Challenges and Well-being of Single Women Living in Malaysia

Azlin Hj Alwi[1] and Pamilia Lourdunathan[2]

Despite the evidence of an increasing number of unmarried women in Malaysia, this group remains an understudied group. Thus the present study examined the life of single women in Malaysia. The aims of this study were to explore (1) single women's experience of challenges, and (2) the factors that can increase their well-being. Using a purposive sampling and snowball method, 12 single women between the ages of 31 to 49 years old, who had never married, living in Malaysia, participated in this study. A qualitative study was designed; in-depth interviews were carried out to elicit information from the participants and the data was analyzed using a systematic process. Results from this study showed that the participants viewed their challenges as attributed to, (1) judgmental attitudes of other people towards singles; (2) own struggle with self-acceptance; (3) being stereotyped and treated unfairly; (4) feelings of insecurity and displacements; and (5) experience of negative emotions. In addition, the findings also indicated that the factors that can increase wellbeing included, (1) defining and creating meaning to self; (2) coping skills; (3) religious strengths; (4) strong internal attributes; (5) positive self-talks; (6) social and emotional support; (7) healthy and active lifestyle; and (8) being hopeful for the future. These findings suggest that while faced with myriad of challenges, single women thrive by drawing on the strength from their own internal attributes as well as their external environment. More studies should be undertaken to understand the experiences of single women in the society. This study raises a number of opportunities for future research including society's perceptions of single women and the impacts when more individuals are opting to stay single.

Keywords: resilience, singleness, marriage, challenges, well-being, qualitative research

Malaysia has an estimated population of 32.6 million with an overall male population of 16.8 million and female at 15.8 million ("Demographic Statistics Third Quarter 2019", Malaysia (2019, November 14). Malaysia is also a multiethnic country, comprising of people of different races and religions. The Malays are a major ethnic group (50%), followed by Chinese (23%), non-Malay indigenous group (11%), Indians (6%) and non-Malaysian residents (10%). The official religion is Islam, practiced by an estimated 61% of the population (Department of Information Malaysia, 2016; Malaysia Demographics Profile 2019, 2019). Within the population, 2.5 million of Malaysians aged 25 and above are unmarried (The Star Online, 2012).

In a collective society like Malaysia, being married is one of the important milestones in one's life (Azmawati, Mohd Hashim, & Endut, 2015; Ibrahim & Hassan, 2009; Omar, 1994). An ideal Malay woman, according to Omar (1994) should be able to reproduce for future generation. Veritably, a study conducted by Azmawati et al. (2015) conceded that Muslim women admitted that marriage is a requirement by their religion. However, there also seems to

---

[1] Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University, Malaysia. E-mail: azlinalwi@iium.edu.my

[2] Lecturer, Department of Psychology, Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University, Malaysia

be a changing attitude of women towards marriage as more women prefer to be single, voluntary or involuntarily (Ibrahim & Hassan, 2009a). In fact, most evidences indicated more Malaysians are delaying their marriage. The number of marriage has declined from 200,274 in 2016 to 190,532 in 2017 (Yusof, 2018). Based on the Census in 1990, 2000, and 2010, the minimum age of marriage among women has increased from 24.7 to 25.1 and 25.7 in 2010 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2011, May 7). The mean age at first marriage for Malaysian women in 2019 has increased slightly to 26 years; with the highest number of marriages occurring within the age group of 25-29 years (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2019).

Numerous studies (i.e., Beri & Beri, 2013; Endut, Azmawati, & Mohd Hashim, 2015; Muhamading, 2018; Ibrahim & Hassan, 2009a; Yusof, 2018) have been carried out to elucidate why women stay single. A survey conducted by the National Population and Family Development Board (The Star Online, 2012) unfolded the main reasons people stayed single including difficulties to find eligible suitors, financial problems, career opportunities, comfort in being single, and family commitment. Single women were also not worried about remaining single as they are educated, assertive, less conforming and had more opportunities (New Straits Times, 2011).

Despite the women's choice to be single (New Straits Times, 2011), society expects them to be married, and it still imposes much psychological distress on them (DePaulo, 2007). The society also perceives the single status as a deviation from the norms (Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003) and is unusual for an individual to remain single (Ibrahim & Hassan, 2009). In the Malaysian context, a never married woman who has past her normal marriageable age (i.e., 26 years old) is often referred to as "*anak dara tua*" or '*andartu*' in the Malay language or 'spinster' or "old virgin" (Ibrahim & Hassan, 2009a) in English. Within this context, a woman's identity is usually defined within a set of familial roles- a daughter, wife, and mother, and developmentally, women are expected to fulfill these roles (Carter & McGoldrick, 1980). In accordance with Carter and McGoldrick's life course model, women undergo a series of stages such as courtship, marriage, and child-rearing. This expectation may leave singles at a marginal position, feeling invisible, and they may experience inadequacy if such roles are not fulfilled. This is reiterated by a study done by Ibrahim and Hassan (2009b) which acknowledged that many single women were aware of their stigmatized status and confessed to feeling inadequate. They were made to feel highly conscious of their single status and uncomfortable (Saili & Saili, 2018). The paucity of literature on this particular population in the Malaysian context resulted in the low understanding of their dilemmas, and recognition of the challenges impose inadvertently on them by the society they live in. Even if there is, majority of studies on single women in Malaysia focused on single women's reasons of staying single (Azmawati, Mohd Hashim, & Endut, 2015; Beri & Beri, 2013; Ibrahim, 2015; Ibrahim, 2016; Ibrahim & Hassan, 2009a), or their views on marriage (Azmawati et al., 2015; Ibrahim, 2016), and scarcely on their well-being. Thus this study attempts to shed light into the challenges and wellbeing of single women living in Malaysia through a qualitative research design.

Challenges Faced by Single Women

Single women usually face a particular form of stigma and discrimination (Carter, 2010; DePaulo & Morris, 2005; Sharp & Ganong, 2011), also coined as singlism (DePaulo, 2011; Herbert, 2013). Singlism refers to the stereotyping, stigmatizing, and discrimination against people who are single (Gordon, 2003; Herbert, 2013). The most difficult time to be single is when women hit the age of 30 (Herbert, 2013). This is where society is more focused on the

women's single status. According to Sharp and Ganong (2011), dealing with single stigma is the worst for women in their mid-20's through mid-30's; whereas women older than age 35 tend to be more content with being single and will not express as much ambiguity and dissatisfaction as do younger women. This is also reiterated by White (1992), who found that single women who felt the most stigma were between the ages of 25 and 35 years; younger single women did not report the same level of stigma. Before age 25, being single is considered more acceptable for women, but after reaching that age, women felt scrutinized by friends, family members and others for their singlehood (Sharp & Ganong, 2011). A study conducted by Morris, DePaulo, Hertel, and Taylor (2008) found that negative stereotypes were stronger for singles older than 40 years than they were for singles younger than 25 years, although negative stereotypes also were present for singles younger than 25 years.

The stigmatization, discrimination, and stereotyping against single women have been repeatedly acknowledged in various studies (McNeely, Knox, & Zusman, 2005; Morris, Sinclair & DePaulo, 2007). For example, in the United States, McNeely, Knox, and Zusman (2005) explored university students' beliefs about women and their single status. In their study, 326 undergraduates completed a 74 item questionnaire designed to assess beliefs about men, women, and relationships. The findings affirmed that many of the respondents asserted that women who were not married by age 30 are unhappy and depressed. The society socializes women toward two goals: (1) to be independent and pursue a career, and also (2) to marry and to have a family. This study shows that despite changing values, marriage and family are still regarded as a norm. In a related study, Hertel, Schutz, DePaulo, Morris, and Stucke (2007) investigated if single people in Germany are viewed differently than married people. They found that generally, while married people are described in more positive lights, single people are seen as more lonely, less warm, and less caring. Singles were also viewed more negatively in these ways regardless of whether the singles were 25-years old or 40-years old, and regardless of whether the perceivers were younger or older, male or female, single or coupled. One study in Malaysia conducted by Saili and Saili (2018) attempted to understand the perceived stigma of single professional women. They carried out in-depth interviews with 20 women who had not married. They found many women braved the presence of stigma where they tolerated being treated in a less advantageous manner compared to married women, and this treatment occurred in almost all spheres of their lives such as family, workplace and public spheres.

A number of studies have also documented the marginalization of single women in the society (Carter, 2010; Sharp & Ganong, 2011). A study by Sharp and Ganong (2011) examined familial and societal messages women receive when they remained single in the late 20s and mid-30s. This study focused on messages women received from their social environments (parents, co-workers, relatives, and friends). Pressure was manifested in women feeling both highly visible and invisible. Specifically, they felt like they were on a different life path when others ask them about their single status. They also felt insecure and a sense of displacement in their families when parents and siblings remarked about their singlehood and make jokes or rude comments (i.e., invisibility). They often felt people expected them to justify their singlehood. In China, women reported the lack of social acceptance and support (Gaetano, 2009; Gaetano, 2010). As a consequence, single women are also susceptible to mental and emotional problems (Earle, Smith, Harris, & Longino, 1997; Gigy, 1980) as compared to those who are married.

Single women, particularly those in the 60 years and above age group faced physical challenges as detailed in a study conducted by Eshbaugh (2008). Eshbaugh (2008) examines

older women's (age 65 years and above) perceptions of living alone in the United States. The findings presented tremendous variability in the perceptions of this sample. Whereas some women showed significant levels of loneliness and depression, many did not. 13% of the participants ($n = 7$) perceived living alone negatively, 37.7% ($n = 20$) perceived living alone positively, with the rest being neutral on living alone. The aspects of living alone most enjoyed were being independent (51%) and keeping one's own schedule (49%). Common responses for least enjoyable aspects of living alone were lack of companionship (62%), no one to help with housework (36%), and fear of falling or getting hurt (30%).

Single women also grappled with their own identity (Gaetano, 2009; Gaetano, 2010; Lewis & Moon, 1997; Macvarish, 2006). Macvarish (2006) interviewed 15 never married women aged between the ages 34-50 who lived in London and the South-East. They were asked how they defined themselves, what they thought of the term spinster, and the way in which they related themselves to the category of single women. Interestingly, the findings revealed that many seemed to be accepting and content being single, but were anxious when they considered the prospect of this being permanent. For the never-married woman, the late 30s and 40s is a time of transition when decisions have to be made about whether to accept the possibility of lasting singleness or to change course and accept the risks of the dating scene in order to pursue partnership and/or motherhood. Moore and Radtke (2015) studied single women to determine whether being single is a deficit. In that study, interviews were conducted with 12 women (ages 35–44) who lived in Western Canada and identified as "never married," "non-mother," and "midlife." The results revealed that these women rejected the deficit identity of singleness by drawing on a more positive outlook. They created their own identity as having a secure and independent life. This depicts the life of single women in their midlife as a continuous struggle to create and maintain this space.

Evidently, the biggest challenge single women experience is a pressure imposed by their social environment in the forms of stigmatization and marginalization. When they reach certain age, the society expects them to be married adding an unwanted expectation on them. They also struggled to create their own identity as a single individual.

Single Women's Well-Being

Well-being among single women can be determined by a number of criteria such as life satisfaction, good mental health, happiness, or social competence (Wright & Masten, 2005). It is indeed a natural instinct to want to be loved and to love, and though these single women were contented of being single, they want to pursue partnership and ultimately motherhood (Macvarish, 2006). However, it is also well-documented of the adverse consequences of singlehood in terms of physical, emotional, social and economic wellbeing (Carr, 2008). Despite the growing number of singles, the idealization of marriage and child-rearing remains strong among single women (Band-Winterstein & Manchik-Rimon, 2014; Carter, 2010). Those who are single generally show more physical and psychological symptoms than those who are married (Diener, Suh, Lucus, & Smith, 1999). Married people are healthier- physically and mentally (Diener, 1984; Diener, Suh, Lucus, & Smith, 1999). Married individuals tend to enjoy higher levels of psychological well-being, pointing to the positive effects of sharing economic resources and emotional support with their spouses (Kim & McKenry, 2002; Mirowsky & Ross, 2003). One of the major reasons which explain this is social isolation – unmarried persons are less happy because they are more likely to be living alone and therefore experience absence in the continuing companionship that is typically associated with marriage (Diener et al., 1999).

Single women, regardless of age are susceptible to mental and emotional problems (Earle, Smith, Harris, & Longino, 1997; Eshbaugh, 2008; Lewis & Moon, 1997). A study conducted by Lewis and Moon (1997) on 39 women between the ages of 30-65 years old found that even though single women enjoyed the freedom to follow their personal aspirations, many felt alone, unhappy, and depressed because of their decision not to marry or to have children. These women experienced loss and grief as a result of the absence of children and of a man. The same finding was found in a study conducted by Dalton (1992), showing that by not attaining the role of wife and mother, single women felt less of an adult as they did not experience what they thought was a significant aspect of womanhood. Other fear includes the loss of assurance about the future. This indicates that although women are increasingly attaining higher education and career, many place marriage and parenthood high on the list of priorities (Patten & Parker, 2012). For both men and women, being a good parent and having a successful marriage remain much more important than career success (Carter, 2010). As a consequence, these may result to significant level of loneliness and depression (Eshbaugh, 2008). In the Malaysian context, a study by Ibrahim (2016) showed that single women had to deal with the feelings of inadequacy, which were related to the inability to form long lasting relationship that would lead to marriage, and also for not having children they could call as their own. In the same study, it was found that these women felt they were in a lower social standing as compared to married women.

In contrary, many single women hold their single status with pride. Band-Winterstein and Manchik-Rimon (2014) explored the aging experience of a group of singles, aged 60 and above. In-depth semi-structured interviews provided an account for their alternative choice for being single and gave meaning to being single. These women learnt to create their own identity as single women and make themselves feel good and manage their lives appropriately. They constructed their own self-identity in order to accept their way of life of being single and to achieve satisfaction in their lives. Similarly, Loewenstein, Bloch, Ebin, Campion, Epstein, Gale, and Salvatore (1981) conducted a study on 60 single women aged between 35 to 65 years old. These single women's life satisfaction was found to be significantly correlated to such factors as good health, not being lonely, living with a female housemate, having many casual friends, and being invested in work.

There is contradictory evidence with regards to single women perception of wellbeing in the literature. While many seem to be having difficulties to traverse life as single person in the society, others also reported being happy. There also seems to be a lack of research that focuses on single women's wellbeing in Malaysia. Based on this, the present study aimed to 1) examine women's perception of difficulties and challenges they face as singles; and 2) identify those factors that can increase their wellbeing.

Method

Participants

This research used a case study design, aimed to describe the single women's experience. Since there was a limited amount of information could be gathered about this topic, a qualitative, in-depth, multiple case study research method was employed (Creswell & Clark, 2007). Based on a purposive as well as snowball sampling, 12 single women participated in this study. The inclusion criteria for this sample were Malaysian women who were never married.

All respondents were aged between 31 to 49 years old. Interviews were carried out between June 2015 - January 2016 to further probe into challenges they experienced and factors that could promote their well-being. At the time of the interviews, they were either staying alone ($n = 4$), with housemates ($n = 6$), or with parents ($n = 2$). The demographic characteristics of the respondents are provided in Table 1. The respondents were approached directly, and/or recommended or suggested by friends or relatives. Once the participants were identified, initial contacts took place through phones or emails. The interview took place in various settings, depending on the agreement and convenience of the respondents. These settings included their offices, homes, and cafes or restaurants. The primary ethical issues in this project centered on informed consent, rights to withdraw, anonymity, and confidentiality. All participants were informed that could withdraw at any time and were assured of confidentiality.

Table 1

Demographic characteristics of respondents

No.	Age	Educational Qualification	Profession	Living Arrangement
1.	36	Master degree	Lecturer However, she is taking a study leave in order to complete her doctorate degree.	Campus accommodation
2.	33	Master degree	Lecturer	Campus accommodation
3.	43	PhD	Lecturer	Living alone
4.	35	Bachelor degree	Corporate	Living with her mother
5.	43	PhD	Lecturer	Living with her sister and a roommate
6.	36	PhD	Lecturer	Living with housemates
7.	40	Bachelor degree	Corporate	Living alone
8.	49	-	Corporate	Living with a housemate
9.	41	Bachelor degree	Counselor	Living alone
10.	37	PhD	Psychologist/Lecturer	Living alone
11.	31	Master degree	Human resource manager	Living with housemates
12.	36	Master degree	Assistant director	Living with parents

Measures

All interviews were conducted using a 12-items questionnaire served to answer the questions of: (1) what kind of challenges women face being single; and (2) what are the factors that help increase their well-being. The instrument design was guided by Zamanzadeh, Ghahramanian, Rassouli, Abbaszadeh, Alavi-Majd, & Nikanfar (2015). They outlined two phases in validating an instrument:

Stage 1: Instrument design: Selecting appropriate items that would allow for the understanding of challenges and factors of wellbeing.

Stage 2: Judgment: The content validity of the instrument was determined by two subject matter experts. Both were professionals who have research experience and work in the field.

Following the two phases, the instrument consisted of introductory questions, addressing the background and narration of the participants' lives experiences. Few of the items pertained to the challenges single women were experiencing: i) how do you think other people see singleness; ii) are there any activities that are either easier or more difficult to take part in, because you are on your own?; and iii) what are the main challenges you face being single. Specific items that would determine the factors that could help increase their wellbeing were i) what are the factors that you think can increase single women's wellbeing; and ii) how do you tend to solve the challenges. Trustworthiness of this research study was ensured through the credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability, as outlined by Guba (1981) and Shenton (2004).

Based on Guba's (1981) and Shenton's (2004) criteria for trustworthiness, the credibility of this research was determined through the adoption of appropriate research methods including the specific procedures and data collection. Transferability was established through the interview data where different people from different settings (i.e., industry and university) participated in this study. Dependability refers to the in-depth methodological description that had allowed the study to be repeated in the future. In the present study, this was achieved through the research design and implementation and data gathering. Confirmability was determined by ensuring that the findings were based on the results of the experiences and ideas of the participants, and recognizing that this study has its own limitations.

In the present study, a thematic analysis was employed to examine the perceptions, emotions and thoughts of the participants. The transcripts of the present study were analyzed into themes and categories. Specifically, the data analysis involves a systematic, iterative process of identifying and making meaning from common themes as guided by Maguire and Delahunt (2017) and Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phase guide to qualitative analysis. In Phase 1, familiarization to data was done by repeated reading focusing on the depth and breadth of the content. Phase 2 was the process of generating initial codes from the data. Once the process of coding and collation was completed in Phase 2, phase 3 involved the search for the initial themes. Phase 4 involved reviewing the themes to ensure they were refined so that data within themes cohere together meaningfully. In Phase 5, the process of defining and naming themes took place for the purpose of organizing them in a coherent manner. Phase 6 involved finalizing the analysis and writing up the report. These findings are detailed in the following section.

Results

The results are presented in two themes to answer the research questions.

Perceived Challenges among Single Women

The participants were asked about challenges they faced being single. Five themes emerged from the interviews as follow: (1) judgmental attitudes of other people towards singles; (2) struggling with self-acceptance; (3) being stereotyped and treated unfairly; (4) feelings of insecurities and displacements; and (5) experiencing negative emotions.

Judgmental attitudes of other people towards singles

The most depicted challenge affecting single women in this study was the way people judge them. Attitude is an evaluation towards a particular person or situation and is composed of three components namely cognition, affect and behaviors. In terms of cognition, majority of the participants reported that people stigmatized the singles as being abnormal, unlucky, lonely, choosy, and are dependent on their parents. In addition, these participants also felt that society thinks that there must be something wrong, weird and even a taboo as to why people are still not married by the society's standard as illustrated by few participants:

Most people (98-99% of them) see singleness as a problem. (Participant 2)

Other people see singleness negatively that is a stigma of being single. (Participant 5)

People are judgmental, it's not perceived as something positive, they think of you as a spinster, nobody wants you, you're not lucky or not pretty. It's very difficult. (Participant 6)

In terms of emotion, many respondents felt hurt and guilty as people around them mock and looking down on them as conveyed in the following:

A comment made by my own aunty hurt me because she was mocking me for being single. (Participant 1)

People make you feel inadequate or guilty. (Participant 2)

Majority of the people are still not okay with it, it's still awkward for them, they feel it's not right being single. (Participant 3)

Having friends who do not understand, who want to match-make you with someone and who think that your life is incomplete. Having friends who think that to complete many wants, you have to be a married woman. (Participant 9)

Behaviorally, the respondents related that people would do matchmaking to help them find their significant others. It is more upsetting to the respondents who felt that this negative attitude did not only come from strangers but also their closest family members and friends.

Married friends tend to do matchmaking. (Participant 2)

Having friends who do not understand, who want to match-make you with someone and who think that your life is incomplete. Having friends who think that to complete many wants, you have to be a married woman. (Participant 9)

Struggling with self-acceptance

Majority of the participants confessed that they were not prepared to be single for life and thus, viewed their status negatively. In fact, many of them validated other people's perception of them by feeling guilty, embarrassed and self-conscious as reported in the following:

Because of people's perceptions, feel awkward or embarrassed or guilty for being single. (Participant 2)

Scared that after past experiences with single women, afraid that you'd end up like these people who were weird-singleness can affect behavior. (Participant 5)

Can see the parts of life that you are missing (you don't have your own children being single). (Participant 12)

Being stereotyped and treated unfairly

Being stereotyped refers to a set of idea that people have about singles. Many single women in this study divulged that people who were having difficulties to accept singles often viewed the singles as having no commitment, less responsibilities, and no life. As a consequence of this type of thinking, singles are usually taken for granted. In the office environment for example, the singles felt like they were assigned to more jobs, and thus were treated differently from the married ones.

People think if you are not married, you have no commitment and many responsibilities are pushed to the singles. (Participant 4)

They see working ladies who are single as people who have no life and so bosses feel "We can give them more work" because they think single women go back and don't have anything much to do- this is unfair. (Participant 10)

Feelings of insecurity and displacements

Feelings of insecurity and displacements stemmed from the messages they perceived or direct conversations or encounters they had within their social environments particularly during social gatherings, with close family members or friends, or are work-related. Most times, the respondents blurted out that they had to defend and justify their single status to others. This made them feel awkward and shameful.

Socially challenging- social events- I feel like," Do I really want to go by myself?", attending social/community events (weddings/open houses), going to restaurants and eating by yourself. (Participant 12)

Attending weddings, reunions or birthday parties, answering the same question every time during reunion-how many children do you have? (Participant 7)

Experiencing negative emotions

Many respondents were hopeful that one day they will find their life partners that they could share their lives with. At the same time, many respondents acknowledged that one of the challenges they faced being single is attributed to a lack of emotional support. This includes, experiencing negative emotions, lack of companionship, lack of contentment, and difficulty in coping. These are reflected in their interviews as follows:

Lonely journey, wish to go back to someone waiting for you, having dinner with someone, happy news that you can share with someone (people take these for granted). (Participant 6)

When I'm sick feel lonely at times, thinking if you die nobody knows. (Participant 7)

Can see the parts of life that you are missing (you don't have your own children being single). (Participant 12)

Factors that can Increase Single Women's Well-Being

The respondents were also inquired on those factors that can increase their wellbeing. The themes related to their responses are (1) defining and creating meaning to self; (2) coping skills, (3) religious strengths, (4) strong internal attributes, (5) positive self-talks, (6) social and emotional support (7) healthy and active lifestyle, and (8) being hopeful for the future.

Defining and creating meaning to self

Majority of the respondents turned inwards when dealing with their single status. This insinuates that they find strength internally by creating meaning about who they are. Many of them associated being single to freedom, living life to the fullest, happiness and success.

Knowing that singleness means freedom and independence… can do what she wants without having to be tied to anyone. (Participant 6)

Know that singleness means being happy, not attached to anyone, freedom. (Participant 7)

Live your life with expectations of being happy. (Participant 12)

Coping skills

In addition to this, coping skills also help single women to traverse their path healthily. These coping skills were related to one's own decision making, problem solving, and religious strength. Decision-making as well as problem solving were two important skills that these respondents employed when they face difficulties. Few respondents said:

Try to solve my challenges myself. (Participant 3)

We can plan because life sometimes does not go as planned but we can try to solve our problems one by one, focusing on it one by one. That way our career and personal life will become easier. (Participant 4)

Religious strengths

Religious strengths refer to one's faith in God. This maybe in the form of prayers, cognitively trusting in God's will, faith in God, spirituality and qur'anic recitation. The participants believed that having a good sense of connection with God and increasing one's *iman* or spirituality will strengthen their believe that will lead to acceptance of oneself and the situation.

Knowing that there is something good that God has in store for you. (Participant 1)

A talk on being accepting and knowing that fate is a blessing and God's will and keep striving or else you would be down or depressed. (Participant 9)

Strong internal attributes

Internal attributes refer to being patient, grateful, contented, self-value, happiness, love, calm, self-acceptance, and self-confidence. Interestingly, many participants also seemed to be focusing on how they should deal with their single status, and that is to be more kind towards themselves, and be more adaptive with how the society perceive their single status.

Have own values and skills and positive outlook of life (Participant 2).

Change our mindset, prioritize, try to adapt to society (Participant 4).

Positive self-talk

Many participants also employed positive self-talk or inner talk to empower themselves. It also enables them to be more open and accepting of their status despite what others may think of them. Engaging in positive self-talks also allowed them to gain inner strength, confidence, and optimism of their single status.

Think positively, be yourself, don't change. (Participant 8)

I rationalize with myself-I talk to myself and tell myself saying that "This is not your time yet, maybe God wants you to search for more, maybe I haven't put in enough initiative". (Participant 10)

Social and emotional supports

Majority of the respondents cited social and emotional supports through various forms of relationships such as families and friends were the factors that can increase well-being. Apart from this, they also obtained supports from other singles who share the same predicaments and pressure from other people, kind of like a support group of single women.

Love (feeling appreciated by family and friends-social and emotional support). (Participant 6)

Having friends who understand that is God's will, if it's meant to be it is if not it isn't. (Participant 8)

Healthy and active lifestyles

Active lifestyles refer to the activities they engaged in so that they become so busy and engrossed with their work that they tend to put aside their worries on being single. They also focused on things that they love doing such as career and hobby, or be involved in physical wellness activities.

Older and mature and tend to do things such as physical activities that I get tired and don't think about these challenges. (Participant 6)

Knowing that singleness means success, you can travel alone, you can be successful, have your own life, you can get engaged in a project and can take the initiative to join any program they have so much freedom as long as you can take care of yourself and keep your parents informed. (Participant 10)

Knowing that it is easier to be independent, travel, be involved in long distance overnight engagement (if it requires you to do so such as more than 1 day conference), be involved in community service, have control to organize your life (just between my family and me). (Participant 12)

Being hopeful for the future

This theme focuses on future goals, empowerment, support group, financial stability, learning from past mistakes, and positive thinking. These single women also created meanings to their existence including finding inner peace within themselves as a way to feel grateful of who and what they are.

Know that what you are if 5% what happens to you and 95% how you perceive it internally. (Participant 1)

Knowing that happiness is created for me and it does not mean that just because you're married, you'll be happy). (Participant 4)

Knowing that you're still you, you need to be a part of yourself to remain who you are applied to whether you're single or not and be comfortable with the stage you're in now regardless of whether you're single, divorced or married. (Participant 5)

Discussion

Several challenges affect the life of single women. The respondents in this study were troubled with other people's judgmental attitudes of their single status. Majority of them revealed that people regarded their singleness as being abnormal, unlucky in love, lonely and choosy. Indeed, these feelings are common among single women as explained by Rosenberger (2007) and Situmorang (2007). In Japan (Rosenberger, 2007) and Indonesia (Situmorang, 2007), the pressures to be married are very strong, immensely important and symbolize one's achievement in the society. Being unmarried therefore, is regarded as a sign of deficiency and is attributed to absence of a life partner (Himawan, Bambling, & Edirippulige, 2018). This explains why getting married is not only expected by family members and friends, but also by singles themselves (Strijbosch, 2015). In fact, a study on single women in Beijing also illustrated the lack of social acceptance and support for singles in China (Gaetano, 2010). Similarly, in Indonesia, the society does not accept singlehood (Himawan et al., 2018). Consequently, many singles struggled with their single status resulting in feeling distressed. Many determined that this status is temporary, and are optimistic that they would be married and have children sooner or later (Azmawati et al., 2015; Band-Winterstein & Manchik-Rimon, 2014; Ibrahim, 2016; Saili & Saili, 2018).

The findings also suggested that majority of the respondents indicated being stereotyped and treated unfairly particularly in the workplace. This kind of treatment in fact, has earlier been communicated in a variety of studies (i.e., Hertel et al., 2007; Morris et al., 2008; Saili & Saili, 2018; Sharp & Ganong, 2011). Single women had been viewed differently by others, that they were considered as unhappy (McKneely et al., 2005) and lonely and less warm (Hertel et al., 2007).

Single women in this context were accustomed to a myriad of negative emotions including loneliness and depression as a result of lack of companionship, lack of contentment, and difficulty of their single status. Again, being single can be detrimental to ones' wellbeing (Diener et al., 1999; Eschbaugh, 2008; Lewis & Moon, 1997).

In terms of wellbeing, the findings revealed that having meaning in life, effective coping strategies, strong religious and internal attributes, positive self-talk, good social and emotional support, healthy lifestyle and being optimistic of their future are ways to build up one's wellbeing. In the present study, many women gave meaning to their single status including freedom, independent, happiness, and success. Gaetano (2009) found that single women do not only define themselves solely through marriage and children. Instead, careers, home ownership, urban consumer culture, friendships, and family of origin can also provide satisfying emotional fulfillment and identity. Ibrahim (2016) also noted that single women often identified themselves as professional career women.

The present study also ascertained that having a trust in the higher power, or God, also allows these singles to manage their lives meaningfully. This is also echoed by Himawan et al. (2018) study where Indonesian singles turned to religion as a source of coping. In fact, the belief that one's soul mate is fated by God (Ibrahim & Hassan, 2009b) provided solace and comfort that they would find their significant others. Another study by Colon-Baco (2010) states that religion is understood to influence subjective well-being through various ways: 1) the religious community gives people a sense of belonging and provides an important source of social support; 2) religion gives people's lives meaning and purpose; and 3) religion encourages people to lead healthier lifestyles. Single women in this study also attained their strength from their strong internal attributes such as being patient, always grateful, self-acceptance and self-confidence. This is also concluded in Situmorang (2007) study among single women in Yogyakarta and Medan, Indonesia which attested that although marriage remains an ideal norm, single women can still be satisfied and live up to their status. Other studies also revealed that single women valued personal growth and achievement (Gigy, 1980), and that being single allowed for self-enhancement (Ibrahim, 2016; Ibrahim & Hassan, 2009b).

Women in this study also gained their strength from their social circles to achieve sense of belongingness. In a study by Endut et al. (2015) 50% of singles were satisfied with their relationships with their family and friends, majority of them turning to family members and friends to cope with their personal or professional problems. A study conducted by Chung, Hong and Newbold (2013) revealed that both informal and formal support, along with individual characteristics, were found to be crucial for reinforcing wellbeing.

Limitations and Recommendations

This study features the plight of single women. Among the challenges single women related to are internal (one's own view of being single) and external (society judgmental

attitudes). Single women draw upon their internal strengths by creating meaning to their identity, managing emotions effectively as well as positive mindset. They also relied heavily on the support, understanding, and acceptance of others of their single status. This is because individual reactions to public perception of their singleness are a relevant factor in their well-being. Negative stereotypes by others usually lead to negative self-perceptions. It is however important to note the methodological limitation involved in this study. This study was based on a primary data and its reliance on participants' own experiences and memory may be subjected to self-report biases. Still these limitations do not prevent the study to be carried out. In fact, the lack of research in this field allowed the understanding of single women challenges and experiences, as well as their strengths.

To improve such research within the same population, it is pertinent to address public perception as the society can directly impact on how single women position themselves in the society. It is also recommended that future study differentiate the experience of single status among age, gender, and/or socioeconomic backgrounds. A longitudinal study too can provide a glimpse on single people's experience since previous literature does suggest that older single women are better adjusted than younger women. This allows for in-depth understanding of single women's identity. It is also notwithstanding that the higher percentage of single women also means there are more households being led by single females. Yet, there are no specific policies drawn for this population (Chin & Meikeng, 2017). Many single women shoulder huge responsibilities such as caring for their parents, and they often struggle with work and personal life at the same time, just like married people do. Thus, the government can invest in care systems, such as a comprehensive social protection for unmarried individuals including paid or special leave (similar to maternity leave) to care for their elderly. A policy should also be put in place to protect single women's wellbeing such as increasing a sense of security and safety. By designing a policy package that centers on single women's issues, the government can empower single women in the community.

Conclusion

The increasing number of Malaysian singles requires specific studies and analysis in order to grasp their needs. This study demonstrates the challenges and difficulties single women experience with regards to their single status. A more proactive approach in identifying their issues, problems, and challenges would allow for the development of appropriate empowerment and support programs to address their wellbeing.

Acknowledgement and Funding

References

Azmawati, A. A., Mohd Hashim, I. H., & Endut, N. (2015). "Don't Marry, Be happy!" How single women in Malaysia view marriage. Retrieved December 23, 2019, from https://www.shs-conferences.org/articles/shsconf/pdf/2015/05/shsconf_icolass 2014_03001.pdf

Band-Winterstein, T., & Manchik-Rimon, C. (2014). The experience of being an old never-married single: A life course perspective. *International Journal of Aging and Human Development, 78* (4), 379-401. doi: 10.2190/ag.78.4.d

Beri, N., & Beri, A. (2013). Perception of single women towards marriage, career and education. *European Academic Research, 1*(6), 855-869.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77-101. doi: 10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Carr, D. (2008). Social and emotional well-being of single women in contemporary America. In B. Rudolph, M., & V. Yans-McLaughlin (Eds.), *Women on Their Own: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Being* (pp. 58-81). New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press. Retrieved December 23, 2019 from http://sites.bu.edu/deborahcarr/files/2018/01/Carr-2007_Women-on-their-Own.pdf

Carter, E., & McGoldrick, M. (1980). *The family life-cycle: A framework for family therapy*. New York: Gardner.

Carter, S. (2010). *This is why you're single: Black woman edition*. Retrieved from https://seantcarter.wordpress.com/2010/10/17/this-is-why-youre-single-black-woman-edition/

Chin, C., & Meikeng, Y. (2017, February 5). *All the single ladies!* Retrieved from https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2017/02/05/all-the-single-ladies-with-a-bigger-percentage-of-single-women-in-malaysia-today-sunday-star-celebra/

Chung, K., Hong, E., & Newbold, B. (2013). Resilience among single adult female refugees in Hamilton, Ontario. *Refuge*, *29*(1), 65.

Colón-Bacó, E. (2010). The strength of religious beliefs is important for subjective well-being. *Undergraduate Economic Review, 6*(1), 11.

Cresswell, J. W., & Clark, V. L. P. (2007). *Designing and conducting mixed method research*. California: Sage Publication.

Dalton, S. T. (1992). Lived experience of never-married women. *Mental Health Nursing*, *13*(2), 69-80.

Demographic Statistics Third Quarter 2019, Malaysia (2019, November 14). *Department of Statistics Malaysia*. (2019). Retrieved December 23, 2019 from https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php?r=column/cthemeByCat&cat=453&bul_id=d1BZVzBZYXVwOTBPdXhGVEJTQWl4dz09&menu_id=L0pheU43NWJwRWVSZklWdzQ4TlhUUT09

Department of Statistics Malaysia. (2011, May 7). *Population distribution and basic demographic characteristic report 2010*. Retrieved from https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php?r=column/ctheme&menu_id=L0pheU43NWJwRWVSZklWdzQ4TlhUUT09&bul_id=MDMxdHZjWTk1SjFzTzNkRXYzcVZjdz09

Department of Statistics Malaysia. (2019, November 27). *Marriage and divorce statistics Malaysia, 2019*. Retrieved from https://www.dosm.gov.my/v1/index.php?r=column/cthemeByCat&cat=453&bul_id=d1BZVzBZYXVwOTBPdXhGVEJTQWl4dz09&menu_id=L0pheU43NWJwRWVSZklWdzQ4TlhUUT09

DePaulo, B. (2011). *Singlism: What it is, why it matters, and how to stop it*. Retrieved March 28, 2019 from http://www.amazon.com/Singled-Out-Singles-Stereotyped-Stigmatized-ebook/dp/B005NJYM6G/ref=pd_cp_kstore_0/177-4853694-1870007

DePaulo, B. M. (2007). *Singled out: How singles are stereotyped, stigmatized, and ignored, and still live happily ever after.* New York: St Martin's Griffin.

DePaulo, B. M., & Morris, W. L. (2005). Singles in society and in science. *Psychological Inquiry*, *16*(2-3), 57- 83. doi: 10.1207/s15327965pli162&3_01

Diener, E. (1984), Subjective well-being. *Psychological Bulletin, 95*(3), 542-575. doi: 10.1037/0033-2909.95.3.542

Diener, E., Suh, E. M., Lucas, R. E., & Smith, H. L. (1999). Subjective well-being: Three decades of progress: 1967 to 1997. *Psychological Bulletin, 125*(2), 276-302. doi: 10.1037/0033-2909.125.2.276

Earle, J. R., Smith, M. H., Harris, C. T., & Longino Jr, C. F. (1997). Women, marital status, and symptoms of depression in a midlife national sample. *Journal of Women & Aging, 10*(1), 41-57. doi: 10.1300/j074v10n01_04

Endut, N., Azmawati, A. A., & Mohd Hashim, I. H. (2015). *Formal and informal support system for single women and single mothers in Malaysia*. Retrieved from https://www.shs-conferences.org/articles/shsconf/pdf/2015/05/shsconf_icolass 2014_03002.pdf

Eshbaugh, E. M. (2008). Perceptions of living alone among older adult women. *Journal of Community Health Nursing, 25*(3), 125-137. doi: 10.1080/07370010802221685

Gaetano, A. (2009). Rural woman and modernity in globalizing China: Seeing Jia Zhangke's the world. *Visual Anthropology Review*, *25*(1), 25-39. doi: 10.1111/j.1548-7458.2009.01007.x

Gaetano, A. M. (2010). *Single women in urban China and the "unmarried crisis": Gender resilience and gender transformation*. Centre for East and South-East Asian Studies, Lund University. Retrieved January 18, 2018 from https://lucris.lub.lu.se/ws/files/3319915/3127772.pdf

Gigy, L. L. (1980). Self-concept of single women. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 5*(2), 321-340. doi: 10.1111/j.1471-6402.1980.tb00965.x

Gordon, P. A. (2003). The decision to remain single: Implications for women across cultures. *Journal of mental health counseling*, *25*(1), 33-44.

Guba, E. G. (1981). Criteria for assessing the trustworthiness of naturalistic inquiries, *Educational Communication and Technology*, *29*, 75–91.

Herbert, W. (2013). It's complicated: The psychology of 'Singlism.' *The Huffington Post*. Retrieved March 28, 2019 from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/wray-herbert/its-complicated-the-psych_b_2433587.html

Hertel, J. & Schütz, A. (2007). Singles – maladjusted or stigmatized? In D. Chadee & J. Young (Eds.), *Current Themes in Social Psychology*. Trinidad, St. Augustine: SOCS, The University of the West Indies.

Hertel, J., Schutz, A., DePaulo, B. M., Morris, W. L., & Stucke, T. S. (2007). She's single, so what? How are singles perceived compared with people who are married? *ZeitschriftfürFamilienforschung/Journal of Family Research*, *19*(2), 139-158.

Himawan, K. K., Bambling, M., & Edirippulige, S. (2018). What does it mean to be single in Indonesia? Religiosity, social stigma, and marital status among never-married Indonesian adults. *SAGE Open*, *8*(3), 1-9. doi: 10.1177/2158244018803132

Hradil, S. (2003). Vom Leitbild zum "Leidbild": Singles, ihre veränderte Wahrnehmung und der "Wandel des Wertewandels" [From admiration to pity: Changes in how singles are perceived and the re-emergence of traditional values]. *Zeitschrift für Familienforschung, 15*(1), 38-54.

Ibrahim, R. (2016). "What is wrong with me?" – Single women's reflections on marriage transition. *Asian Social Science*, *12*(12), 213-219.

Ibrahim, R., & Hassan, Z. (2009a). Never married women in modern Malaysia: Are they rejecting marriage? *The Global Studies Journal*, *2*(2), 45-56. Retrieved December 23, 2019 from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/283658646_Never_Married_Women_in_Modern_Malaysia_Are_They_Rejecting_Marriage

Ibrahim, R., & Hassan, Z. (2009b). Understanding singlehood from the experiences of never-married Malay Muslim women in Malaysia: Some preliminary findings. *European Journal of Social Sciences, 8*(3), 395-405.

Kim, H. K., & McKenry, P. C. (2002). The relationship between marriage and psychological well-being: A longitudinal analysis. *Journal of Family Issues, 23*(8), 885-911. doi: 10.1177/019251302237296

Lewis, K. G., & Moon, S. (1997). Always single and single again women: A qualitative study. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 23*(2), 115–134. doi: 10.1111/j.1752-0606.1997.tb00238.x

Loewenstein, S., Bloch, S., Ebin, N., Campion, J., Epstein, J., Gale, P., & Salvator, M. (1981). A study of satisfaction and stresses of single women in midlife. *Sex Roles, 7*(11), 1127-1141. doi: 10.1007/BF00287589

Macvarish, J. (2006). What is 'the problem' of singleness? *Sociological Research Online*, *11*(3), 1-8. doi: 10.5153/sro.1418

Maguire, M., & Delahunt, B. (2017). Doing a thematic analysis: A practical, step-by-step guide for learning and teaching scholars. *All Ireland Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (AISHE-J)*, *8*(3), 3351-33514

Malaysia Demographics Profile 2019. (2019). Retrieved December 23, 2019 from https://www.indexmundi.com/malaysia/demographics_profile.html

McNeely, A., Knox, D., & Zusman, M. (2005). College student beliefs about women: Some gender differences. *College Student Journal, 39*(4). Retrieved March 30, 2015, from https://www.questia.com/library/journal/1G1-141167425/college-student-beliefs-about-women-some-gender-differences

Mirowsky, J., & Ross, C. E. (2003). *Social causes of psychological distress (2nd ed.)*. New Brunswick, NJ: Aldine Transaction.

Moore, J., & Radtke, H. (2015). Starting "real" life women negotiating a successful midlife single identity. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, *39*(3), 305-319. doi: 10.1177/0361684315573244

Morris, W. L., DePaulo, B. M., Hertel, J., & Taylor, L. C. (2008). Singlism: Another problem than has no name: Prejudice, stereotypes, and discrimination against singles. In T. G. Morrison & M. A. Morrison (Eds.), *The psychology of modern prejudice* (pp. 165-194). Hauppauge, NY: Nova Science.

Morris, W., Sinclair, S., & DePaulo, B. (2007). No shelter for singles: The perceived legitimacy of marital status discrimination. *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*, *10* (4), 457-470.

Muhamading, M. (2018, September 16). Staying single due to money woes. *New Straits Times*. Retrieved from https://www.nst.com.my/news/exclusive/2018/09/411728/exclusive-staying-single-due-money-woes

New Straits Times. (2011, July 27). *Study: More women fine with being single.* Retrieved from https://www.asiaone.com/News/AsiaOne%2BNews/Malaysia/Story/A1Story 20110727-291231.html

Omar, R. (1994). *The Malay Woman in the Body: Between Biology and Culture*. Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Fajar Bakti.

Patten, E., & Parker, K. (2012). A gender reversal on career aspirations: Young women now top young men in valuing a high-paying career. Retrieved April 23, 2015 from http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/files/2012/04/Women-in-the-Workplace.pdf

Reynolds, J., & Wetherell, M. (2003). The discursive climate of singleness: The consequences for women's negotiation of a single identity. *Feminism & Psychology, 13*(4), 489–510.

Rosenberger, N. (2007). Rethinking emerging adulthood in Japan: Perspectives from long-term single women. *Child Development Perspectives, 1*(2), 92-95. doi: 10.1111/j.1750-8606.2007.00021.x

Saili, J., & Saili, A. R. (2018). At odds: Perceived stigma of single professional Malay women. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, *8*(14), 79-90.

Sharp, E. A., & Ganong, L. (2011). "I'm a loser, I'm not married, let's just all look at me": Ever-single women's perceptions of their social environment. *Journal of Family Issues*, *32*(7), 956-980. doi: 10.1177/0192513X10392537

Shenton, A. K. (2004). Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects. *Education for Information*, *22*(2), 63-75.

Situmorang, A. (2007). Staying single in a married world: Never-married women in Yogyakarta and Medan. *Asian Population Studies*, *3*(3), 287-304. doi: 10.1080/17441730701746433

Strijbosch, K. (2015). Single and the city: State influences on intimate relationships of young, single, and well-educated women in Singapore. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *77*(5), 1-18. doi: 10.1111/jomf.12221

The Star Online. (2012, May 26). *There are more single men than women in Malaysia*. Retrieved from https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2012/05/08/there-are-more-single-men-than-women-in-malaysia

White, J. M. (1992). Marital status and well-being in Canada: An analysis of age group variations. *Journal of Family Issues*, *13*(3), 390-409. doi: 10.1177/019251392013003008

Wright, M. O. D., & Masten, A. S. (2005). Resilience processes in development. In *Handbook of Resilience in Children* (pp. 17-37). Boston, MA: Springer.

Yusof, T. A. (2018, September 28). *Fewer people getting married, divorced last year*. Retrieved from https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2018/12/444748/fewer-people-getting-married-divorced-last-year

Zamanzadeh, V., Ghahramanian, A., Rassouli, M., Abbaszadeh, A., Alavi-Majd, H., & Nikanfar, A. (2015). Design and implementation content validity study: Development of an instrument for measuring patient-centered communication. *Journal of Caring Sciences*, *4*(2), 165-178.