

What it is Like to be Single: Experiences of Unmarried Female Professionals in Ghana

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Abstract

Being married is regarded as a significant social and developmental duty. However, the absence of such a connection frequently results in societal stigmatization and marginalization. The study explored the lived experiences of unmarried female professionals in Ghana. The study adopted a qualitative approach and a phenomenological design. Fifteen unmarried female professionals were selected using the snowball sampling technique. Data was accumulated through the use of an interview. The data were analyzed in themes. The study found among other reasons, that attaining a high level of education, setting a high standard in life, fear of being disappointed, and enjoyment of singlehood were reasons why unmarried female professionals remained single. The study again revealed that society made several verbal and nonverbal comments or reactions that stereotyped and discriminated against the lives of single female professionals. Such comments as “when are you getting married?”, “you are old, get married,” husband snatcher,” among others, were found. The results also showed that these stereotypes and discriminatory practices against single female professionals have negative psychological effects, including feelings of unhappiness, anxiety about staying single forever, shyness, and the stress of peer, family, workplace, and community pressure to get married. It was found that single female professionals were dissatisfied with their current marital status. Also, peers, co-workers and family members put pressure on single female professionals to get married. As a result, recommendations were made in light of the study.

Keywords: Single, Experiences, Unmarried, Female professionals

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1. Introduction

Being single can be a unique experience for many individuals, especially among professional females who are actively pursuing their career goals. While some may view being single as a period of independence and self-discovery, others may feel a sense of loneliness or social pressure to find a partner. Moreover, professional females may encounter additional challenges as they navigate the dating world while balancing the demands of their careers. In this context, being single can be both liberating and challenging, with its own set of unique experiences and perspectives. In social hierarchies, people who chose to get married and are currently married are regarded more highly than those who have previously been married and, finally, those who have never been married. Although being single is frequently presented as an option for women in today's society, this choice is frequently seen as unhealthy, and single women are unfavorably portrayed as failing to live up to the ideal of a woman (Barak *et al.*, 2014). Independent of any real personality differences, negative stereotypes are ascribed to unmarried people, with singles being viewed as inferior to married people and receiving different treatment (DePaulo & Morris, 2006; Greitemeyer, 2009; Pignotti & Abell, 2009). Many women believe that society expects them to be married, that being single is bad for them, and pressure from their family, friends, and the media to get married (Piatkowski, 2012).

The study was supported by the theories of singlism and social constructivism. Singlism shows that single women are highly stigmatized and discriminated against because other people hold negative perceptions towards them (Bella *et al.*, 2005). Due to this notion, the adult unmarried women experience stigmatization, discrimination, and many other unfavorable judgments; as a result, unmarried females are frequently perceived as less mature and well-adjusted than married women. Social construction theory on the other hand contend that social interactions are the source and upkeep of knowledge (Day *et al.*, 2011). According to this theory, unmarried women internalize and accept the unfavorable opinions others have of them as fact. In other words, unmarried females are assumed to be true to all stereotypes about them, including that they are less satisfied, less successful, less socially adept, and have lower levels of life satisfaction. This study explores the opportunities, difficulties, and societal expectations that shape or discourage the experience of being single among professional women.

There are varieties of reasons for some females to be unmarried, people may not be interested in getting married, such as obstacles to their financial, emotional, or physical well-being, stress in their families, time restraints, limitations in their schooling or careers, personal preferences, and other issues (Allen 2011; Apostolou

et al., 2019). A university education is associated with later marriages, fewer marriages, and being single for the majority of women (Raymo, 2003; Ntoimo & Isiugo-Abanihe, 2011). In other words, a woman is less likely to get married young the more educated she is. The likelihood of getting married decreases with length of education. As a result, there is a perception that a college education is detrimental to marriage. Further, a study by (Ntoimo and Isiugo-Abanihe, 2011) in Nigeria found that males are less likely to propose marriage to women who hold high educational and financial status because they feel frightened by their status. Kent (2016) countered this claim by stating that education does not delay or hinder the marriage of female professionals. Women with at least a bachelor's degree are more likely and willing to get married than women with less education. According to Goldstein and Kenney (2017), a new socioeconomic pattern of first marriages is revealed by educational attainment. They note that while recently graduated college students have greater levels of marriage rates despite the fact that the majority of them put off getting married, educated women historically had lower rates of marriage. Moving ahead, Apostolou *et al.* (2020) discovered that professional women may also desire to be single in order to be liberated to pursue their interests. They also made an argument on the freedom of single women. (For instance, making progress in their employment, flirting more, and growing their social network by spending more time with friends).

These females after remaining single encounter a lot of discrimination and marginalization. Several studies have highlighted the challenges and discrimination that unmarried female professionals face in the family, workplace and society. Studies have it that unmarried females are unfairly and unjustly treated based on their marital status (Bella *et al.* 2005; Clark & Graham 2005; Poortman & Liefbroer 2010; Apostolou *et al.*, 2020). Further, some of the challenges facing unmarried women are pressure from family and friends to find a mate, ambiguous loss, a fear of being alone, complaints about married couples, and biological impacts of aging (Poortman & Liefbroer, 2010; Sharp and Ganong 2011; Bella *et al.*, 2005; Shikha, 2009). Several studies have highlighted the challenges and discrimination that unmarried female professionals face in the workplace. For instance, studies by Bruch *et al.* (2019) and Hsiung *et al.* (2020) found that unmarried female employees are often perceived as less committed to their jobs and are often excluded from social networks in the workplace, which can negatively impact their career development than married female employees. The discrimination and marginalization experienced by unmarried female professionals can also be attributed to societal attitudes towards marriage and gender roles. A study by Smith *et al.* (2021) found that societal expectations of marriage and family often affect the treatment of unmarried women in the society. Similarly, a study by Arndt *et al.* (2020) reported that unmarried female professionals are often viewed as deviating from traditional gender norms, which can result in discrimination and marginalization. Following negative affect and decreased self-esteem as immediate responses to stigmatization and discrimination connected to social acceptance, people may then behave in pro-social, withdrawn/avoidant, or antisocial ways depending on how they perceive, understand, and interpret the event. Unmarried women were again seen as typically less content, having fewer social skills, being less successful, having flaws, and having less life satisfaction. (Clark & Graham, 2005; Greitemeyer, 2009; Sharp & Ganong, 2011).

These discriminatory acts or comments on unmarried females can affect them internally. According to studies, single women endure stigma and isolation, which makes them more vulnerable to mental health conditions like depression, aggression, and obsessive-compulsive disorder. They also struggle with independence and social engagement (Kajbaf 2008; Collins, 2011; Safiri & Shahanavaz, 2016; Qaderzadeh *et al.*, 2017). Adamczyk, (2017) also claimed that being in a committed sexual relationship with a partner satisfies one's need for belonging and makes people happier than those who are alone. In addition, Sharafoddin's (2020) research, also made it clear that, married people are less likely to use drugs or commit suicide than unmarried people. Noorbala (2017), in contrast to the findings aforementioned asserted that those who are single or have never been married have a reduced risk of mental issues than those who are married since they do not go through the difficulties of marriage.

According to Ghana's Population Census (2010) Report, there were 28.2% of women aged 25 to 29 who had never been married, 12.7% aged 30 to 34, 6.4% aged 35 to 39, 4.3% aged 40 to 44, and 3.1% aged 45 to 49. Ghana's Population and Housing Census (2021) found that unmarried females (15,631,579) outweigh unmarried males (15,200,440) overall by 437,139 (2.8%), as well as in urban areas by (5.0%). Investigating this phenomenon was therefore necessary because statistics on unmarried women in Ghana reveal that this population is growing. Conferring to therapists, singleness-related distress is a prevalent issue for female clients between the ages of 30 and 45 (Evetts, 2014). Also, anecdotal records from churches in the Asokore-Mampong Municipality shows that a lot of these unmarried female professionals visit the churches for prayers in search of husbands because they are ageing and this shows how desperate they are in search of life partners.

With counseling implications, it is vital to comprehend how these single female professionals recount to these lived situations. This study explores the opportunities, difficulties, and societal expectations that shape or discourage the experience of being single among unmarried female professionals. This study will also stock the Ghanaian context of experiences of unmarried female professionals, both theoretically and empirically, with the

knowledge and information necessary regarding reasons and effects of unmarried female professionals. The following questions guided the research study:

1. What are the reasons that make unmarried female professionals to remain single?
2. What are the discriminatory acts or comments targeted at unmarried female professionals?
3. How do these discriminatory acts or comments affect these unmarried female professionals?

2. Methods

2.1 Research Design

The study used a qualitative research approach, and the designed was phenomenology. The purpose of the phenomenological design is to understand the significance of an individual's experience with a particular phenomenon (Lichtman, 2010).

2.2 Participants

In this study, the researcher did not have a pre-selected sample to interview when she went to the field. Instead, until she achieved data saturation with the 15th, the researcher spoke with individuals in-depth. As a result, the sample for the study included 15 single female unmarried professionals. The snowball sampling method was used to choose the 15 participants in the Asokore-Mampong Municipality. Using this method, one unmarried female teacher, who was 35 years old was approached. After discussing the study with her and adhering to all protocol requirements, she then acted as a conduit for the remaining 14 participants. Other single female unmarried nurses, bankers, police officers, prison officers and auditors at ages 35 and over were found using the same sample technique.

2.3 Data Collection

Unstructured interview was created and utilized to gather information from participants. By encrypting their identities, I ensured their privacy and established anonymity. The interview audios were password-protected. The essential information was gathered from the unmarried female professionals through interviews. The researcher visited the work places of the chosen participants to request access from their superiors and permission to speak with the unmarried female professionals. They were then given a briefing on how to respond to the items in the protocol. The decision was approved, and arrangements were made to interview the participants at the predetermined day, time, and location. Any queries raised during the debriefing sessions were fully addressed for the participants. The decision to take part in this study was entirely voluntary. A consent form was read and signed by participants, and confidentiality and anonymity were upheld at all times. In addition, participants were told to get in touch with the researcher if they were unsure about continuing so that private information or sensitive material, they might not feel comfortable sharing is not revealed.

The interviews were conducted in two ways: one-on-one and in focus groups (FGD). The focus group method was initially used. The FGD encouraged the participants to open up more and discuss their own experiences with the subject of the study. There were three groups with a total of five individuals in each. A group was questioned in one day in order to give participants the chance for in-depth discussion and clarification. Each FGD lasted for an hour. Additionally, the focus group discussion was followed by the one-on-one interviews. Because they believed other participants would violate the confidentiality rule while the one-on-one interviews were being conducted, the participants were unable to share their stories before using this method. Each one-on-one interview lasted for twenty-thirty minutes. In one day, three participants were interviewed to allow for in-depth discussion and clarification. To make sure the participants were on track with the topic, I closely examined, explained, and watched them. The interview ended when the 15th participant attained saturation. In addition to field notes, the interview data was recorded on a tape recorder.

2.4 Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using themes. To make it simple for the researcher to connect particular responses to the proper individuals, the researcher first translated the raw data into words, cleaned them up, and assigned color codes to the participant responses. The concepts were generated using coding procedures such as reading the data aloud several times, transcribing it, looking for parallels and differences, and clearly expressing thoughts in order to develop categories and themes from the information gathered. This was done through developing codes, making distinctions, and identifying themes. During the interviews, taking field notes gave me more understanding of the various themes that surfaced. The reliability of the data was ensured using a variety of methods. These included extended stays in the field throughout the data collection process, triangulations, reflexivity, peer debriefing, and member checking. The data were reviewed using codes to preserve the confidentiality of the participants. As a result, I used the following codes for the verbatim transcription of participants data: UFP 1, UFP 2, UFP 3, ... and UFP 15 to assess the themes.

3. Findings

The aim of the study leveraged the analysis of the data ascertained. The following results constitute the demographic information (age) of participants and the identified themes from the interviews.

3.1 Age Demography of Participants

The demography of the participants focused on age. Frequency counts and percentages were used to analyse the background information of the respondents. The results show that 2 (representing 13%) of the unmarried female professionals were 35 years. Also, 3 (representing 20%) claimed that they were 36 years old. Further, 1 (representing 7%) proclaimed that she was 37 years old. Moreover, 2 (representing 13%) indicated that they were 38 years old. Lastly, 4 (representing 27%) revealed that they were 40 years old. The results infer that these unmarried female professionals were advancing in age though they had not married.

3.2 Reasons why unmarried female professionals remain single

In order to answer the first research question, five themes were drawn from the narrative accounts and presented.

3.2.1 Attainment of high level of education

In regard to obtaining a high degree of education, a participant expressed her opinion as: *"Hmm... As for myself, I intended to climb the scholastic ladder to a high degree before considering who I should marry. I had no idea that I would eventually wish to be married yet be unable to find a responsible man to do so"* (UFP8). Another participant added that: *"As I was growing up, I prioritized my schooling over getting married. I therefore believe it is a contributing cause to my current situation"* (UFP3). Moreover, this is what another had to say: *"One thing I have learned in life is that most of the time, a married woman's husbands do not appreciate her if she does not have a good status in society. I wanted to achieve a high level of education before getting married, not knowing it was a different ball game all together"* (UFP4). These assertions were confirmed in the focus group discussion as a discussant shared that: *"It's highly beneficial for women to advance in life before getting married. While I was growing up, this was my main priority. I had no idea that it might one day work against me"* (focus group discussion).

The participants' comments suggest that they had high aspirations for their education and paid more attention to it than their marriage. They did not want thoughts about marriage and relationships to distract them from their studies. Their preconceived views about a woman's place in life before marriage played a role in their current circumstance.

3.2.2 Fear of disappointments

A participant shares her story on her dread of disappointments from unsuccessful relationships with male partners, saying: *"I come from a household where women experience a lot of heartbreaks before deciding on a man to marry. As a result, I suppressed that fear, which is having a severe impact on my ability to get married"* (UPF1). Another participant also added: *"I don't like disappointment in life at all but it seems that is all that I get. In fact, I made a decision to avoid failed relationships and this has landed me into this mess"* (UPF4). While some of the participants, talked about disappointments from failed relationships this was what a participant in the focus group discussion who rose in a divorced family because her father was abusive had to say: *"Growing up in an abusive family, seeing my mother being beaten up by my father, seeing them always quarrelling and not sharing a single love and happy moment, witnessing my mother always worried and terrified makes me think that marriage is an institution which is designed to control, oppress and suppress women. Having that in mind every time always makes me feel that I will be disappointed one day when I marry"* (focus group discussion).

The participants comments imply that they swore not to date because they were afraid of being let down by a relationship. These remarks also imply that these individuals choose not to be in a relationship that might not end in marriage in order to avoid becoming a victim of that. Again, the comments show that these participants were gripped by fear of experiencing relationship disappointment.

3.2.3 Desire to maintain the freedom as a single woman

With regard to desire to maintain the freedom as single woman, a participant shares her views as: *"In growing up, I told myself that I will enjoy singlehood to the fullest. My reason was that I did not want to be in a relationship where my guy will put unnecessary pressure on me"* (UFP15). This claim was affirmed by a discussant from the focus group who described her story by saying: *I realised that in most cases, men want to know every detailed information about the lady they are in a relationship with. This implies that these ladies cannot have their freedom. To avoid this situation, I vowed not to be in a relationship till I have realised that I have enjoyed my singlehood to the completest"* (focus group discussion).

The comments from these participants demonstrate that they purposed in their heart to enjoy their single life to the maximum. The comments also signify that these participants wanted to escape the condition where their guys would mount needless pressure on them in the relationship. The comments further depict that these participants wanted to enjoy their freedom at their youthful stage without allowing a man to put pressure on them as a result of a relationship.

3.2.4 High career focus

In line with high career focus one of the participants has this to say: *“I wanted to complete my education, and start my own business before thinking about whom to marry. To achieve these goals, I realised that I was also ageing. This explains why I have not married till now”* (UFP9). A discussant also established this assertion and disclosed that *“Apart from being a teacher, I have other private business doing and it is fetching me a lot of money. I can say that I have everything but I am still not complete as a woman all is because I wasted much time on building my career* (focus group discussion).

The participants statements implies that the ambition of career choice was a factor in their current situation (unmarried female professional). The comments again signifies that these participants concentrated more on their career than being in a relationship that could lead to marriage one day.

3.2.5 Superstition

Concerning superstition, participant 4 said: *“Hmmm... Just last two days, I locked the door of my room and wept bitterly. I even asked God why I am still single though I have all the qualities a lady should have. I think my case is more spiritual”* (UFP4). In furtherance, a discussant from the focus group added: *“I am very sure I have been bewitched by my family members not to get married. I am saying this because I am the only one with the highest degree amongst them and I am very presentable too but up till now I am not married”* (focus group discussion).

These participant's comments suggest that they are of the opinion that they possess all the traits required of a woman, yet they are still single. Their remarks also show that they believed their current status can be more appropriately attributed to supernatural influences. This may indicate that the participants thought their marital state are more spiritual than physical.

Based on these premises, the study came to the conclusion that the reasons why unmarried female professionals in Asokore-Mampong Municipality remained single included obtaining a high level of education, fear of disappointment, enjoyment of singleness, a strong focus on one's career and superstition were waiting in line for these women.

3.3 Discriminatory acts or comments targeted at unmarried female professionals

To identify various actions and comments of members of the community that constitute discriminations and stereotyping against the unmarried female professionals within the Asokore-Mampong Municipality, four themes were identified. Some of the comments from the participants affirm the themes as follows:

3.3.1 You are old, marry

Based on you are old, marry a participant said: *“I realized that anytime there will be a social gathering and I go there, I will see several girls talking about me. They sometimes discuss me to the extent that I will hear them mentioning my name in the discussion that I should get married and that I am growing”* (UPF5). Another unmarried female professional added that: *“there was a small misunderstanding between my younger sister and I, and my Mum told me that I am old to marry so I should get married and move to my husband's house and leave them in peace”* (UPF11). A discussant also shared her story as: *“For me it was my co-worker who insulted me and hooted at me that I should marry ooo, I should marry for I am old to marry”* (focus group discussion).

Unpleasant verbal attacks against the single female professionals were evident in the comments, which clearly displayed discrimination and stereotypes. The comments give the impression that whenever individuals attend programs, they become the subject of conversation and family members and co-workers also attack these participants during petty quarrels.

3.3.2 Husband snatcher

In line with husband snatcher a participant has this to say; *“It is not easy to be unmarried as a woman at my age. My experience includes the fact that married women see me and refer to me as a husband snatcher who need to be monitored”* (UFP7). Another participant also said: *“When I interact or even work closely with a man who is married, once they know I am unmarried those around will start talking about me even at times to my face that I should be careful because the gentleman is married and that they know the wife”* (UFP2). A discussant also affirms the assertions and exclaimed that: *“I was addressed by a friend's wife as husband snatcher and due to this I am unable to keep males as friends and sometimes as working partners because their wives refer to me as wanting to take their husbands away from them”* (focus group discussion).

The responses show that unmarried professional women endure stereotypes and discrimination in many areas of their social lives. It demonstrates how prejudiced remarks are destroying the socialization of single female professionals as well as their self-esteem.

3.3.3 Submissiveness to a man

With being submissive to a man, one participant disclosed that: *“I have on several occasions been referred to as being too loud in the midst of men at my workplace, and that I needed to be obedient, if not I will never ever get a man to marry me”* (UFP 13). A discussant added: *“I have also been told before that my inability to find a man to marry is because I am not subservient and that as a woman who needs a husband, I need to submit to the whims and caprices of men”* (focus group discussion). In furtherance this is what another discussant said:

Hmm...I was told by my ex-boyfriend that I lord over him, and this always happened when I try to be assertive (focus group discussion).

According to the participant and discussants' accounts, some community members' behaviours suggested that unmarried female professionals were not humble and that they need to humble themselves if they want a man to marry them.

3.3.4 Unfair treatments from family members

In line with unfair treatments from family members, a discussant had these stories to tell: *"Some of my family members look at me differently whenever we go for family meetings. I perceive that indirectly they are telling me to get married"* (focus group discussion). One of the discussants describes: *"Hmmm...I remember one day, my family members and I went to a funeral at our home town, when we arrived, one of my Auntie's declared that she had reserved rooms for all family members who were married. I became very sad after that declaration"* (focus group discussion). Similarly, a participant confirmed these assertions by saying: *"Sometimes, when there is the need to share something in the family, those individuals who are married are taken care of first before those of us who are not married. I think this practice is not good at all"* (UFP5). Another participant also added: *"One day I had to fight with my Aunt. The cause of this fight was that she intentionally gave what belongs to me to my younger sister just because she is married"* (UFP1). Again, one of the participants emphatically said: *"I have realized that the respect I had in the sight of my siblings had reduced drastically, all because I am not married"* (UFP7).

The statements from these participants indicate that some family members scrutinize these individuals from head to toe when they attend family events and they also lacked regard for them. The comment implies once more that these participants were unhappy with these circumstances and had lost their family members' respect as a result.

3.4 How these discriminatory acts or comments and reactions affects the unmarried female professionals.

Research question three was to explore how discriminatory acts or comments and reactions to their marital status affect their daily life. It was realised from the comments given by the participants that these unmarried female professionals were affected negatively about the discriminatory acts or comments and reactions on their marital status. Five themes were identified. The following comments were advanced by participants to support the themes.

3.4.1 Unhappy and Moody

With regard to unhappy and moody, a participant aptly stated: *"I am not happy at all whenever I see all my friends around me married and I am still not married"* (UFP14). Another participant also added her voice by saying: *"I don't like the way some individuals treat me because I am still single at my age. I sometimes cry because of the way they treat me"* (UFP7). Similarly, the assertion in the theme was supported by a discussant from the focus group who shared that: *"I become sad when my family members especially my mum treat me badly because I am single. Because of that I have vowed that any man that will propose to me, I will accept and marry him like that"* (focus group discussion). Again, another response from a discussant who looked so sad said: *"I have been sad in recent times. All because I have not gotten married at age 40. Sometimes, I will be in my room and be crying all day long now that I am on leave. Hmmm. This situation becomes worse when my parents too are asking me when I will come home to introduce to them the man that I want to marry"* (focus group discussion).

Comments from these participants suggest that they had been in a sorrowful mood and feel sad because of the situation they find themselves in. These comments also further signify that people around them do not treat them well and that they had almost given up their fate and have now decided to accept any man who comes their way.

3.4.2 Fear of remaining single forever

Another theme that emerged was fear of remaining single forever. In line with this theme a participant had this to say: *"I become emotionally down whenever I see some of my colleagues getting married and fear that I can never get married. Though I make conscious effort to deal with it, the more I do, the harder it becomes for me to control it"* 'Cries' (UFP3). Similarly, another discussant lamented: *"For some days now, I locked the door of my room and wept for almost the whole day. People are even complaining that am growing lean. I don't eat and I am most of the time emotionally down all because I fear I may not marry in my lifetime"* (focus group discussion).

The fact that the participants are single has a negative impact on their social and emotional lives. The comments imply that because these people are single, they were unable to attend their classmates' weddings. It was concluded based on these results that these discriminatory acts or comments and reactions adversely affected the emotion and social life of an unmarried female professional in Asokore-Mampong Municipality.

3.4.3 Being Mocked at or Ridiculed

Concerning mockery or ridicule a participant reveals her feelings towards her marital status by saying: *"There*

had been a number of times I saw some girls laughing at me. When I confronted them, they denied? This had not been the first time I had experienced this scenario” (UFP8). Another participant also had this to share: “When I see people who want to make a mockery of me because I am not married, I find it hard to hold my patience. Though I have worn some of them but the problem still persists” (UFP1). Similarly, a discussant was also in support of what the participant said and echoed this: “I can’t go to some public gatherings because I feel like I will be teased when I go. But if I don’t go too, then, I receive complains from my friends who may attend such gatherings” (focus group discussion).

The comments infer from the participants show that, some ladies laughed at these participants because they are not married. The comments further connote that these participants do not like this mockery and had made a conscious effort to stop it, but the problem continues. From these comments in general, it was concluded that discriminatory acts or comments and reactions unmarried female professionals feel about their marital status included lack of respect and being laughed at.

3.4.4 Shyness

Another emerging theme that came up was shyness. In mark with this theme a participant had this to share: “*I wished by now I had married. As I told you earlier, I am growing old and you are already aware that for women if we don’t give birth early, we may face some challenges later on. The most unfortunate part is that I can’t mingle with my friends who are now married because I feel shy” (UFP2). Again, another participant reported that: “I often feel shy whenever I meet my friends who are married or about to get married. For this reason, I most of the time do not honour programs I am likely to meet such friends especially those who have married” (UFP7). Correspondingly, a discussant shared this in support of what the participants said: “Hmm...Whenever we meet as girls-girls, there are a lot of issues we discuss and one of them is marriage. For some time now, I hardly go to functions where I will meet my friends who will talk about marriage. My reason is that as we speak, I am not married and feel shy to be in their midst while they discuss this topic of marriage” (focus group discussion). Likewise, another discussant also reported: “I sometimes look at myself in a mirror and cry the whole day. I don’t understand. All my mates are getting married and I am not. Meanwhile, I am more beautiful than many of them who are married now. Or is it my destiny? ... Hmmm, oooo God, please help me! I always feel shy about myself” (focus group discussion).*

Participants comments suppose that they desired to have married by now and they were not getting it easy whenever they meet their friends who are now married. The comments also presume that these participants felt shy whenever they meet as friends because they had not married. Their remarks also signify that, they see themselves as marriage material and believed they are more beautiful than their colleagues who had married, however, they are not married.

3.4.5 Burden of pressure

With regard to pressure, a participant has this to share about the pressure from family members; “*My parents are giving me too much pressure to get married. Meanwhile, I am not the cause of the problem. For this reason, I don’t want to even visit them to bring this issue on board for discussion” (UPF6). Another participant also added: Frankly speaking, the pressure my mum is giving me is too much. For this reason, I hardly call or visit her. Because as soon as I call or visit her, she will raise the issue” (UFP9). This is what a discussant also disclosed to confirm the participants assertion: “Some of you are lucky the pressure is coming from your family members; Me my co-workers and friends would not let me be. Every day they are on me to marry and at times I do not feel like talking to them” (focus group discussion).*

Comments from these participants connote that they perceived that their parents, family members, co-workers and friends were not making things so easy for them concerning their marital issues. It could be inferred from their comments that this circumstance had brought about a communication gap between these participants and their parents, family members, co-workers and friends. Based on the responses given by these participants it could be deduced that there were diverse states of conditions of not being married.

The comments, in general, infer that while some of these unmarried female professionals feel sad about their current situation, others could not associate with their friends, especially those who are married. Based on these results it was concluded that feeling nervous about not being married, unhappy and pressured by family, peers, co-workers, and community members were how unmarried female professionals feel about their marital status. Also, the findings indicated that these discriminatory attitudes and practices towards unmarried female professionals have a detrimental psychological effect on them.

4. Discussion

The key findings of the responses of the participants indicated that, unmarried professional females reported reasons for being unmarried. Themes such as one’s desire to maintain the freedom as single woman, attain high level of education, high career focus, setting of high standards in life, fear of disappointments from failed relationships with male partners, the pleasure and comfort in singlehood and superstition for these females were reasons why the participants remain unmarried. In this respect, the present findings are consistent with the results

reported by Allen (2011); Raymo (2013); Apostolou *et al.*, (2019); Apostolou *et al.*, (2020). These studies showed that a university degree is linked to later marriages, fewer marriages, and on the freedom domain of unmarried women preferring to be single in order to be free to do the things they have wanted (e.g., flirting around, advancing their careers, and enhancing their social network by spending more time with friends). Consequently, there is a belief that higher education has a bad impact on marriage. This can be argued that in Ghana, education leads young women to have greater influences over the timing of marriage in that, a woman can have a respectable job after second degree and she would be 27 to 30 years of age. This age group is also viewed as too old and unattractive. Ghanaian males like young women because they want quiet, meek, submissive, and productive (childbearing) wives that they can manage. Hence, there is the perception that higher education is negatively related to marriages.

On the contrary to the findings, Kent (2016); Goldstein and Kenney (2017) argued that education does not prevent female professionals from getting married or delay women's marriages. Kent's study shows that women with at least a bachelor's degree are more likely and willing to get married than women with less education. Goldstein and Kenney stated that educational attainment reveals a new socioeconomic pattern of first marriages. They pinpoint that whereas educated women in the past were less likely to be married, recent college graduates have higher levels of marriage rates even though most of them delay marriages.

The study also established from the responses that, unpleasant verbal attacks targeting the unmarried female professional which showed clear forms of discriminations and stereotyping. There was an indication that, unmarried female professionals are being discriminated and stereotyped against in various facets of their social life. The discriminatory comments are killing their socializations and even the self-esteem of the unmarried female professionals. The findings concur that of Bella *et al.* (2005) theory of singlism. The theory was used by Bella *et al.* (2005) to study singles and their place in society and science. Its premises include the assumption that those who are married are happier and more fulfilled than those who do not. The study is also in line with Bruch *et al.* (2019) and Hsiung *et al.* (2020), whose studies suggest that unmarried female employees frequently experience verbal abuse at work because they are seen as less dedicated to their jobs and frequently left out of social networks at work due to societal expectations of marriage and family. The finding also supports the findings of Smith *et al.* (2021) and Arndt *et al.* (2020) who discovered that unmarried female professionals are frequently treated unfairly in society due to societal expectations of marriage and family life.

The study also ascertained from participants responses that, there were diverse states of conditions unmarried female professionals experience. Their comments, in general, infer that they feel sad, low self-esteem, feeling nervous, loneliness, ridiculed, unhappy and pressure from family, peers, co-workers, and community members were how unmarried female professionals feel about their marital status.

This finding supports the claims made by Poortman and Liefbroer (2010), Safiri and Shahanavaz (2016), Collins (2011), Qaderzadeh *et al.* (2017), and Kajbaf (2008) that singles experience difficulties with being single, including sadness, social isolation, worry about the future, pressure to find a partner from family and friends, ambiguous loss, fear of being alone, complaints about married couples, and biological effects of aging. Additionally, the results support those of Bella *et al.* (2005), Shikha (2009), Sharp and Ganong (2011), who discovered that challenges of singlehood include pressure from family and friends to be partnered, ambiguous loss, fear of being alone, complaints about married couples, being less happy, having fewer social skills, being less successful, being flawed, and having less life satisfaction. Adamczyk, (2017) also avowed that having a partner satisfies one's need for belonging, and those engaged in committed sexual relationships are happier than those who are alone. It can be argued that as women aged, watching other people get married, increasing concerns over the viability of becoming pregnant later in life, increased attention paid to their single status, and feeling displaced in their birth families when a younger sibling married and had children before them can easily lead to the aforementioned difficulties in female unmarried professionals. Contrary to the study's findings, Noorbala *et al.* (2017) claimed that persons who are single or have never been married had a lower risk of mental problems than those who are married. This can be contended that these unmarried females do not experience the challenges of marriage and for that matter may not experience high mental problems but they do experience a lot of psychological effects according to the findings of this study.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The majority, of the unmarried female professionals in the Asokore-Mampong Municipality who participated in this study were continuing their journey of singlehood. Many of them had already taken a long pathway, but the hopefulness in them drives them ahead. They had been in one or two relationships but did not end up in marriage. Though they had all gone through failed relationships before, they were still hoping one day things would work out for their good. It was perceived that unmarried female professionals in the Asokore-Mampong Municipality desired marriage, but due to one or two reasons, they could not have one. All the unmarried female professionals in the Asokore-Mampong Municipality had a particular cause for their singlehood. While some attributed it to setting a high standard of education and career, others wanted to enjoy singlehood. Also, unmarried female

professionals suffered a lot of psychological, emotional and social stigma. This emotional and social suffering were mainly caused by their inability to get married. This situation negatively affected their psychological well-being. This unmarried female professional had to face blame and neglect for their inability, which heightened up their misery. They were pressurized by their parents, especially mothers, friends and neighbors to get married via verbal and non-verbal comments and reactions. They faced questions about their singlehood in social gatherings repeatedly and some of them decided to keep themselves away from such functions.

Based on the findings and conclusions, it was recommended that, parents/guardians should be educated by professional counsellors, church counsellors during social gatherings on the relevance to motivate their female children to factor in their marriages while planning for their future. This would help them not to avoid lining suitors at the peak of their marital stage. There should also be public education in the Asokore-Mampong Municipality about the psychological effects of discriminatory acts and comments against unmarried female professionals and how they can help minimize the effects. Society should be taught through open forums by counsellors, pastors and Imams that marriage is not the only way to be successful in life. Africans, and especially Ghanaians, should change the way they think about marriage and how they see it. It should not be a measure of how much a young man or woman is worth and what they have done in their lives. To overcome all these challenges there should be a social support system designed by the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection Department in collaboration with social welfare and professional counsellors within the municipality to assist unmarried females professionals and all other unmarried women to build confidence in such women. These stakeholders should set up single female groups and around the country, like the ones we had in the focus group, where single women can meet and talk about important issues. Churches, schools, families, and other socialization agencies should also set up social activities and programs to help single people deal with their single lives. The program should also target developing the psychological and emotional intelligence, of single women to develop enough thick skin to be able to resist the attacks from members of the society.

6. Limitations of the Study

Although the researcher made an effort to entice the women to participate by setting up proper communication and outlining the confidentiality of the information, some of the women's lack of participation during the interview was a constraint in this study. Furthermore, very few of the participants could not control their emotions while sharing their stories and this may affect their contribution to the study. This made the researcher pause and showed empathy (such as by giving words of assurance that they could still get married, tapped their shoulders and embraced them). This helped them to get to a stable condition before continuing with the interview. For this reason, the time indicated to be used for the interviews was extended a bit.

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