

Through the Lens of Solitude: Capturing the Realities of Singlehood Stigma Among Women

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ABSTRACT

Singleness is a phenomenon that has gained popularity and acceptance over the past few years, as evidenced by the growing trends in many societies. However, many single women in the Philippines belonging to the age group of 30-35 remain stigmatized. The researchers delved into their narratives using the Photovoice methodology to understand their experiences. Using purposive sampling, six participants were chosen based on their age range (30–35), duration of singleness status (at least 5 years), and period of residing time in the Philippines (since age 19 and beyond). They were grouped into three pairs according to geographic proximity. They were instructed to select five photos that most accurately reflect their answers to the questions on their 1) perceived and internalized stigma and 2) ways of seeking empowerment to counteract it. After the selection of photos, thematizing was done. The themes of the perceived and internalized stigma were: (a) Lonely and Incomplete, (b) Unpreferred and Unattractive, and (c) Envious but Choosy. Meanwhile, three themes emerged regarding the participants' ways of seeking empowerment in their singleness: (a) Finding Direction from God and the Church, (b) Fostering Friendship, and (c) Recognizing Self-Worth. The researchers recommend that future researchers conduct longitudinal studies to gauge shifts in attitudes toward singleness and comparative analysis to examine varying levels of stigma and identify factors contributing to their similarities and differences.

Keywords: singlehood, stigmatization, women empowerment, photovoice, phenomenon

INTRODUCTION

Marriage has held significant importance in various civilizations throughout history, acting as a means to represent cultural values and as a vital societal mechanism for survival (Norouzi et al., 2022). However, within our present-day society, which is marked by complex interpersonal connections, being unmarried frequently prompts curious gazes, questioning expressions, and an overwhelming rush of unsolicited opinions. Nevertheless, with the progression of civilization, there is a growing trend of leaning toward being single or delaying marriage. Currently, there exists an expanding demographic of individuals who opt to maintain a single status, motivated by several factors like developments in technology, evolving research findings, biasing expectations for relationships, and increased opportunities for job progression (Nasirian & Taheri, 2019; Apostolou et al., 2020). However, despite the potential changes in public attitudes over the years, the enduring presence of stigma remains.

Singleness, defined as the absence of a romantic partnership, has been a global phenomenon (Girme, et al., 2023) over the past three decades, which saw a notable increase.

Asian nations like India, South Korea, Pakistan, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Bangladesh are witnessing a rise in the average age at first marriage (Census of India, 2011; Dommaraju, 2015; Guilmoto & de Loenzien, 2015; Park & Choi, 2015; Podhisita & Xenos, 2015;). At the start of the 21st century in the Philippines, it was revealed that 7.0% of older women in the Philippines had never married (Hamedanchi & Zanjari, 2020), with marriage reduced by 20.1% between 2005 and 2015 (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2017).

In contemporary societies characterized by the persistence of negative attitudes towards individuals not in a romantic partnership, women frequently experience the most significant burden of public expectations and evaluations. According to Ibrahim and Hassan (2009), singlehood, particularly among women, is a prominent subject in mass media discourses within the Malaysian Malay community. The phenomenon of stigmatizing unmarried women goes beyond the borders of China, as seen by the derogatory term "Leftover Women" (Yu, 2021), which is explicitly used to marginalize individuals who deviate from conventional gender norms by pursuing higher education, professional employment, and choosing to remain single beyond the age of 27 (Gui, 2020).

In the Philippines, Alcasid et al. (2017) noted that Filipino millennials tend to be less traditional and more accepting of diversity and exhibit lower instances of phenomena like premarital sex and divorce, making them more accepting of prolonged singlehood. However, there is a noticeable gap in research regarding the social stigma experienced by individuals who choose to remain single for extended periods (Cabalza, 2018). Unmarried women, related to the derogatory term "spinster," are frequently shown as undesirable or regarded as atypical, thereby prompting cautious conversations and evoking sentiments of compassion (Howe, 2015).

Most studies on singlehood have primarily employed either quantitative or phenomenological approaches, with no research utilizing the photovoice method. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring single individuals' lived experiences and their coping mechanisms in response to societal stigma through photovoice. Additionally, it seeks to highlight the positive aspects of being single by examining how individuals adapt to their circumstances and thrive within them.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review includes the prevalence, experiences, and common stigma of singlehood. Despite singlehood becoming common in the present generation, stigma remains.

The growth in the population of unmarried adults in recent years is the most substantial demographic shift since the era of the 'Baby Boom', which Britannica (2009) defines as the increase in the birth rate between 1946 and 1964 in North America (Klinenberg, 2013). In the UK, for instance, one-person households nearly doubled from 17% to 31% between 1971 and 2000 (ONS, 2002). In the United States, unmarried individuals aged 15 and older grew from one-third in the 1950s to 48% in 2020 (Census, 2021). Studies also indicate that about 25% of American young adults are likely to remain unmarried (Wang & Parker, 2014), with a particularly significant trend among Black Americans, where 71% remain single (Skipper et al., 2021). In addition, the decennial census conducted by the Philippine Statistics Authority in 2015 revealed that 44% of the population aged 10 and above were single, with a total of 34.8 million individuals—a significant increase from 31.3 million in 2010 (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2020).

In the context of a single woman reaching middle age, the prevalent question often concerns the timeline for marriage, encapsulated by age-old labels such as "spinster" or "old maid" while men are referred to as "bachelors" (Cejuela, 2019). According to the findings of Cejuela (2019), there exists a strong association between a woman's sense of self and her marital status, with the categorization of "never-married" carrying negative connotations. Previous research on singleness, such as that of Gubrium (1975), indicates that never-married elderly people are a distinct group within each community who are frequently alone throughout their lifetimes. Additional studies suggest that individuals in this demographic have diminished levels of life satisfaction and happiness when compared to those who are married. In the specific context of women, it is often assumed that being single signifies a lack of one's sense of self or is linked to underlying psychological problems (Reyes-Laureano, 2012). Several research studies have also suggested that unmarried women may suffer several adverse psychological outcomes, such as feelings of loneliness, diminished self-perceived beauty, reduced life satisfaction, and issues in their social connections and self-esteem (Byrne & Carr, 2005; Adamczyk K., 2017; Shahrak et al., 2021).

Moreover, research has established that individuals lacking romantic relationships frequently experience challenges. These challenges were related to decreased support, increased feelings of loneliness, and a perception of limited access to support, comfort, and guidance in comparison to those who are involved in romantic partnerships (Adamczyk, 2016; Greitemeyer, 2009; Prezza & Pacilli, 2002; Ta et al., 2017).

The stigma single women face daily intensifies the inherent challenges of singlehood. Thus, it is necessary to understand and provide a platform for these stigmatized single women and give voice to their realities.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative methodology to capture individual experiences (McCleod, 2019). Specifically, the researchers utilized the photovoice methodology, which involves photography and group discussions to empower marginalized individuals to express their viewpoints (MacFarlane, 2017; Nykiforuk et al., 2011). This approach aims to capture and enhance the fundamental characteristics of the community using visual narratives. Moreover, researchers used the PHOTO framework (Hussey, 2006) to guide the discussion of the participants regarding their photographs and obtain essential insights.

Participants of the Study

The study used a purposive sampling technique to gain knowledge about specific phenomena, as McCombes (2019) suggested. It is also ideal for in-depth examinations of relatively small samples because it improves the alignment between the sample and research objectives (Nikolopoulou, 2023), enhancing the study's rigor and the reliability of its data and findings (Campbell et al., 2020). This study is limited to women aged 30 to 35 who have remained single for at least five years and stayed in the Philippines for most of their life.

Below is the demographic profile of the participants. They were given pseudonyms for anonymity and confidentiality.

Participants	Age	Yrs of Being Single	Occupation	Residence
Ms. Patience	30	Since birth	MAPEH Teacher	Caloocan City

Ms. Maestra	30	6	Piano Teacher	Malabon City
Ms. Pamelia	30	7	Medical technologist	Romblon
Ms. Nine	30	7	Manages family business	Romblon
Ms. Faith	32	5	BPO	Calamba City
Ms. Love	30	17	English tutor	Los Baños

Data Collection

Interview and photovoice were the primary data collection methods used in this study. Purposive sampling was used to recruit the six participants who met the criteria using advertisements or referrals. Then, informed consent was obtained, followed by an orientation on the nature of the study and photovoice. The PHOTO framework, derived from Hussey's work (2006), was implemented and demonstrated as follows:

- P - Describe your Photo
- H - What is Happening in your photo
- O - Why did you take a photo Of this?
- T - What does this photo Tell us about your life?
- O - How can this photo provide Opportunities to improve life?

After the discussion, recorded data was transcribed and analyzed from the group discussions and interviews.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using thematic analysis. Interview transcripts were read and reread for familiarization. Initial coding was generated. Codes were then categorized into respective themes. The themes were reviewed and finalized. Theme definition and labeling were executed before the report writing. A photo exhibit was conducted during the department's research colloquium.

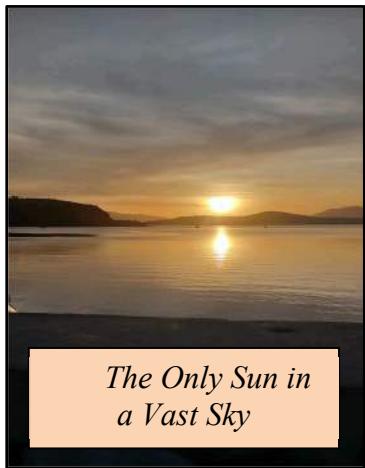
Ensuring Rigor and Trustworthiness

In order to uphold credibility and methodological rigor, the qualitative research approach employed data source triangulation incorporating interview transcripts, photographs, and captions generated through photovoice discussions (Saksena & McMorrow, 2020). In addition, the researchers employed a technique known as homogeneous purposive sampling. This approach has significant value in cases where the sample comprises individuals who possess similar characteristics, including but not limited to age, gender, background, and employment (Rai & Thapa, 2015). This approach will allow the researchers to concentrate on specific characteristics within the population that are particularly relevant and will effectively address the research questions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Stigma Received and Internalized

In response to the first research question, "What kind of stigma have the participants received and internalized?" Four recurring themes were observed, including (a) lonely and incomplete, (b) unpreferred and unattractive, and (c) envious but choosy.



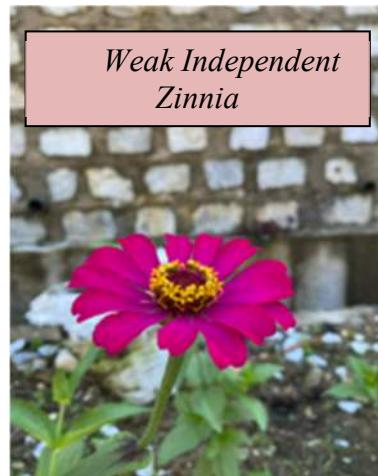
without feeling complete, as you lack inspiration." The stigma of loneliness is portrayed in the photo that displays the beauty of the only sun in a vast sky.

Moreover, singles are labeled as incomplete without a partner. This may come in unsolicited advice, forced matchmaking, and the stigma that being single is a weakness. Ms. Patience shared her experience with other people's frequent attempts to introduce her to possible love interests through positive-sounding statements like "Uy bagay 'to (referring to a potential dating partner) sayo" [Hey, you are matched!] are in fact, people's efforts to pressure her into entering a relationship. She adds, disappointedly, "Parang hindi naman nila masyadong kilala tas pinapakilala nila sayo," [Seems like they don't know the person well, yet they're introducing them to you]. Ms. Patience was disappointed that friends and relatives would introduce her to any single man without knowing the person well. However, she understands that they just want her to have a boyfriend.

Ms. Nine also shared, "You know, just like a flower that sometimes withers, we are sometimes judged as if what is happening in our lives is because we are single and there is a need to get married. We are treated as if we are weak, and the elders always tell me that I can't manage on my own; at our age, we need to have children." As such, she gave a visual presentation by capturing a weak independent Zinnia flower."

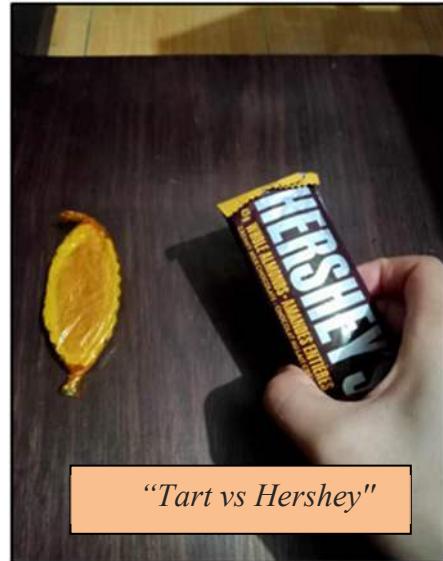
Previous studies support this finding. Loneliness in singlehood (Adamczyk, 2016) manifests in lacking companionship and emotional support (Ang et al., 2020). Another study by Lesch and Watt (2018) with African single ladies 30-40 years old found that loneliness and incomplete stigma towards singles "limit the acknowledgments and ability to claim such negative experiences for fear that they would be typecast" (Lesch & Watt, 2018, p. 9). This implies that as the stigma continues, single people tend to become defensive with their negative experiences and may become superficial with their relationships.

Unpreferred and Unattractive. The second emerging theme depicts how the participants feel and are perceived by others as unattractive; thus, nobody chooses them. A photo entitled "Tart vs Hershey" represents the comparison of apparent differences in appearance and/or qualities between a cheaper pili tart and a more expensive and popular



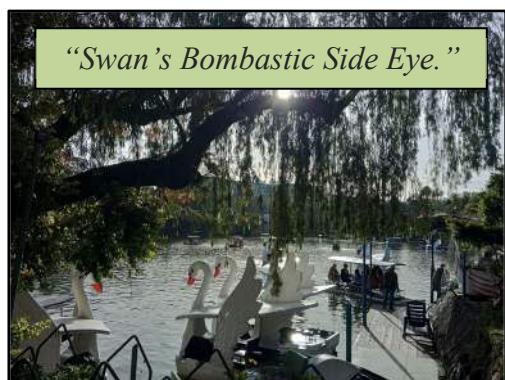
Hershey chocolate. Ms. Maestra points to the tart and says, “*Yung tart, ako yun. Tas yung Hershey yung ibang girl. Sila pinipili, ako hindi.*” [The tart, that's me. And Hershey is the other girl. They are the ones being chosen, but I am not.] She sees herself as less attractive than other ladies regarding her outward appearance.

Ms. Nine uses makeup to show that using cosmetics to enhance one's beauty is caused by the pressure to conform to the prevailing beauty standards around her. Notice her statement, “*I'm afraid to show the real me, so I need to use makeup to feel beautiful. I have to make myself look good so that others will notice me. It's like, through this makeup, I might meet other people's standards.*” This is supported by Ms. Nine commenting: *I can relate stigmatism to [cosmetic] make-up. Just because I wear makeup or make myself look good, people think I'm looking for a boyfriend.*” Unmarried women are seen as incompetent and unattractive (Kammeyer, et al., 1982). This stigma is still present in our day and age. Unfortunately, single women internalized such stigma, which affects their self-image and self-esteem.



“Tart vs Hershey”

Envious but Choosy. The final theme that emerged is the stigma that single women



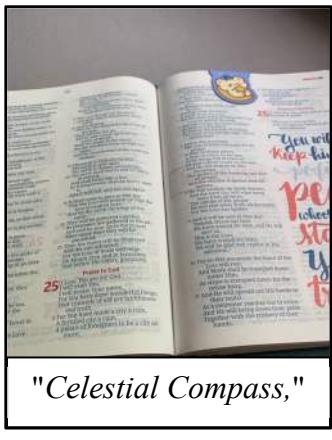
are envious of lovers and yet too picky in choosing a male partner. As such, considering the significant number and similarities in appearance of the swans on the glistening lake, Ms. Faith stated that they represent the “side comments” she receives about her singleness from her relatives and friends. She recalled one instance, “*Bakit wala pa, apaka-choosy mo kasi.*” [Why haven't you found one yet? It's because you're choosy!] Another pressure from the family of Ms. Nine who told her, “*Mag-asawa ka na! Baka maubusan ka ng oras at malipasan ka ng iyong oras ng paghahanap or pagbobyfriend.*” [Get married! You might run out of time and miss your time for searching or dating.] It is as if there is a need to rush and stop being too picky.

With all of the comments about single women being choosy, there is a point where envy creeps in. Ms. Nine shared her sentiments when she attended a wedding, “*Despite the joyous occasion, you quietly pray that you will be the next to get married, that the person God has destined for you will finally come, and that you will also experience getting married in the church.*” In the study of Apostolou and Esposito (2020), one of the most significant reasons for remaining single among Western societies is being too picky, which relates to the mismatch problem. They further explained that people shun relationships and remain single until they have found someone who fits their own mate's values. However, they may overestimate their mate value and attract mates significantly beyond their reach, resulting in them remaining single (Apostolou & Esposito, 2020).

Ways to Seek Support, Resilience, and Empowerment

In response to the second research question, "In what ways do single individuals seek support, resilience, or empowerment to counteract singlehood stigma?" three themes emerged: *(a) Finding Direction from God and Church, (b) Fostering Friendship, and (c) Recognizing Self-Worth.*

Finding Direction from God and Church. This theme encompasses how an individual can navigate their current singleness through the counsel of the church and God Himself. Ms. Pamelia stated, *"By reading the Bible, I can find direction for my life despite what others tell me. Reading the Bible is how we learn who God is. The Bible contains His message about life, relationships, work — all things that give our life meaning."*



"Celestial Compass,"

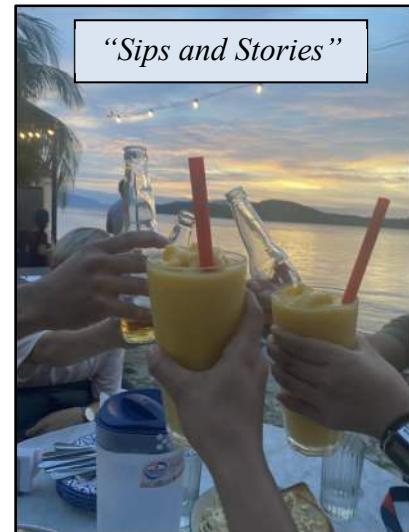
This was portrayed by the photo she took entitled *"Celestial Compass,"* which emphasizes the openness of oneself toward the Scriptures as a guide for her life. The theme is further expanded by Ms. Love's showcasing her journal reflection on what God has to say for the weary soul, *"God will still say to you that, 'Don't you worry. I got you. You got me. The best way to cope with singleness, especially for a Christian woman, is to be close to the Lord. I will note what God has told me and how I reflect upon Him."* Thus, even though uncertainties may lurk around the corner during the season of singleness, an assurance of comfort can become more apparent once journaling is practiced. Moreover, the church also provides a safe space for single women – a community that prays for the members in need. Ms. Faith commented, *"The Church is one of the support systems for single women because they are the ones who can give you advice, have more experiences, and at the same time, they are the ones who pray for you. So it is very important to have your church family. It's a support through prayers."* This was supported by Ms. Maestra in which she stated, *"....in the church I receive support and comfort through the messages, the topics, and from the brethren. It's a great support emotionally, socially, and spiritually."* She specified how the messages from the church could play a significant role in emotionally and spiritually easing her unsettledness during her season of singlehood. Previous research established that higher levels of spirituality are associated with problem-focused coping strategies (Krageloh et al., 2012) and provide meaning, purpose, and hope (Baldacchino & Draper, 2001).

Fostering Friendship. Another theme emerged that pertains to the importance of cultivating bonds between individuals who nurture trust, a sense of connection and kinship as an avenue for empowerment. Ms. Nine elaborated on the picture entitled *"Sips and Stories,"* which brings to mind joyous memories of time well spent together. She explains, *"It reminds me of my friends who serve as my support system. Being a single individual, I lean on my friends for emotional support, companionship, and encouragement."* The clinking of glasses under the setting sun amplifies the joyous memory and demonstrates how being single does not always imply being alone in the fun. Ms. Patience also highlighted the essence of fostering camaraderie with fellow singles as a source of belongingness and comfort, saying, *"If we are going through the same thing, it's like you have the same vibe, so it's easier to interact. Support from friends and spending time with them is very important because it helps you realize that you can still do many things. Some people are blessed to have a partner, so we should support*

them. And for us single ladies, let us support one another, knowing there is still so much to experience and explore with our friends.” Indeed, with the right people, the adventure of a lifetime can occur even without a lover. As long as one has the time to spend with friends, nothing can stop them from enjoying life.

Previous research shows that social support is a protective factor in a person’s life. It provides potential health benefits (Ahmadi, 2015), psychological benefits during stress, and enhanced overall well-being among women (Bedrov & Gable, 2022).

Recognizing Self-Worth. Understanding and appreciating one's beauty and worth is a never-ending process that typically entails self-awareness, kindness to oneself, and



worth. They acknowledged that in pursuing love, they overlooked the reservoir of unconditional love present from the start: family.

Ms. Faith's shared a picture of her complete family. She described the photo as, “*My whole family makes me feel complete. Sometimes, it reminds me that there is something like this — this love, from them.*” Ms. Faith's statements reflected that the conventional love from a romantic partner that feeds an individual's self-worth may still be found in another form. This may also be interpreted as the supposed void one feels when lacking a romantic partner is filled with another love. In Ms. Faith's case, her family makes her feel “complete.” Ms Pamelia also thought similarly about her family: “*My family has witnessed my journey even up to this age, embracing me with open arms and building stronger connections with them. The bond of my family, because it allows me to be stronger and more confident in life, reminds me that despite being single, their existence helps me feel that I am not alone in my journey. Their presence helps me to flourish and be more proactive as a single woman.*” The expressed thought of Ms. Pamelia uncovers the unconditional love she receives from her family as they reaffirm her self-worth with complete acceptance. Lastly, a person's self-worth is not solely dependent on the contribution of others; rather, it must also be independently sought and cultivated. For Ms. Nine, this cultivation comes from expressing herself. She said, “*Being single can be a time for me to express myself, discover my interests, and develop my personality without the influence of a romantic partner.*” Ms. Nine vocalized that her way of freely expressing herself would help her shape her identity without a romantic partner. According to studies, women who have a high sense of self-worth are less likely to suffer from anxiety, despair, or loneliness, even

intentionality in fostering a positive self-image. It is a journey of acknowledging that each individual is intrinsically valuable enough to begin treating oneself with the respect and kindness everyone deserves. With this, single women can confidently face singlehood stigma. The participants shared different depictions of their self-

when they do not have a romantic partner. They tend to acquire more emotional resilience, allowing them to successfully deal with societal pressures and personal disappointments (Pyszczynski, et al., 2004). Self-esteem protects against thoughts of inadequacy or being defined primarily by relationship status (Manela, & Oshri, 2021).

CONCLUSION, IMPLICATION, SUGGESTION, AND LIMITATIONS

In exploring the stigma of singlehood experienced by the participants, this study found a thin line between the stigma and the reality of their experiences. For instance, regarding loneliness stigma, participants expressed feeling lonely at the end of the day or during specific occasions (e.g. weddings, when in beautiful scenery). Acknowledging these negative experiences promotes genuineness and authenticity which are positively associated with overall well-being and life satisfaction (Sutton, 2020; Ryan & Ryan, 2019). Moreover, participants face the dilemma of feeling envious of those in relationships, while also resisting societal pressure to rush into a relationship in favor of maintaining their standards and waiting for the “one.” Finally, the perception that single women are unattractive can be damaging to their self-worth and self-esteem. They often compare themselves to others in terms of beauty, desirable traits, and appeal.

The participants' reliance on their faith, particularly through prayer, Scripture reading, and the church community, highlights the critical role of spirituality in mitigating the negative effects of stigma. This suggests that spiritual resources can offer emotional support, a sense of direction, and comfort during challenging times. Moreover, the participants' ability to reaffirm their self-worth through family perspectives and spiritual identity demonstrates a proactive approach to self-development during singlehood. This suggests that self-affirmation practices, whether through faith, family, or personal development, can help buffer the damaging effects of societal stigma. Finally, by viewing singlehood as an opportunity for personal development, participants challenge the traditional societal narrative that links worth or fulfillment solely to romantic relationships. This indicates the potential for reshaping societal perceptions of singlehood through positive reframing.

The findings of this study are essential in helping readers, especially single individuals in the Philippines, understand the prevailing stigma surrounding singleness and the positive coping strategies they can adopt in response. However, the results of this research may not be generalizable due to its subjective nature and the small sample size. Additionally, the researchers were not able to conduct face-to-face discussions for all three pairs, which deviates slightly from the original Photovoice methodology, which aims to gather all participants in one physical location for discussions. Instead, the researchers opted for synchronous meetings.

Based on the data gathered, the following recommendations were proposed:

Future researchers may consider conducting longitudinal studies to track the changes in societal attitudes towards singleness over time. Additionally, they could conduct comparative analyses of different regions or societies with varying degrees of singleness stigma could help identify the factors contributing to both differences and similarities in attitudes toward singleness.

For single women, it is important to maintain positive coping strategies. Negative experiences associated with singlehood such as loneliness or the perception of being overly selective, are to be acknowledged. Seeking professional help can be beneficial for improving their mental health and increasing access to resources and support in addressing the stigma of singlehood. It is also essential to strike a balance between setting a mate's value and recognizing the available options among potential partners.

For families and relatives of single women, it is important to recognize that these women are aware of their situations. There is no need to repeatedly remind them of what they are missing by remaining single or to question why they are still single. Instead, being part of their support system and offering love and understanding can fulfill their need for companionship. Family members should also critically evaluate cultural norms and expectations to foster an environment of acceptance and understanding.

For the church community, researchers suggest that churches can lead by example by ensuring that the leadership positions are diverse and inclusive, which promotes open communication and a welcoming atmosphere. Moreover, churches can provide social support and programs specifically for singles.

Finally, the broader community can combat singleness stigma by fostering inclusivity and ensuring that all individuals are respected and valued, regardless of their relationship status. Creating support groups and programs for singles, which include counseling services and social activities, can help build a sense of belonging and community.

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