People's Perceptions about Unmarried Women: A Survey in the Kwaebibirem District of the Eastern Region, Ghana

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Abstract
Perceptual patterns are neither innate nor absolute, they are selective, learned, culturally determined, consistent, and inaccurate. This article aimed to discover Ghanaian's perception about mature single / unmarried women which appear to be gaining grounds in the country. A mixed – method approach was adopted with 110 participants selected using purposive and convenient sampling techniques. It was found that most participants had negative perception about unmarried women although quite minority showed positive perceptions. These negative perceptions were rooted in the idea that the unmarried woman is at fault but not the men or societal norms. It was evident that the perception that unmarried women are unhappy was not about their marriage per se rather how others see them; what others say, think and do to them make unmarried women unhappy.
Keywords: Unmarried/single woman, Perception

Introduction

Marriage is not a foreign concept to the African. It has been there long ago and has been embraced by many societies. Nwobi (1997) wrote that marriage is a union between at least one man and a woman which must be culturally approved; couples are guaranteed sexual endorsement and commitment with the expectations of bearing children and training the children on prescribed modes of behaviour. Gyekye (2002), argued that, in African culture, marriage is looked upon as a sacred duty which every normal adult is expected to perform. According to Lodonu (2009:22), "Unlike marriage in many other parts of the world, marriage in Ghana is seen as a requirement stage in life, rather than an option, and remains the most important social institution."

Lodonu (2009) observed that marriage is a major transitional point in the lives of young people. For instance, in Ghana in the past girl-child education was not common, therefore as soon as a girl had passed through puberty rite rituals, she was married off (Francoeur & Noonan, 2004). Francoeur and Noonan (2004:471) continued to posit that since the social position of a person, especially a woman, is often dependent on marital status, single adulthood as a chosen option is hardly acceptable. The normal pattern of Ghanaian life is to marry and have children. Any alternative lifestyle is highly questionable.

"Perceptual patterns are "neither innate nor absolute. They are selective, learned, culturally determined, consistent, and inaccurate" (Adler, 1991: 3). Perceptions of womanhood, refers to beliefs, notions and ideas people have about females in terms of what they represent in their relationship to men as well as expectations about their appropriate roles (Amadiume, 1987). Generally, perceptions are culturally constructed and are therefore products of the socialization process. In a society where marriage is the norm, stigma and misconceptions about unmarried exist strongly (Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003; Sandfield & Percy, 2003 in Macvarish, 2006).

Historically, unmarried or single women who were unable to marry at a certain point in their lives in many western societies were called spinsters (Glynn, 2013). According to Byrne (2003:15) "Social identities for single women revolved around stereotypes of fussy, selfish, choosy, particular, spinsters, women were dried up, 'staid, old, not living', single women who hated men, old maids, wall flowers, women who were left on the shelf and women who had something with them." Reynolds and Watherall (2003:489), DePaulo and Morris, (2005) also argued that the privileging of marriage and long-term partnerships contribute to the marginalization of single women. As a result of this, in many parts of the world, colleagues, friends and relatives put pressure on the unmarried woman to marry (Sharp & Ganong, 2011). Evident from the literature also indicates that in Ghana, particularly in the old Ashanti Kingdom women who remained unmarried from 15 years and above were captured by force for a man to marry (Allman, 1996).

However, Dzokoto and Darkwah (2014:7) stressed that "Women are embracing, rejecting, maintaining, and championing changes in today's Ghanaian society". This implies that the idea that a woman needs a man for economic support no longer holds. Despite the fact that marriage is highly promoted and valued, in Ghana, within the past few years, however, an increasing number of women do not conform to social norms and remain single (Francoeur & Noonan, 2004). Ghana experienced a consistent increase in the number of never married women aged 30-34 from 1.3% in 1993, 2.3% in 1998, 5.1% in 2003 and 5.7% in (2008) (Ntoimo & Isiugo-Abanihe, 2011). Ghana's Population Census (2010) Report shows that, the proportion of never-married women

from age 25-29 was 28.2%, 30-34 was 12.7%, 30-39 was 6.4, 40-44 was 4.3% and 4549 was 3.1%. These figures on unmarried women in Ghana show that, there is an increasing number of women who are single; it is therefore, imperative to study how people perceive unmarried women in Ghana.

Methods

The study adopted a mixed method approach in which one hundred and ten (110) adults conveniently and purposively selected from five (5) towns in the Kwaebibirem district in the Eastern Region, Ghana. These adults consisted of married, singles, divorced and widows aged between 20 and 50 years. The five towns included Kade, Asuom, Pega, Tweapiasi and Bomso. These towns were selected based on their high economic activities and social activities. The population of Kwaebibirem is 113,721 including children. Males constitute about 49.0% and females constitute about 51.0% (2010 Population and Housing Census). The instruments used for data collection were questionnaire (100 participants) and interview (10 participants) and descriptive statistics used to analysed the data.

Results
Demographic Characteristics of Respondents
Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

ITEM	VARIABLES	FREQUENCY (*F*)
GENDER	Male	66
	Female	34
AGE	Under 20 years	0
	21 – 29	31
	30 years and above	69
EDUCATIONAL LEVEL	JHS	0
	SHS	13
	Diploma / Certificate	45
	1st Degree and above	42
MARITAL STATUS	Single	37
	Married	58
	Divorced	3
	Widowed	2
RELIGION	Christian	87
	Muslim	9
	Traditionalist	2
	Others	2
DEGREE OF RELIGIOSITY	Extremely religious	59
	Fundamentalist	11
	Casually religious	27
	Others	3

Source: Field data, February, 2015

Table1 above shows the demographics of participants. Thirty-four (34) of the participants were females and 66 males. Age wise, 61% of the participants were 30 years and above, and 31% were between the ages of 21-29. 13% of participants possessed S.H.S. certificate, 45% had Diploma/Certificates, and 42% possessed a degree or more. The marital status of participants as indicated in Table 1 shows that 37% of the respondents were single, 58% were married, 3% had divorced and 2% were widows.

Majority of the respondents representing 87% were Christians. Just 9% and two 2% were Muslims and traditionalists respectively. Two percent (2%) of the respondents belonged to other religious denominations. Lastly, 59% were extremely religious, 11% were fundamentalist, 27% were casually religious and just 3% were not religious.

Perceptions of People in Kwaebibirem District about Unmarried Women
This section presents findings of the study pertaining to the research question, "what kind of perceptions do people have about unmarried women in Kwaebibirem District of the Eastern region of Ghana"?

The perceptions of the respondents were measured using a five-point Likert scale with options ranging from Strongly Agree (SA) to Strongly Disagree (SD). A neutral line (Ambivalent) was included. The participants were to obtain a possible rating score from a low of 24 to a high of 48 due to 24 statements. For purposes of scoring, each statement in the Likert scale in section B was assigned a numerical score ranging from 1 to 2. Positive statements were also rated as SA =2, A=1, Am= 0, D = 1 and SD = -2. Negative statements were rated as SA = -2, A = -1 Am= 0, D = 1 SD=2. Individual perception scores were obtained by summing the values of their choices on the scale.

When the researcher did the individual scores, any negative score meant negative perception and any positive score represented a positive perception. Thus, those who had negative scores had negative perceptions, those who had positive scores had positive perceptions and those who scored zero were neutral. However, negative and positive perceptions were further categorized as highly positive which ranged from (48 - 25), positive (24 - 1), highly negative (48- 25), and negative (24 - 1) and the neutral line or zero (0 – 0) scores as neutral. The summary of the categorizations of the perceptions is shown on Table 2 below.

Table 2: People's Perceptions about Unmarried Women in Kwaebibirem District of The Eastern Region of Ghana

Range of scores	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)	Perceptions
25 - 48	1	1	Highly positive
1 – 24	35	35	Neutral (ambivalent)
0 – 0	2	2	Negative
0- 24	61	61	Highly negative
25 - 48	1	1	Highly positive
Total	**100**	**100**	

From Table 2, 1 participant (1%) had highly positive perceptions and a significant number of respondents (35%) had positive perception showing a general positive perception towards unmarried women. On the opposite end of the spectrum, (1%) of the respondents had a highly negative perception, a significant proportion of the respondents (61%), showed a greater negative perceptions about unmarried women. The descriptive data as presented in Table 2 above indicated that 62 out the 100 respondents had negative perceptions. This was confirmed by the number of respondents who had scores ranging from 24 - 1 and 48 - 25 negative perceptions categories respectively. To describe whether they have negative perception or positive perceptions, the data showed that overall majority of the respondents had negative perceptions. This is because overall, (62%) out of hundred respondents as against (36%) out of hundred respondents had negative perceptions. This is because individually out of the total number of the respondents, (62%) had the higher percentage as against (36%) respondents. Just (2%) were neutral.

It could therefore be concluded that, the statistical analysis showed many participants had negative perception about unmarried women. This finding supports other studies that found similar results (Byrne, 2000; DePaulo & Morris, 2005; Hertel, Depaulo, Morris, Schütz, & Stucke (2007). Participants' ideas about unmarried women appeared to have been limited to a narrow definition of singlehood which largely influenced their perceptions.

Results from the interviews show that many participants thought that unmarried women are *high time people* and thus live a high *time* lifestyle. According to them, a *high time* woman is a woman who likes dressing loudly from head to toes. That is, to them unmarried women dress in expensive clothing, shoes and accessories. As a result of this, many men fear to approach them thinking that they will not be able to afford these expensive clothes when they should marry them. Here is the excerpt from Mamme Efuah:

> A woman who is over 30 years unmarried many of them like "high time" life that is why they don't want to marry. Perhaps they don't want to stop enjoying life. The way they dress, the high heels and the make ups that they wear make men to be afraid of them. Because the men think if they should marry them they have to be buying all those expensive dresses and stuffs which will drain their coffers. Some of the men use their dresses to predict their spending so they won't approach them.

Many of the respondents also shared the perceptions, that happiness is tied to marriage. Independence here means being able to make decisions concerning one's life as an unmarried woman, provide one's needs, being economically and financially stable and not under any man's, parent's or friend's control due to any economic and financial support. Six respondents shared this perception. To them a woman will not be happy without a man even if she is independent. According to them, a woman who is independent and economically sound will be unhappy especially if she does not have any child. Besides, they indicated that, irrespective of an unmarried woman's independence and money, she cannot *sleep* with her money unless she has a man in her life. Below is an excerpt from Mr. Kofi:

> It is good an unmarried woman works but she cannot "sleep with her money". This is because, at a point in many people's lives, they would like to fulfil their sexual desires so irrespective of woman's independence, she needs to marry. In our society, a woman is not complete until she is having a man in her life.

The views of Alhaji were not different from those of Mr. Kofi.

> In our society, a woman can have all the money but if she is not married she won't be happy. This is because in our society we cherish marriage so much so gossip from people around her won't even give her a piece of mind until she is married

especially if she does not have children.

It appears from the excerpts that a single women's unhappiness is not about their marriage per se rather how others see them, what others say, think, and do to do them or about them. Again, the above excerpts appear to suggest that a woman needs a man/family to be happy. This idea is limited thinking and problematic, because an individual's happiness may not necessarily depend on the presence of family members or a man. But this seems to be what many respondents thought.

Additionally, some respondents opined that a woman's character was a necessary factor for marrying early. Due to this, many of the respondents shared a perception that many unmarried women are having character problems. That is, unmarried women were perceived to have led bad life styles like chasing men when they were quite younger. As a result of unmarried women's bad character, when they are finally of age to marry, it may be very difficult for them to get a partner. Apart from that, respondents indicated that many unmarried women are unfriendly thus men find it difficult to approach them.

Here is an excerpt from Alhaji:

> If a girl began to chase all kinds of men early as she grows up, men may not be willing to marry her because they think she is a prostitute so some women grow up not marrying due to their promiscuous life style. Again, some do not know how to respect, be submissive and also some like chasing men around. So if men around her know such behaviour for her they won't want to marry her.

This perception aligns with Morris, Sinclair and DePaulo (2004) which were quoted in Byrne and Carr (2005:85) whose findings showed that "Unmarried persons often are viewed as responsible for their single status due to some 'characterological' flaw or *blemish* such as promiscuity, immaturity, self-centeredness, or a lack of personal discipline." The above excerpt depict participants' idea of how they thought "some women" i.e. unmarried women fit a particular mold of behavior but failed to talk about how "other women" (remaining single women) do not fit that mold. From the participants' points of view, all human beings do not behave in the same way. Thus, negative behaviours of one woman does not mean all unmarried women show same negative behaviours. Nevertheless, the participants seemed to blame all single women for their circumstances i.e. they are single because something is wrong with them but not that something is wrong with the men or the society.

Furthermore, on the issue of the emotional status of the unmarried woman, the results from the interviews showed that many respondents believed that unmarried women suffer emotionally more than their married counterparts. According to a respondent, some unmarried women even go to the extent of drinking too much alcohol. Here are some of the excerpts that attest to this evidence of people's perceptions.

Miss Adwoa:

> Yes because before I married some months ago I went through a lot of emotional stress as a result of how people talk to me and they behave towards me. Those days I wish I had my way out to perform magic to get a man early. I was emotionally tortured and afraid because I thought I was growing old. I did not know whether I will be able to conceive. People's behaviours towards me as at that time had worsened the situation. So many women especially if they are in their 30s and unmarried suffer emotionally.

Besides, Mr Bright also confirmed this by saying:

> Yes of course. This is because some might have indulged in relationships that they had disappointments so when they are alone they think about the past. They feel unhappy and sad."

The above excerpts indicate that many respondents are of the view that, women who remain single tend to think more than their married counterparts. This thinking affects their emotions than a woman who is married. Hence, many of them look sad and think more than their married counterparts do.

From these findings, it is evident that some participants showed a subtle or slight degree of difference in the way participants viewed unmarried woman. That is, these sets of participants indicated a fairly positive perception. The nuance in regard to the participants' perceptions is indicative that a smaller proportion of people have begun to see single status as a normal way of life thus suggesting a little acceptance of single status.

Conclusion

Many of the respondents believe that a woman needs a man because marriage is a cherished value in Ghana. Thus, if a woman is of age but not married, people around her may form so many perceptions about her. The data presented have shown that, many respondents believe that, if a woman is of age to have married but remain single, people think perhaps, she is too selective, a high time woman; she might have character problem, chasing too much education, does not want to marry and perhaps her suitor does not have money to marry her.

The data presentation and findings also revealed that many respondents appeared to have more negative than positive perceptions about unmarried women. The results from the questionnaires revealed that

more than 60% of the respondents showed negative perceptions about unmarried women as against 35% positive attitude. This was confirmed by findings from the interviews where many of the participants showed negative perceptions. This result corroborates with DePaulo and Morris (2005) that unmarried women face negative perceptions as a result of their status. Though the statistical analysis showed that many participants had negative perceptions, their idea about unmarried women appeared to have been limited to the narrow definition of singlehood.

Again, the data also indicated that, the negative perceptions that people have about unmarried women tend to blame single women for their situations, and that the single woman has something wrong with her but not that something is wrong with the men, the society/cultural norms.

In addition, the findings also showed that many married people especially, the married females appeared to have shown more negative perceptions about unmarried women than the single males and the females.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusion of the study, the following recommendations were made:
  i.   It is recommended that laws on all manner of negative comments, marginalization, and stigmatization of people especially, the unmarried women should be enforced by law enforcement agencies and institutions. This will help prevent all forms of marginalization, stigmatizations about unmarried women hence, enable people to make life time choices they want to make.
  ii. Besides, there is the need for education and awareness creation to sensitize people about the need for change in societal norms to pave way for respect for people irrespective of their marital status. This sensitization can be done by Ministry of Gender, Children and Social protection. This is because negative perceptions about unmarried especially, women can make them have low self-esteem.
  iii. Again, tertiary institutions should increase specialty areas concerning gender issues. The issue of unmarried women should be incorporated in these specialties
  iv. Lastly, Civil Society Organizations and NGOs interested in women issues should encourage women especially, unmarried ones to get involved and fully participate in development of their societies to help project them positively.

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