the religion's value one the sacredness of marriage and how it must be maintained at all cost as marriage is forever. In addition, divorce must also be avoided as recommended by religion. It also suggests that single women undoubtedly believe in marriage institution and the element of secrecy that comes along with it. Single women also believe that both wife and husband must take equal part in making decisions about children's well-being which can be translated as them believing in equal partnership.

Meanwhile, the five lowest means reported by the respondents are these five items:

- divorcee must quickly find a partner,
- the task of a marriage who contributes finance the most,
- I would rather be the head in a marriage,
- outside jobs like paying the bills must be done by the husband,
- it is most appropriate for a father to attend PTA

As much as single women believe in the sacredness of a marriage, single women also on the other hand demonstrated their level of independence by not believing in a divorcee must quickly find a partner. Respondents also strongly and slightly disagree the husband alone should play a major role in the family well-being & chores such as attending PTA and contribute to the family's financial expenditure.

On marriage plans and attitude towards such as marriage such as why are not currently married, do they have the desire to get married and the reason why, criteria for a future husband and how would their lives change in a marriage, most respondents agreed that marriage is still important to them. For the first question, respondents were give six choices – have not found a suitable partner, divorce, death of a husband, personal preference, sexually I am not into men and one open-ended question - on why are they not currently married. The highest mean reported was on the first that is has not found a suitable partner. The lowest mean reported was sexually I am not into men. This demonstrated the respondents are still opened to the idea of a marriage but is still looking for a suitable candidate.

For the second question on their plan to be married off, most respondents stated their intention to get married by answering “Yes, Insyallah (God Willing), Jika ada jodoh (God Willing), Jika bertemu pasangan yang jodoh (if i find the right man) , Pasti (definitely)”. These responses indicated their positive attitude towards marriage and would like to be married off in the future. Only a few were determined not to be married off by stating “No, I am not sure, Not interested”. And probing further into why do they want to get married, respondents with positive answers stated that they would like to have a life partner, children, a family of their own, company, someone to take care of them, to complete their lives and it is a requirement in religion. Meanwhile, those with no plans to get married stated that either they are already old or they like their current lives. The third question asked about the characteristics of a partner and most of the respondents reported kindness, piousness, sincerity, responsibility and maturity as their choices. Finally question was asked on how their current lives change with marriage would. Respondents mostly reported that their lives will be easier as there is another person to share their lives with, happier and more responsibilities to be expected. The rest reported as unsure. These findings verified traditional perception and attitude on marriage complete a woman.

In the section where respondents were asked on their experiences related to social expectations, the two highest means reported by the respondents were “my family prefer if I am married and people around me prefer me to be married off”. These suggest that respondents feel that family and people around them expect them to get married. This is in accordance with the religion and tradition believes on the importance of marriage. The lowest means reported by the respondents are my family pressure me to get married soonest and my family won't be able to function without me. These imply that although the family and people around them would like them to be married yet there is no pressure to be married as soon as possible as long as the end of the day, they become married women.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrated that single women interviewed still feel strongly about marriage institution and believe that it is one sacred institution that must be kept that way. They mostly have positive views about marriage. Most of them agreed that marriage is important and they expect to be married off if it is meant to be. However, they can accept their singleness status as the Muslim respondents mostly believe in “jodoh” (mate) is in the hand of God. Respondents also believe that marriage is for life and hence divorce must be avoided at any cost.

In essence, the aim of this study is to explore how single women in Malaysia who have never been married view marriage and related issues. Respondents reported moderately traditional view

about gender and marriage, experienced some level of expectations to get married and although they generally felt positive with their current status of being single, they were still open to the idea of marriage. Ideal characteristics of a partner include kindness, sincerity, responsibility and maturity. Most of them did not rule out the prospect of being married off yet they are fine with their current singleness status. Findings indicated realistic but open expectations related to marriage. They also have mainly positive views and perspective with regard to marriage. Single women in Malaysia experienced both positive and negative aspects from their social life.

This study is not looking for certain kind of answers in regard to single women's views on marriage as it merely tried to understand single women's perspectives and experiences on being unmarried.

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