

Modernisation and singlehood in urban Indonesia: A study of six single millennial women in Jakarta

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Abstract

This research explores single lifestyle and the shift in the definition of family and marriage amongst single millennial women who live in Jakarta, Indonesia. The shift is explored through concepts from Ochiai (2014) i.e., Compressed Modernity and Marriage and Risk Aversiveness. These concepts are used to understand perspective changes in the meaning of family that occur in developing countries due to their increasing socio-economic outlook, single lifestyle, and modernisation. This research focuses on the phenomenon of a millennial generation in Jakarta that is experiencing delaying marriage in contrast to the general trend of early marriage throughout the majority of regions in Indonesia. Unlike these regions, the Jakartan's perception of being happy and prosperous is not the traditional aspiration of having family, but to pursue financial success through higher education and skilled careers. Because of the contrast in desires, Jakartan women must reconcile the juxtaposition of their own goals with the expectations set by traditional Indonesian society. The methodology of this research is a qualitative approach through remote in-depth interviews, digital ethnography, and visual participation. The findings revealed modernisation impacts millennial women's value on marriage and family, and that impact leads to delaying marriage or choosing not to marry. These choices are made despite living in a society with conservative social values, including government regulations which are perceived by these women to be rigid and unsupportive. Single women utilize various coping mechanisms in facing stigma of being single above 30 in a traditional society including using humour, focusing on career growth, seeking peer support, participating in religious activities, and choosing different forms of "partnership".

Keywords:

Compressed Modernity, Marriage, Risk Aversiveness, Singlehood, Millennials, Women

Introduction: Singlehood in Indonesia

Modernisation creates generational shifts in both economic and personal values (Himawan et al. 2017). Throughout developing countries in Asia, modernisation has also contributed to a shift in the meaning of family in part to the economic variables in which modern society works (Ochiai, 2011). A trend towards late marriage and non-marriage has defined all the countries of East and Southeast Asia, though to varying degrees over decades (Jones et al. 2012).

The most recent data shows that the proportion of single women aged 25 to 44 rose in a few countries such as Singapore, Japan, and Indonesia. In Singapore, the percentage of single women of this age bracket in 2009 was 19 percent and increased in 2019 up to 32.1 percent (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2020). Similarly, Japan in 2005 had 15.1 percent of women unwed and increased in 2015 to 18.8 percent (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2017). Compared to other Asian countries such as Japan and Singapore, Indonesia's singlehood is the lowest and has been increasing the slowest (Himawan, et al. 2017) with only 2.8 percent of women being single in 2010 (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2010) and increased gradually to 12.6 percent in 2017 (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2018).

In line with the trend of an increase in single women, the age of marriage has also risen in these three countries. In 2009, the median age for first marriages of women in Singapore was 28.1 years old and increased to 29.2 years old over a decade (Singapore Department of Statistics). While in Japan, it was 28 years old in 2005, rising to 29.4 years old in 2015 and 29.6 years old in 2019 (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, 2017). The same trend also happened in Indonesia, with a change from 19.8 years old in 2007 (Survei Demografi dan Kesehatan Indonesia (SDKI) 2007) to 22.9 years old in 2017, especially in urban cities (Susenas, 2017).

In Indonesia, Badan Pusat Statistik (Statistics Indonesia) recorded the level of happiness amongst singles in 2013 was lower than those who married (64.99 percent to 65.31 percent). A similar national survey (n=70,631 respondents) was also conducted in the next year with the result that both singles and married had a similar level of happiness (68.77 percent to 68.74 percent) (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2015). This number rose significantly for

both groups in 2017, with the quality of life amongst singles overtaking (71.53 percent) the level of happiness of those who are married (71.09 percent) (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2017).

Despite the fact that singles are reporting to be happier than married couples, women choosing to live as single in Indonesian society are facing negative stereotypes due to their unmarried status. Singles are often judged, derided, or even discriminated against (Jones, 2010; Situmorang, 2007). Moreover, Indonesian governmental policy favours the conventional view of marriage by prohibiting cohabitation and premarital sex (Fachrudin, 2016; ABC Australia, 2019), and not acknowledging marriage alternatives such as de facto relationships. Living as a single in Indonesia has its own obstacles as there are no legitimate alternate relationship options other than marriage to fulfill their needs, including emotional and sexual.

Aim and Scope

The aim of this study is to explore educated, unmarried, career-women's feelings and opinions on family and marriage, as well as other social factors related to singlehood as a result of modernisation, and how these singles cope with the stigma and judgement of going against what is traditional for Indonesian women.

Methodology

A series of semi-structured, in-depth interviews to better understand how compressed modernity influences the definition of marriage and family were conducted with six highly educated, single, Jakartan women over 30. The interviews were conducted between June and August 2021 through the platforms Zoom, WhatsApp, and Instagram. This remote methodology was considered ideal due to limitation of mobility during the pandemic.

The qualitative data allowed the researcher to gain a sense of how Jakartan single women view marriage, having a family, and having a career. Additionally, the women described their partner preferences and the underlying motivations for their preferences. A visual participation technique was also used, asking them to express their feelings through certain pictures or items that have personal meaning to them during the interview.

Digital ethnography was also conducted by observing social media activities, mainly Instagram, to gain more insightful information about these women and how they express themselves online. Before the pandemic, the researcher was also able to conduct some offline observations between January and February 2020. Furthermore, the findings of this research were presented in the form of a descriptive study. In addition to this, the researcher will further use the abbreviation of Single Woman (SW) in this paper in order to maintain confidentiality of the participants.

Respondent	Age	Education	SEC	Occupation	Ethnicity	Religion
SW 1	33	Bachelor's degree	Middle class	English teacher	Manadonese	Protestant
SW 2	33	Bachelor's degree		Risk management analyst	Batak	Protestant
SW 3	34	Bachelor's degree		Entrepreneur	Javanese	Muslim
SW 4	34	Master's degree		Civil Servant	Lampungnese	Muslim
SW 5	34	Master's degree		UX researcher	Sundanese	Muslim
SW 6	38	PhD		Researcher	Betawi	Catholic

Table 1: Demography of interviewees

For this study, the researcher is using the legal definition of being single in Indonesia which is those who are registered as non-married in the government records (DePaulo & Morris, 2005, 2006). The respondents were recruited using the technique of purposive sampling who have characteristics such as:

- being women, never married, of the millennial generation in their 30s;
- having a good career;
- being financially stable and independent;
- coming from a middle socioeconomic class;
- having high educational backgrounds (completed tertiary education); and
- working and living in Jakarta.

In Indonesia, the majority of educated women who have a career, and are 27 years old or older still face hidden discrimination and stereotypes due to their unmarried status--

considered too old and undesirable (Retnaningsih, 2013). Career wise, they had passed a phase of looking for a better job or pursuing a different career at this stage (Santrock, 2020). Therefore, this group is considered to have more experience in the context of professional life and eagerness to keep on progressing. Additionally, living and working in Jakarta shapes people's mindset to be more progressive, less conservative, and more open minded compared to those who live outside Jakarta. Therefore, this group has more options in their life compared to those who are outside these characteristics. Furthermore, this generation is also different compared to previous generations (their mother) especially in terms of age of marriage, career wise, and their view of marriage and family.

All the interviews were tape-recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. The data collection usually lasted between 2 hours to 2.5 hours, which included questions on their education, occupation, living arrangements, aspirations, concerns, attitudes towards career and education, marriage and (ideal) family, relationships experience with being single, relationship with family, friends, and significant others, coping strategies with singlehood, and opinions about modern women. The information collected from the interviews were analysed using NVivo software.

All of the respondents had tertiary education-- three hold a bachelor's degree, two hold master's degrees, and one had just recently graduated from a PhD programme. These women were doing all kinds of jobs: English teacher, risk management analyst, civil servant, entrepreneur, UX researcher, and academia researcher. They were earning a wide range of incomes between IDR8,000,000-25,000,000 (USD561-1,753) a month.

Co-residence with parents was only happening with three respondents, while the rest were more independent and living in an apartment or renting a house/room (*kost*). All have been in a serious relationship in the past, but only two of them are in a relationship currently. The four not in a relationship claimed they were not actively looking.

Modernity, lifestyle, and technology

Indonesia has undergone meaningful transformation, especially in Jakarta. Rosel (2012) mentioned the vast growth of economic activity stimulates urbanisation, bureaucratisation, democratisation, gender equality, higher education, and job opportunity.

Moreover, the modernisation in society also leads to social transformation (Rossel, 2012). These changes generate a transformation at the psychological level, including increased personal efficacy, greater financial independence, self-independence, equality of gender, distancing from traditional beliefs, and acceptance of global culture (Hamamura, 2011). In addition to this, Chang (2010) suggested changes in economic and political systems as well as social and cultural norms could also be happening in an extremely condensed manner. This series of rapid changes, known as a civilizational condition, called compressed modernity, combined with the dynamic coexistence of mutually disparate historical and social elements, leads to the construction and reconstruction of a highly complex and fluid social system (Chang, 2010).

Compressed modernity can be manifested at various levels of human existence, such as personhood and family (Chang, 2010). People's autonomy needs to be balanced intensely, intricately, and flexibly with their relationships to remain normally integrated with the rest of society. To explore changes caused by compressed modernity, the data was examined through the influence of modernisation on the perception of marriage through three indicators: shifting of personal values, impacts of technology, and availability and acceptability of alternate forms of marriage.

Lifestyles

The findings suggest that these single women feel content with their life. They have positive self-concepts such as being aware of their potential, having confidence, achieving personal goals, and continuing to self-improve. They have professional careers, allowing financial independence and stability. Some are even able to support their parents and siblings. The old saying of 'men should go to work, and women should stay home' is not applied to these women-- this is an example of the effect of the complex changes in gender relations of what Chang calls compressed modernity (Chang, 2010; Ochiai, 2014). The keenness for self-improvement and development is very high in this group. They have a constant thirst for new knowledge as they want to keep on growing. The combination of financial independence and self-growth supports the pursuit of interests and hobbies.

“Women have to have income. We cannot be just a housewife and dependent on the husband financially. There’s no way I could be like my mum, left a job to become a housewife” (SW 2, 33 years old, Risk Management Manager).

All of them love travelling within Indonesia and overseas (not only in Asia but also Australia and Europe) at least two or three times a year. They admitted that this helps them to have different perspectives about anything in life, to have progressive mindset, and to be more grateful. Some of them have lived in different cities in Indonesia (Yogyakarta and Bandung) and one respondent has lived in other countries such as Malaysia and Italy in the past as well.

These women’s life choices give them more opportunities, which in turn gives them increased self-reported happiness. Pre-pandemic life, these women had a regular hangout schedule with friends at a cafe or shopping mall, travelled within Indonesia or overseas minimum once in a year, hunted for new culinary experiences, and exercised outside in a variety of activities such as going to the gym, jogging, swimming, performing yoga, and even thinking of taking archery class. These activities help the singles to connect with people, maintain their social life, and make their life livelier.

The pandemic and ensuing lockdown have represented a loss of control for many singles. Routines have been disrupted and changes are happening fast. These women feel their pace of life has become slower than before. Because they have more free time at home, they sometimes feel lonely due to loss of real connection and physical interactions. The feeling is manifested at different levels. While some started to develop new interests to cope with the situation by exploring new hobbies and activities, such as learning about investment, learning new languages, adopting pets, taking care of plants, cooking, etc., others focused on self-reflection and re-evaluating their life’s goals and priorities. They started to think of the next stage of their life, getting married. One respondent decided to change careers, going from a manager in a beauty clinic to become a civil servant for the international economics department in one of the ministries as she feels the workloads and industry in the previous company was very demanding and taking up too much of her time. The new career, she believed, would be better suited towards maintaining a relationship and becoming married.

These women have experience adapting to their environment and finding opportunities in order to get what they want. Living in a traditional Indonesian society that they perceive less supportive to their happiness trained them to tackle adversity when achieving goals.

Shifting personal values

The findings indicate that marriage postponement amongst urban women in Indonesia may be partly explained by two facts that are correlated to individualism: 1) singles tend to prioritise their careers; 2) singles value freedom and independence more than marriage.

Interviewer: What would be the consequences if you decided to get married?

SW 3: The consequences if I decided to get married? I think I would lose my freedom.

Interviewer: In what sense?

SW 3: Financial freedom to spend all the money I got at once. I don't think I could do that again because I need to consider other people's needs, right?

“If I got married, I think I would lose my time for career development purposes or travelling. As much as I want to have a family and provide time for them, I want to have my own income and travel to many places too” (SW 2, 33 years old, Risk Management Manager).

The study also suggests that many singles prioritise their career advancement, financial stability, and material success rather than to marriage and procreation. To them, marriage can always wait.

“I would get married one day when I am financially stable. I just feel that it is unfair for my future partner to also support my family emotionally and financially. If you asked me when it will be, I don't know. Getting married to me used to feel like going to New Zealand, now... it feels like going to see Aurora. So, it's not even on the table, yet” (SW 1, 33 years old, English Teacher).

Many singles in Jakarta dedicated themselves to their careers. They strive for perfection, improvement, and development, especially in their career because it is something that they are passionate about. Moreover, they can no longer spend their time hanging out with friends due to restrictions during the pandemic.

“I think my life is all about work now. Most of my time is for work and I don't feel like there's something wrong with it. I feel fine, I can buy what I want, I can buy

things for my parents. I don't even think about having a boyfriend at the moment. You see, I am managing my own team now. So, I need to check my subordinate's work quality and also report to my boss. That's stressful enough" (SW 2, 33 years old, Risk Management Manager).

This study shows that personal preferences on the option of delaying marriage, or to not marry at all, is part of the freedom these women have embraced.

There is continuing centrality of family in single women lives in Indonesia (Situmorang, 2007; Ibrahim and Hassan 2009). Raymo and Ono (2007) argue the intergenerational relationships influencing the marriage behavior of Japanese women co-residing with parents seem to be more complex than suggested by the popular image of "parasite-singles". While in Singapore, earlier surveys show that singles are less likely to talk to their family members about their problems or hear from their family members when the latter have personal problems than is the case for married people (Chan, 2002; NFC & MCYS, 2007).

The findings suggest the relationships between these singles and their families are not intimately close considering their career-focused lifestyle. Although two of the respondents live together with their family in their parents' houses, they only spend time together (such as watching TV and chatting) roughly 2-3 hours every day. Respondents mentioned communication with their families was hampered by a difference in values, such as education and work. Only two women who live separately spend weekends with their family, usually for lunch or dinner together.

"My parents live in Bogor with my siblings. And I will try to make time to see them once a week for dinner or lunch. But we don't talk about my personal life or my work, I just don't feel comfortable talking about it with them" (SW 5, 34 years old, UX Researcher).

"I probably spend time talking to my parents for maximum 2 hours a day and nothing else. You know, just the usual. Sometimes about news, sometimes about what's happening with other family members, never about personal life" (SW 2, 33 years old, Risk Management Manager).

Only two respondents mentioned that their parents were concerned about their marital status. The majority feel the pressure is often coming from relatives such as uncles, aunties, or their parents' friends.

“My parents are pretty cool about me being unmarried. It’s the aunties who are more concerned about it” (SW 6, 38 years old, Academia Researcher).

Moreover, the respondents mentioned that it is easier for them to express their feelings to their friends and get emotional support from them, especially because they have similar views. Singles do not see the rush to enter into marriage. Furthermore, it may imply there is a rise in the number of singles or millennials in Indonesia who can accept singlehood as one kind of social status.

Impacts of technology

Another outcome of modernisation is the advanced growth of communications technology (Rossel, 2012), which now influences how people live their life (Himawan et al. 2017). This is reflected by these women, where many are heavily attached to their mobile phone to the point of it becoming an essential part of their life. They rely on technology and the internet in almost every aspect, especially now during the pandemic where they have limited mobility. The singles admitted that technology helps make their life easier.

Technology helps the singles to better connect with friends, family, and organisations, keep up to date with current situations, express their feelings through social media, research (such as investing, education, etc.), gain more income, shop (including groceries), work, study, hold meetings, join online groups/forums regarding their interests, watch entertainment, and even look for a potential partner or to fulfill sexual needs via online dating.

“I use Bumble to meet new people. I don’t like dating my circle because the potential to ruin the relationship is big. So, I use online dating for fun. It’s fast, convenient, and it has all the information you need to start a conversation or get to know them” (SW 5, 34 years old, UX Researcher).

The respondents’ usage of and comfort with technology has provided tools to avoid direct confrontation with the social stigma surrounding their untraditional life choices while providing them with avenues for enrichment-- be it social or professional. As technology continues to grow, so too will the opportunities for the respondents to venture even further away from societal expectations and instead lean into their own wants and needs.

Attitude about marriage and family

The study suggested that the attitude about marriage amongst Jakartan single women is changing. To them, the definition of “ideal family” is polarised. While some uphold the belief of having both father and mother figures and the importance of holding religious values within a family, others prioritise closeness and bonding amongst family members and roles equality including division of labour, financial contribution, etc. The respondents showed less concerns or put less emphasis on the structure of the family unit.

Their acceptance towards premarital sex and cohabitation is increasing and their view of procreation is changing to less children, not having one, or put adoption as an option. Similar findings also found in Singapore in 2012, where partnership and cohabitation are seen as a solution for couples as it provides a good chance to establish emotional bonds between couples, lets them see how it works to live together before getting married, and at the same time still allows each partner to have plenty of freedom (Jones et al. 2012). The compromise between marriage and being single for these women are other forms of non-traditional relationships such as cohabitation. However, this is against the common practice in Indonesia.

Increasing of premarital sex and cohabitation

To this group, marriage feels like a burden that can hold them (or worse, stop them) from doing many things in life such as continuing education, traveling the world, buying a house, and other aspirations.

“To be honest, I don’t know until when I will keep on entertaining myself with my achievements and career. I think marriage is only important because I live in Indonesia, for legal purposes such as a children's birth certificate” (SW 6, 38 years old, Academia Researcher).

“I don’t want to get married, ever. Why should I? I don’t see the importance of getting married in my life. What if I want to be with two men? I would rather just have an agreement that my partner and I sign in front of the notary public” (SW 3, 34 years old, Entrepreneur).

Two of them are in casual relationships with little commitment, providing the singles with more freedom than normal relationships and ability to fulfil sexual and emotional needs.

“I am seeing someone, but we’re not exclusive. It’s just two people seeing each other. When I need him, I can just call him, he will come to see me, then we will eat together, sleep together, and such. But there’s no commitment, no girlfriend-boyfriend whatsoever” (SW 5, 34 years old, UX Researcher).

Moreover, the concept of premarital sex and cohabitation is more acceptable as a new form of couple relationship to many singles, especially to those who live separately from their parents.

Changing attitudes towards the desirability of marriage

Loneliness is one of the challenges for singles (Olson and DeFrain, 2021). The preliminary findings shows that marriage is still considered as a desirable state by the majority of respondents, but not a priority. Some feel that marriage might be a perfect solution to overcome loneliness, especially during the pandemic and now that their peers are busy with their families. However, the findings suggested that there is no significant difference between singles who live with their parents versus those who live alone.

“I really want to get married right now. I feel lonely. Friends are getting married and busy changing their baby’s diapers so I cannot contact them anytime I want, just like in the past. They are not always ready for me. And I think by getting married, I could have a partner that is bound to me officially and cannot come and go as he wishes just like my casual partners now” (SW 5, 34 years old, UX Researcher).

Interviewer: So, what do you want in your life now?

SW 4: I want to get married. Like I really want to.

Interviewer: Have you always thought about getting married?

SW 4: Well, not really until 1.5 years ago when the pandemic hit Indonesia. I spent a lot of time at home. Activities are limited, doing the same thing over and over again and I then realise I feel alone and lonely.

Religious beliefs drive decision-making around marriage. For some respondents, marriage is part of religious services (*ibadah*) for Muslims and a permanent decision “in the eyes of God” for Christian especially because the church does not recognise divorce. Therefore, they feel it is something that they need to be careful with - including when they look for a potential partner. Some of respondents are also joining many religious activities, with the former trying *ta’aruf* (an attempt for a person to find a life partner without any processes that deviate from the principles of sharia: dating), and the latter attending mass and

other church events. Only one respondent who is a Catholic feel there is no pressure of getting married from a religious point of view due to Father and Nun not being married-- makes her feel more relaxed with her unmarried status, less burdened.

“I am feeling great with my life. I am open if someone wants to get to know me more or something. But... It needs to be with someone with the same frequency. Otherwise, no. You know as Christian, we cannot get divorce, right? So, it needs to be with someone right” (SW 1, 33 years old, English Teacher).

“I think it’s one of my privileges as Catholic, that there’s no such pressure from the religion to get married because the Father and the Nun are not married. And divorce is seen to be something that is even worse than not marry” (SW 6, 38 years old, Academia Researcher).

These women tend to have high standards for partner preferences. While some still feel having the same faith is mandatory, some others put higher importance on education and financial aspects. None focus on the physical appearance, rather, they feel it is important to have genuine connections. Regarding the marriage timeline, most of them are not rushing to engage into a marriage.

“I don’t against the idea of getting married. I want to. But not actively seeking guys to date and rush on it. I am content with my life, but if there is a guy who wants to get to know me better, I am open to it. Though, we need to be on the same frequency to be together” (SW 2, 33 years old, Risk Management Manager).

“I personally could not see myself marrying someone in the next 2-3 years. I just have not found anyone that can stimulate me intellectually and see me as an equal partner” (SW 6, 38 years old, Academia Researcher).

The respondents also have different views of having children. While some of them aspire to have their own children in the future, others prefer adoption or not having children at all. A few expressed that having children might create a burden for their current lifestyle, the majority held the rationale to forgo children as childrearing seems like a large and heavy responsibility in conjunction with their professional lives. To them, the structure of the family unit is more fluid-- not necessarily consisting of mother, father, and children, but could be in any form, including pets.

Interviewer: Who is that?

SW 3: It’s Hugo. The cat I just adopted last week. He is three or four months old.

Interviewer: What is he to you?

SW 3: A company. A good one. Just like a little brother because he gives me unconditional love.

“I think it would be much more possible for me to adopt a child than to get married and have my own. I never picture myself getting pregnant and having a baby” (SW 6, 38 years old, Academia Researcher).

Furthermore, they feel that they haven't finished pursuing their goals they have in life and are afraid that they may become a burden for their future partner as well. These respondents' exhibit a high conscientiousness across life choices such as careers, relationships, and family, and their hesitancy to make commitments which includes dependents, such as having children, is drawn from the same adherence to responsibility. These singles are not ready to enter different life transitions or parenthood.

Indonesian Singles as a Target of Stigma – “*perawan tua*” (Old lady with cats/spinster) and their Coping Mechanisms

Social and familial pressure to get married remains strong in Indonesian culture. Singlism was born out of the idea that traditionally Indonesian women had the expectation to focus on the domestic sphere and bearing children. The stigma of being single is not as strong as in the past, though it is still happening. Despite this, all respondents are open about their unmarried status and not feel ashamed of it. To them, there is no such thing as the ideal age of getting married, even though when some respondents were younger, they had thought to be married by the age of 25-28 years old. Singles hold the value of only getting married whenever they feel ready.

Although the respondents themselves feel comfortable with their decisions regarding marriage, singleism produces the negative effect of invasive and awkward questioning regarding the status of having a spouse or children. These moments challenge the respondents' lifestyle choices via those choices differing from the unspoken status quo and may even lead to interpersonal conflicts. These conflicts often include friends, coworkers, and family.

The majority of Indonesian society is attached to conservative and pseudo-religious based beliefs (Himawan, 2014). In this context, marriage is regarded as a social achievement

and as being mandatory for every adult of marriageable age (Situmorang, 2007). If they do not get married past a certain age, nobody wants them (Himawan, 2017). In contrast to the responses of not feeling ashamed by the decision to remain unmarried, the respondents exhibited several coping mechanisms to help deal with the pressure put upon them by traditional societal expectations such as:

- *Focus on career, education, and hobbies*

Singles strive to achieve their goals including in career growth. Most of these women manage their own team and focus on accomplishing their target. Outside work, they also have a high interest in acquiring new skills both through academic and informal means.

“To me, being different is a normal thing. It’s okay to be different as well as being single at my age now. It makes me able to explore more potential. And it’s okay if there is anyone who does not want to get married” (SW 6, 38 years old, Academia Researcher).

- *Humour*

Rather than battling societal perception directly, these women use humour to cope with the situation. In Indonesian society, using humour to deal with being single is evident (Himawan, 2017). Two of the respondents also feel less pressure if the family asks about their marital status in a light/casual manner rather than outright.

“I feel more comfortable when they wonder about my relationship status in a more casual way. Aunties from my mum’s side, they sometimes say things like, “Oh you girls, why haven’t you gotten married, huh? You shouldn’t eat too much. See, you look like a pig.” Me and my cousins would just laugh at it and respond with, “Well, of course, we have a lot of money to buy food. It means that we are rich, Auntie, that’s the benefit of having a good career.” While aunties from my dad’s side tend to be more serious, asking me to introduce the guy, etc. It makes me uncomfortable” (SW 2, 33 years old, Risk Management Manager).

- *Seeking support from like-minded circle*

Emotional support given from their unwed peers commonly helped the singles accept their marital status and not take dissenting opinions personally. Moreover, some of their family members such as aunties and cousins are not married yet, so they feel they do not carry the burden alone, especially during family gatherings where the questions about their marital status are raised.

- *High acceptance towards cohabitation (“berpartner” – having a partner)*

Non-traditional forms of relationships are more acceptable to these women. Cohabitation is perceived to provide emotional and sexual needs while having less responsibilities, allowing those involved to maintain autonomy.

- *Participating in religious activities*

Indonesia is a nation with large numbers of religious-practicing citizens and thus it makes religion an avenue to utilise. Spiritual connection with God may meet the human need to belong and provide an attachment figure (Kirkpatrick, 1992). Some singles actively participate in Qur’an or Bible study in order to increase a sense of belonging and social connection through their involvement. Additionally, religious values often deter stigmatisation and discrimination (Dingemans & Ingen, 2015).

Some respondents also feel the law in Indonesia is unsupportive due to the fact it is still considered to be against the law to cohabit, especially to those who are not interested in the idea of getting married or against the idea of procreation.

“There are things about Indonesian marriage law that I disagree with. What if I want partnership? What if I want to be with two men in my life? It’s not allowed by Indonesian marriage law. Also, how Islam sees us as wives. It’s like the husband is depicted as someone with more power than the wife while the fact is we are equal” (SW 3, 34 years old, Entrepreneur).

Additionally, religious and cultural perspectives (especially Batak and Lampungese ethnic groups) which view women as inferior to men are antithetical to the women's viewpoint of equality.

Conclusion

Being single above 30 in a traditional society is always challenging. The negative stigma of being unwanted and undesired is attached to these women. Additionally, the emotional and sexual needs are not always fulfilled. Despite their situation, singles claimed to feel happy and content with their life. They focus more on personal development, career advancement and financial independence to pursue interests and hobbies.

Changes in lifestyle caused by compressed modernisation outdo the changes in social value regarding marriage. These changes emphasise the challenges that these singles are facing including increasing individualism and shifting in priorities have led to delayed marriage. This phenomenon is likely to happen in other urban areas, not only Jakarta and potentially wider areas in the future. In addition to this, we also see singles avoiding marriage and family life because they see marriage as a burden that can stop them from achieving their goals due to the responsibility of taking care of the family (risk aversiveness). However, the Covid-19 pandemic brings a new dimension to marriage to these singles, as some of them experience loneliness and start to think of getting married for companionship.

The Indonesian Government sees raising rates of singlehood as a major challenge to future family resilience. On the other hand, the government does not acknowledge marriage alternatives such as de facto relationships considering the lifestyles of these women. The existing regulations are unsupportive to alleviate these singles' burdens and more increase in happiness especially the conventional view of marriage by prohibiting cohabitation and premarital sex. Moreover, the regulations cause the challenges to become exaggerated and exacerbate the need for studies to continue looking at coping mechanisms and social health for this population.

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