Single Women: Problems and Challenges

In the age of freedom and democracy, it is not astonishing that women, both married and single, should wish to breathe the pure fresh air of emancipation like men. Though the Constitution of India guarantees equal rights and opportunities to women in India, in reality the life of women is steeped in misery and subjugation. This is especially true of single women who are further exploited and victimized. Women have been the victims of male tyranny for many centuries, as a result of which their talents have not been allowed to bloom. It has been rightly said that women are perhaps the largest under-privileged group in the world (Swarup, 1985). The first slavery in human history began with the subjugation of women within the family, their being pushed out of productive roles and being relegated to the domestic role.

The ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity in no way exclude womanhood. Although, the message on vindication of the rights of women has been sadly neglected, the cause of women was not left unheeded. Liberal-minded scholars also claimed equality for women. According to Jain (1975), “the roles and status of women have been far from static, ranging from what is thought to have been a position of considerable authority and freedom, to one of equally considerable subservience”.

An individual who remains single and never marries feels out of place, socially and culturally. Traditionally, single persons were supposed to be the responsibility of the extended family, and this tradition still continues. Remaining single is more acceptable for men than it is for women. When a woman is not married, it is assumed that there is
something wrong with her; she may be very difficult to get along with, she may be uncompromising, and therefore she is single. It is due to this reason that singlehood is looked down upon in Indian society. Marriage being the ultimate goal of their lives, women are taught to tolerate and overcome the stress and strains of marital relationships even under the worst conditions. Single men and women are not allowed to participate in religious festivities and marriage celebrations because it is considered unlucky, unholy, and inauspicious. Traditionally, parents who could not find a suitable match for their daughters were ostracized and looked down upon.

According to Blumberg and Dwarki (1980), women cannot be happy without marriage mainly because of three reasons—problem of protection and living arrangement, biological and companionship needs, and social pressures and criticism. While it appears that social pressures on single women are lessening, traditional living arrangements and needs for protection and companionship still present practical difficulties.

Indian society is experiencing widespread and dramatic change in traditional gender and family roles. The major gender role change has been a substantial increase in the number of young women engaged in paid employment outside the home. Employment is now the norm for young women. A majority of young women now expect to work after completion of their education and the more highly educated a woman is, the more likely she is to be employed. Though women’s educational and occupational options have greatly expanded, there has not been as great an increase in the number of women planning to forego motherhood since the role of mother also is a highly valued one for women. However,
Nautiyal (1994) has stipulated that incidence of single women in India is likely to increase due to education and employment of women.

Though single women accept spinsterhood as an alternative lifestyle, society still devalues spinsterhood, and considers it personal failure of the girl/women, kin, neighbours and office colleagues, couch stereotypes of single women in pathological terms, such as lack of attractiveness, too proud and arrogant, deficit in personality, inability to develop intimate relationship with another person, lack of parents’ interest in daughter’s career, and so forth. It is this attitude of society which creates stresses and problems of adjustment for single women. This calls for in-depth study of single women.

1. **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The present study aims to address major issues related to single women. The specific objectives of this study are as under:

1. To explore the socio-economic background of single women;
2. To explain the phenomenon of singlehood among women;
3. To identify the life styles of single women and to measure their level of satisfaction;
4. To identify the problems and challenges faced as well as strategies opted to overcome these problems by single women;
5. To find the future aspirations of single women; and
6. To suggest methods to cope up with the problems of singlehood.

2. **THE METHODOLOGY**

The universe of this exploratory study consists of single women, i.e. those women who have reached the age of thirty and are still
unmarried living in Meerut and Delhi. A total number of 150 single women have been selected through purposive and snowball sampling having different socio-economic background, 75 from Meerut and another 75 from Delhi. These 150 sampled single women constitute the units of study.

Primary data have been collected through a structured interview schedule and in-depth informal interviews in 2008-09. Secondary data, mainly from standard books and articles published in different journals, have been used to reconstruct the position of single women through the ages in India. The data collected through interview schedules have been computerized under SPSS package, whereas data collected through in-depth informal interviews have been handled manually.

3. **MAJOR FINDINGS**

Major findings of this study have been presented under following sub-heads:

3.1 **Socio-economic Background of Single Women**

Major socio-economic characteristics of selected single women are as under:

1. Most of the single women (74.7 per cent) belong to the age group of 30 to 40 years.
2. Most of the single women (62.0 per cent) have education up to graduation and above.
3. Most of the single women (84.0 per cent) come from families where father is educated up to high school/secondary level or above. As regards mother’s educational level, 4 out of every 10 single women come from families where mother is educated up to
post-graduation or above. Contrary to this, the proportion of mothers with less than high school education is much more than the proportion of fathers.

4. Single women have different living arrangements. Nearly one-fourth single women (26.7 per cent) live with their families and almost the same proportion (26.0 per cent) live in working hostels. One-fifth of them (20.0 per cent) live all alone in separate apartments. Remaining single women live in families under the same roof (14.0 per cent) but separately or all alone in separate house (13.3 per cent).

5. Less than half of the selected single women (40.0 per cent) have only one brother, whereas, three-fourth of the selected single women (76.7 per cent) have either one or two sisters.

6. Majority of the single women have one married brother (52.0 per cent) or married sister (45.3 per cent).

7. Nearly half of the selected single women (47.3 per cent) come from families where father is engaged in government or private service, whereas, two-third mothers (66.0 per cent) are housewives and thus not engaged in any outside occupation.

8. Half of the selected single women (52.0 per cent) don’t have any earning member in the family and more than one-third of them (37.3 per cent) are the only financial supporter of their families. One-third of the selected single women (33.3 per cent) have monthly income up to Rs.10,000 only, while another one-fourth (24.0 per cent) fall in the income bracket of Rs. 10,001 to 15,000. Another one-fifth (20.7 per cent) have family income between Rs. 15,001 to 20,000. It means that most of the single women are not financially strong.
9. A little less than one-third (30.0 per cent) of the single women belong to higher castes, nearly one-fourth (26.7 per cent) to middle ranking castes. One out of every ten single women (10.0 per cent) comes from low caste. Remaining one-third has not mentioned caste as they belong to other religions where caste-based stratification is not there.

10. Half of the selected single women (58.7 per cent) are Hindus. A little less than one-third (30.7 per cent) are Christians, whereas, the remaining include Muslims, Jains, Sikhs and Buddhists. It means that single women hail more from Hindus than any of the minorities.

11. An overwhelming majority of the single women, more than three-fourth (85.3 per cent), come from urban background, whereas, the remaining (14.7 per cent) from rural background indicating that the phenomenon of singlehood is less in rural areas as compared to urban ones.

Findings about the socio-economic background of single women show that they don’t form a homogenous category sociologically as they hail from different family, caste, religion and residential backgrounds. Having investigated the socio-economic background of single women, we may proceed to explain the phenomenon of singlehood. This is done in next chapter.

3.2 Phenomenon of Singlehood among Women

Though, society emphasizes marriage for each man and woman still, industrialization, urbanization, education, employment and lately liberalization and globalization have fostered the singlehood among career-oriented women. This phenomenon is still discouraged in many
societies, especially in India. Some of the findings about the phenomenon of singlehood are as follows:

1. Meaning of singlehood is understood by an overwhelming majority of selected sample (92.7 per cent) as being unmarried.

2. A little less than half of the selected single women (42.7 per cent) hold that the phenomenon of singlehood is discouraged by society.

3. More than half of the selected single women (55.3 per cent) find the option of marriage closed to them due to constraints.

4. Nearly three-fourth of the selected single women (74.7 per cent) don’t agree that marriage is a necessity now and have emphasized that it has become a choice.

5. A little less than two-third selected single women (60.7 per cent) are satisfied with singlehood.

6. The perceptions of singlehood in reference to self show both their positive and negative images. Most of them disagree with the general opinion that they can utilize their income according to their wish, they can adopt a child, they can run their household all alone or their health and energy are intact without child birth and child rearing. However, more than half of the selected single women agree with the opinion that they can join high executive posts involving transfers and can live the life as they wish because they are singles.

7. The perceptions of singlehood in reference to family and community also present mixed picture. They disagree with the general opinion that they should simply follow their elders in most of the social matters, they cannot speak freely with the male members at work and society, and they are not given equal respect
in the family due to singlehood. However, most of the selected single women agree with the opinion that they should not be checked for staying out till late for work just because of their singlehood and they should not be forbidden from travelling alone. They do realize that they should not attend late night parties as such things may create doubt among family members, neighbours and others.

8. Half of the single women (49.3 per cent) have remained single by choice, very few by compulsion (8.0 per cent) and remaining both by choice and compulsion (42.7 per cent).

9. A number of factors related to self and family are responsible for remaining single either by choice or by compulsion or by both of them. Factors related to self like pursuing a bright career, willing to devote life to some social or religious purpose, to study further and desire for economic independence seem to be mainly responsible for singlehood. Inability to pay heavy dowry on the part of parents, motivation by family to become nun to serve the God, absence of a suitable partner because of caste/religion barrier or compatible ideas are main factors related to family.

It may be concluded that the single women are very clear about the phenomenon of singlehood, reconciled and satisfied with it and defy the traditional norm of compulsory marriage in spite of the fact that singlehood among women is still discouraged by society.

3.3 Life Styles of Single Women

Single women not only have different living arrangements, but are also engaged in different jobs and have different job schedules. Most of the single women do the household tasks themselves or take the help of
servants. Majority of them don't feel the need for life partner or male partner and consequently the feelings of deprivation about child (ren) is also not there. Most of them are not the members of voluntary social organizations and do engage themselves in jobs for mere satisfaction. However, the significant fact which emerges is that many male colleagues/members see singlehood as weakness and try to make advances. Even the reactions of parents/other family members to the employment of some of the single women are not favourable. However, the empirical evidence shows that three-fourth of the selected single women are satisfied with their current life style.

There are many positive and negative aspects of the life styles of single women. Independence in all spheres of life; freedom from family responsibilities, coercions, strains and sacrifices; greater opportunities for over-all development of personality; and greater opportunity for establishing an independent identity are some of the positive aspects of singlehood revealed by the selected respondents. The negative aspects include lack of intimate relationships; feeling of insecurity, fear and loneliness; greater chances of being sexually harassed; fear of loneliness in old age and deprivation of sex-gratification.

3.4 Problems and Challenges of Single Women

Empirical evidence collected on the problems and challenges of single women shows that nearly three-fourth selected single women or even more do not experience physical problems. Psychological problems like deprivation, frustration, awkwardness and inferiority complex are also not felt by most of them as their intensity is not high. However, the intensity of problems of emotional stress and insecurity as well as loneliness is reported by the respondents.
The evidence collected also reveals that the intensity of social problems like lack of the feeling of belonging to the family, social stigma and social boycott or rejection society meets out to single women resulting in their low social status and social harassment is not high and majority of them don’t experience such problems. However, the problems of exploitation by their kiths and kins as well as social restrictions have been reported by sizeable proportion of the selected single women. Similarly, the gravity of financial/economic problem of inadequate income, economic insecurity, discriminative facilities and exploitation at the work-place is not high, though the problem of dependence on others to meet the basic needs is felt by many selected single women.

Empirical evidence also shows that different mechanisms are adopted by single women to cope with the problems and the challenges. The mechanisms/strategies used many a times by nearly one-third of the selected single women or even more include interacting with children and old people, undertaking religious activities, spending time with friends of same sex, reading books, watching television programmes (televiewing) and giving suggestions to solve others problems. One-fourth of them listen to music to reduce their stresses.

It must be emphasized that in this male dominated society, the greatest problem of the single women is lack of security—physical, psychological or emotional, economic or financial and social. Single women have great capacity for work, but they do not find proper avenues. They lack confidence in themselves, which is mainly the creation of the environment. To provide a sense of security to them, what is needed today is restoring their confidence, particularly among the single women, in their own capacity. Deliberate decision to remain single with a purpose;
habit of self-reliance and self-autonomy; selfless participation in family of origin; network of friends, relationships and activities; and sound and rational economic base are the factors which lead to well-adjustment among single women.

3-5 Future Aspirations of Single Women

Single women are divided on the question of increasing the phenomenon of singlehood in Indian society. Most of them have developed the feelings of social insecurity which ultimately results in the fear for old age/prolonged Illness. Single women have emphasized the need for establishment of social institutions for them like women’s clubs, single women’s associations, social service centres run by NGOs, special hostels, special old age homes and multi-purpose information and awareness centres.

The future plans of single women include their fight against social stigma attached to singlehood. They want to serve the people by associating themselves with NGOs or to fight for their just status in society. They have underlined the need for developing positive attitude towards single women and understanding their problems through empathy. The single women who feel well adjusted with their state of singlehood aspire to do something for the betterment of their fellow women.

3-6 Recommendations

In the light of the above discussions certain socio-legislative measures have been suggested to alleviate the sufferings of single women. These are as follows:

1. The Indian women of today should fight against the existing prejudices against women and should force themselves from the
secondary status that is accorded to them in this male-dominated society.

2. The continuous struggle should begin in the homes as the socialization of both male and female starts here. It becomes very essential that the right social values should be inculcated from childhood which should begin at birth itself. Parents should provide equal opportunities to both female and male children, and in no time during the life of a girl should she be regarded as a liability and inferior to a boy.

3. The ideas that careers are for boys and marriage for girls should be wiped out. Marriage should not be made as the ultimate aim of a girl’s life. Daughters who want to remain unmarried for various reasons, like to pursue a career, should be encouraged and their unmarried status should in no way cause an impediment to progress in their career or in their personal life.

4. All educated people should strive to change the society and its outlook through education and social awakening and action in order to raise the status of single women. The right type of education to help them to face the problems of life and build up the right attitude towards life is essential.

5. Mass media—print, audio and audio-visual—should make deliberate attempts to negate the prejudices that exist against singlehood. They should help in creating a sympathetic and human approach towards the problems of single women.

6. Single women, themselves, should not feel alienated from the society. They should not think that they are women who are more vulnerable than others and are misfits in society. They need not
necessarily subject themselves to a variety of mental torture. They should develop a positive approach towards life.

7. Singlehood in society can be considered seriously only when single women themselves are emotionally and socially strong. Such feelings would create boldness within them to stand for themselves in the society. They should learn to hold in esteem their own qualities and potentials because they are in no way inferior to any other member of their own sex.

8. Government should plan and implement specific programmes/projects for the overall development of the single women with the active involvement of the local NGOs. Help of the NGOs should be taken to organize a series of awareness programmes for building up the confidence among single women. There is need for the establishment of vocational training centres for the single women and this task can be entrusted to NGOs.

9. Government and NGOs should develop and implement sensitization programmes to bring out an attitudinal change of the society towards the single women.

10. Government should provide financial assistance for establishing community based aid centres and rehabilitation centres for the single women. For this purpose, government should establish strong networks between the government departments/organizations/institutions working for the welfare of the single women.

11. Government should provide reservation for single women in government jobs and ensure strict enforcement of the laws on dowry and atrocities against them.
It is hoped that these suggestions will be taken seriously by the government and interested agencies concerned with the welfare of women in order to uplift the conditions of those exploited and depressed. This will not only help to alleviate the sufferings of the single women, but also enable them to lead a fuller life and thereby contribute to the development of society.

4. **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

In India, marriage still continues to be the main institution that organizes lives of both men and women. As per the report the National Family Health Surveys (NFHS) III conducted in 2007, nearly 99 per cent of women get married. Single women who are never married form such an obscure category that the National Family Health Surveys never bothered to list them. This 1 per cent dares to live in sin. They are essentially young, urban women, growing up with more flexible life styles. For some, marriage is either not a necessity for them or does not hold the promise they had hoped for.

It may be argued that there are three aspects of life of single women which draw much of the attention of social scientists, the public and the policy makers—domestic life, working life and life after retirement or old age. Social scientists have to analyze and help in understanding not only the problems and processes of adjustment at these levels (domestic, working and old age), but have also to explain the stresses as perceived by single women themselves. It is unfortunate that national surveys neglect single women merely because they constitute only 1 per cent of Indian women.
To conclude, it may be said that the incidence of permanent singlehood is a type of a social phenomenon which defies a simple explanation. Examining the correlates of singlehood in a particular culture at a particular time invites a contextual explanation of singlehood for those circumstances. These contexts can only explain why singlehood is tolerated or rejected. By and large, singlehood in Indian culture is both involuntary and voluntary. In case of voluntary singlehood, desires for professional achievement, self-fulfillment and personal autonomy are responsible for it than the inability to pay dowry, moral responsibility of daughters, in the absence of their brothers, to support old and sick parents, physical deficiencies and deformities which are responsible for involuntary singlehood.

Either by involuntary and voluntary, the number of single women is so small, and they are so scattered in society, that they cannot work collectively to win their rights and pursue their significant achievements. Those women are more likely to afford the life of a single woman who are well educated, enjoy some social and familial independence, belong to upper or upper-middle classes, and live with their parents in nuclear families. These single women defy the myths that they are responsible for weakening interpersonal and community ties or single women are unhappy and they become happier if they marry.

Researches by sociologists and psychologists abroad like Simon (1987), Trimberger (2005) and Sarkisian and Gerstel (2006, 2008) point to the fact that adults who have always been single are more likely to visit, contact, advise, and support their parents and siblings, and to maintain intergenerational ties, than are the currently or previously married. Singles are also more likely to socialize with, encourage, and help their
friends and neighbors. Similarly, studies of scholars like Lucas, Clark, Georgellis and Diener (2003) and DePaulo (2006) defy the myth that single people are generally not happy. Those who do marry and stay married report small increases in happiness around the year of the wedding (a honeymoon effect), then go back to the same level of happiness they had when they were single. Such studies have not been conducted in India.

Though Indian society still regards married status as the desirable status for women, still it seems that the number of those women who are defying this is increasing. The traditional state of status-incongruence which prevailed and pervaded the lives of single women in India is changing slowly. The single women are getting recognition and factors like education and economic independence have become crucial for asserting their identity. The stereotypes associated with single women are also changing. Number of people have started recognizing the remarkable adaptability of successful single women and the amount of hard and pioneer work done by them to improve the life of the others in society. There is need to recognize the status of single women and accord respect to this important social category.

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