



A Sociological Study of the Causes of Women Remaining Unmarried

Upali Weerakoon

Senior Lecturer, Department of Sociology, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka

ABSTRACT

Marriage and the family are closely related social structures, with the family structure itself depending on the institution of marriage. Both stem from the necessity of society to regulate and legitimize the union of individuals. This study aims to explore the unmarried status of women in Sri Lanka, focusing on the factors influencing their marital status. The qualitative research methodology was employed and the study utilized the semi-structured interviews method to collect data from 15 women living in the Yatinuwara Ganga province, focusing primarily on Kiribathkumbura East and Kiribathkumbura West domains of Pilapitiya. Study reveals that women's unmarried status has been influenced by several economic, social and cultural factor. Accordingly, poverty and its ramifications on dowry in Sinhala society was the major economic factor led to being unmarried while study identified that broken family and eldest sibling responsibilities and love brake up have led to the women's unmarried status. However, cultural elements are important when thinking about marriage, and among the women in the research sample, astrological incompatibility and mismatches between partners, as well as caste differences in married unions, were highlighted as cultural factors that contributed to their single status. In addition, women's marriages are hindered by broken families, situations in which the woman takes on the role of the eldest, and the frequent disruption of educational pursuits. They remain single much past the traditional marriageable age due to the complex interactions between social norms and family dynamics.

Key words: Dowry, Marriage, Family, Unmarried women

Introduction

The institution of marriage is a ubiquitous and fundamental social construction in society worldwide, serving as a mechanism to regulate and uphold the complexities of human sexuality. Stemming from the societal need to control and legitimize the union of individuals, marriage and family are intricately linked social institutions, with the family structure itself contingent on the institution of marriage. This symbiotic relationship is deeply influenced by the social, cultural, religious, and economic foundations unique to each society, shaping the diverse manifestations of marriage based on the prevailing social context. Sociologists, recognizing the pivotal role of marriage in societal existence, have directed considerable attention to its study. The significance of marriage is underscored by societal beliefs, particularly in the context of monogamy, where the union is perceived as being between one man and one woman. This traditional view ensures the societal legitimacy and acceptance of children born within the marital relationship as the offspring of both parents, emphasizing the societal importance of marriage for the continuity and well-being of society (Gough, 1993).

The definition of marriage extends beyond monogamy, with other forms of marriage identified. Polygamy and polyandry forms globally. According to Murdock's world ethnographic sample, signifies a prevalence of polygamous marriages, accounting for a substantial percentage (75%) of such unions (Nassi, 1978). Certain societies have advanced further, embracing same-sex marriage, exemplified by the Netherlands, Sweden, and United States, etc. These progressive societies recognize marriages between individuals of the same gender, whether between two men (gay) or two women (Lesbian) (Kumara, 2008). The evolution of marriage has seen diverse forms emerge, yet the core remains the acceptance of legal sexual relations between a man and a woman. This acceptance may be a product of legal frameworks or cultural norms within respective societies. In modern developments, marriages are duly registered, engaging in a legal contract that necessitates legal procedures for dissolution if either party seeks to terminate the union voluntarily.

Societal norms play a pivotal role in the selection of suitable marriage partners, with endogamy and exogamy representing prevalent paradigms. Endogamy involves choosing a partner from within one's own community, often influenced by factors such as class or tribe. Sri Lanka, in particular, places substantial emphasis on these endogenous factors, where disparities in traits can significantly impact the decision to remain celibate. Conversely, exogamy advocates partnering beyond traditional boundaries, influenced by factors like career pursuits, migration, and co-education, contributing to the changing dynamics of marital choices. Human sexuality, a natural and essential process in societal growth and reproduction, finds expression through marriage, acting as a nexus between nature and culture. Beyond serving as a means for sexual satisfaction, marriage is a complex institution with social functions.

Married couples are expected to live in mutual bonds, maintaining kinship relationships vital for societal survival, particularly in the upbringing of children. Societal norms regarding the constancy of marriage until the birth of the first child vary, with some societies not adhering to this convention (Herath, 1999). In universally accepted monogamy, mutual consent between both male and female parties is integral. The institution of marriage necessitates the agreement of both parties to prevent the potential of celibacy. However, across societies, instances of both men and women remaining unmarried exist, prompting limited studies to delve into the reasons behind this phenomenon. This study specifically examines the unmarried status of women in Sri Lanka, focusing on the factors influencing their marital choices. Accordingly, this study mainly intends to examine and detect the impact of economic factors on female singleness, to investigate and comprehend the impact of cultural variables on the phenomena of celibacy, to explore the role and impact of social variables in contributing to women's celibacy. Thus, these goals constitute a systematic framework for the study, with the goal of providing detailed insights into the various factors impacting the marital choices of women over 50 in the defined geographic and cultural setting.

Marriage, as the sanctioned framework for procreation, plays a crucial role in the societal order by ensuring the birth of children vital for its continuity and survival. The absence of marriage among women disrupts this established order, hindering the society's ability to realise its desired demographic. Such a scenario not only poses a threat of future member scarcity but also casts a shadow on societal growth. Recognising the significance of marriage in shaping the fabric of society, this study delves into the factors influencing non-marriage, aiming to unravel the complexities of celibacy making a practical as the practical significance. By identifying and understanding these factors, the study contributes valuable insights for policymakers to address these issues systematically. It scrutinises the extent to which socio-economic and cultural factors contribute to celibacy, shedding light on the broader impact of these influences on societal dynamics. Consequently, this study serves as an essential exploration, illuminating the intricate interplay of factors that may lead individuals, particularly women, to avoid or delay marriage, thus enriching our understanding of the societal landscape.

This study's scope is limited because it only looks at single women 50 years of age and older. This restriction was put in place with the understanding that women under the age of 50 might get married during the study period. This linguistic barrier results from the inclination for the native tongue and is addressed in Sinhala for the convenience of studying information. Furthermore, the study only includes single women, and it was difficult to get participants to disclose their marital status. Information disclosure was restricted to academic purposes in order to uphold ethical standards and protect participant identity, guaranteeing participants the privacy of

their personal information. Only two geographic domains were chosen for the study, each having a significant proportion of single women (more than 10) selected according to proximity to facilitate data collection and travel within the study area. These restrictions set the study's framework and emphasise the need for careful interpretation of results falling within these predetermined bounds.

Methodology

In the fabric of society, individuals coexist collectively, sharing and shaping a communal lifestyle. This collective living dynamic gives rise to intricate relationships between the group and the individual, consequently influencing diverse behavioral patterns. Sociological or socio-human scientific research seeks to comprehend the factors that influence or are influenced by human behaviour within this social milieu. The qualitative research method was employed to identify the the unmarried status of women in Sri Lanka, focusing on the factors influencing their marital status. For that, the research utilized the semi-structured interviews method, a comprehensive approach chosen to unravel the nuanced intricacies of the factors impacting the marital choices of women over 50. This method involved in-depth conversations with primary informants, ensuring a rich and contextual understanding of the sociocultural dynamics shaping the unmarried status of women within the selected geographic domain.

This study focuses on the Yatinuwara Divisional Secretariat Division in the Kandy District, which is divided into three primary administrative divisions: the mountain area (Kandu Palatha), the middle area (Mada Palatha), and the river area (Ganga Palatha). There are thirty domains in all, twenty-eight in the central province and seventy-seven in the mountain province. The study focuses on the Ganga province in particular, which was purposefully chosen because of the high number of single women over 50 who live there, offering a thorough demographic representation. The information gathered from this area—which is displayed in the table that goes with it—forms the foundation for a careful investigation of the variables impacting women's single status in this particular geographic and cultural setting.

Table No- 01

Number of unmarried women in Ganga Province of Yatinuwara Divisional Secretariat Division

Division Number	Division	Number of Unmarried women (Above 50)
125	Bulumulla	4
126	Pilapitiya	10

127	Sooriyagoda	6
128	Karuwalawatte	4
129	KiribathKumbura East	10
130	KiribathKumbura West	16
131	Edanduwawa East	3
132	Edanduwawa West	2
133	Gannoruwa East	5
134	Kandakaduwa	7
135	Gannoruwa West	3
136	Gannoruwa Middle	4
137	Paalawa Pahalagama	3
138	Palawa Ihalagama	5
139	Palawa Ihala Mada	4
140	Yahalathanna	2
141	Kobbakaduwa	4
142	Kobbakaduwa Ihala	6
143	Dehigama East	3
144	Dehigama North	3
145	Dehigama South	5
146	Mangalagama	4
147	Diyapalagoda	5
148	Moladanda	5
149	Malgammana	4
150	Ranawana	3
151	Udairiyagama East	5

152	Udairiyagama West	5
153	Dehideniya East	4
154	Dehideniya West	4

Source: GS Reports

The data collection process for this research targeted the unmarried population in the Yatinuvara Ganga province, focusing primarily on Kiribatkumbura East and Kiribatkumbura West domains of Pilapitiya. A total of 26 unmarried women were identified in these domains, and a random sampling method was applied to select 15 participants for in-depth semi-structured interviews. This approach aimed to capture both quantitative and qualitative insights into the factors influencing the unmarried status of these women. Additionally, interactions with officials from the Hayatinuwara Divisional Secretariat in August 2023 contributed valuable context, insights, and verification of study information, enhancing the overall reliability of the research findings.

Findings and Discussion

Women's unmarried status can be influenced by economic, cultural, and social factors. Cultural and social phenomena influence the position of women in a patriarchal culture. As a result, marriage-instilled patriarchal attitudes have affected the marital status of women in Asian societies such as Sri Lanka. On the other hand, the economy has an essential function in developing every institution in society, and it significantly contributes to connecting people with societal circumstances.

Economic Factors

Poverty within Family

A prevailing challenge in Sri Lanka is the pervasive poverty experienced by a significant portion of families. This hardship manifests in an inability to secure basic necessities such as food, clothing, education, and healthcare, highlighting the acute deprivation associated with poverty. Scarce resources further compound the struggle, resulting in modest living conditions with limited facilities. The financial constraints faced by these families often lead to heightened physical vulnerabilities and increased instances of family isolation from broader societal interactions. Familial poverty not only engenders economic difficulties but also gives rise to a myriad of associated issues. The economic strain can disrupt the family's integration with social institutions like religion and education, fostering a sense of hopelessness and dependence. In these circumstances, individuals may resort to maladaptive behaviors, including anti-social conduct and engagement in activities detrimental to physical and mental health, such as drug use. Lack of education, low self-efficacy, social isolation, career

stagnation, and reluctance to adopt saving practices are among the multifaceted consequences of poverty (Handaragama and Rasnayake, 2011, p. 76). The impact of family poverty becomes especially pronounced concerning housing, with families grappling with limited land and inadequate resources to construct decent-quality dwellings. This precarious living situation is further exacerbated by the head of the family's illness and a perpetual lack of consistent income.

In one poignant account, a 68-year-old participant narrates the challenges of familial poverty, emphasizing the absence of a proper home due to her father's paralysis. This dire living circumstance significantly influenced her marital prospects, with marriage proposals faltering upon the revelation of their impoverished state (Age 68 years old, Discussion 07)

Poverty and its Ramifications on Dowry in Sinhala Society

Traditionally, Sinhala social norms leaned towards the involvement of older family members in orchestrating marriages, emphasizing the necessity of the prospective partner's consent. However, a perceptible shift in contemporary times sees the ascendancy of love marriages, diverging from the historical practice. This shift aligns with Western European trends, where marital unions are increasingly rooted in the principles of emotional and physical fulfillment (Kumara, 2017, p. 277).

The confluence of poverty and dowry becomes evident in the struggles faced by young women aspiring to marry. A poignant account illustrates the impact of poverty, as a 67-year-old participant laments the impossibility of providing firewood, symbolizing the economic hardship that thwarted her chances of marriage (Age 67 years old, Discussion 06). The inability to provide dowry significantly influences the marital prospects of young women in Sri Lanka. In the realm of arranged marriages, the expectation of dowry assumes paramount importance. This expectation extends beyond the personal qualities of the woman, encompassing her education, demeanor, and physical appearance. The dearth of dowry, a customary element in many societies, often results in delayed marriages for women, a phenomenon notably absent in countries like India where dowry holds substantial cultural significance (Kumara, 2001).

Cultural Factors

Astrological incompatibility and mismatches between couples

In Sri Lanka, astrology plays a pivotal role in the marital context, with individuals often seeking astrological guidance, especially during weddings. Even those not routinely consulting astrology in their daily lives tend to turn to it when contemplating marriage, commonly referred to as auspicious or moon testing. This practice extends beyond merely comparing predetermined promises; it involves a holistic assessment of various astrological connections to unveil details about the couple's future life. Key

considerations include evaluating whether the husband is destined to be a provider and whether the couple is compatible for a joyful life together. Moreover, assessing the potential for a fruitful union, including the possibility of fortunate offspring, holds significance in traditional Sri Lankan beliefs. The absence of fortunate children, particularly female infertility, has been historically regarded as a disqualifier for marriage, underscoring the enduring cultural influence of astrological considerations in marital decisions (Hettigoda 1999, p. 376). The following statement, however, highlights the significant influence that astrological incompatibility and mismatches between couples have on women's single status.

"My parents looked for marriage proposals for me. The first thing they did in that circumstance was to check the horoscope matching. They were matching horoscopes one by one. But none of them matched my horoscope. So, marriage was not in the cards for me. As a result, I am single and unmarried." (Age 71 years old, Discussion 02)

The discrepancy in astrological compatibility has emerged as a significant factor influencing the unmarried status of young women. Marriage proposals, predominantly rooted in parental consent, often hinge on the alignment of moons—an astrological criterion. The delay and ultimate non-realization of marriage for some women can be attributed to the failure of matching moons, a process in which parents actively participate. The adherence to parental wishes and the acceptance of their opinions on the matter contribute to the broader cultural understanding of marriage not merely as an individual bond but as a lasting alliance between two familial groups. This perspective reflects the foundational principles of upland Sinhala marriage customs, emphasizing enduring connections between groups rather than individuals (Herath 1999). It was also discovered that the forecasts made in their horoscopes contributed to their single status.

"My horoscope predicted that there would be no marriage for me. As a result, I did not consider my marriage." (Age 73 years old, Discussion 04)

Furthermore, birth charts, a tool frequently consulted by astrologers, wield considerable influence over marital decisions. Predictions derived from birth charts have dissuaded some young women from pursuing engagement, as illustrated in the statement of a participant who recalled being told at the time of her birth that marriage would not be in her future. The individual impact of astrological predictions on a person's life choices becomes apparent, highlighting the pervasive trust in astrology, particularly within the Sinhalese community. The influence of astrological factors on the unmarried status of women underscores the cultural and societal significance attached to astrological considerations in shaping marital outcomes.

Caste Disparities in Marital Unions

The Sinhalese caste system, its origins, and evolution have been a subject of historical debate. According to Sinhala historians, a hereditary system of social inequality has prevailed since the early stages of society. While all Sinhalese individuals are part of this system, regional variations, especially between upland and lowland areas, underscore the complexity of the Sinhalese caste structure. Distinct castes exhibit varying degrees of influence, with upland areas experiencing more pronounced caste dynamics (Silva 1997, p. 29). The incongruity in caste alignment significantly impacts the marital status of young women. Narratives revealed that caste considerations play a crucial role in marriage decisions. Instances of caste-related objections leading to the termination of relationships highlight the enduring influence of caste in partner selection.

"I began my love affair with a boy while I was in school. We went to the same school. we were in a long-term relationship. When it came to marriage, the caste problem came up. My parents were vehemently opposed to it. They informed me that he is unsuitable for me since his caste is not the same as ours. Then I chose to live alone."
(Age 57 years old, Discussion 03)

Love relationships, often initiated during school days, demonstrate how caste misalignment can elicit parental objections, potentially causing delays in marriage or prompting individuals to reconsider their relationship choices (Kumara 2017, p. 278). Caste disparities emerge as influential factors shaping marital choices and contributing to the unmarried status of individuals. Notably, discussion number 7 exemplifies how caste-related issues can lead to the cessation of relationships, prompting individuals to pursue separate paths due to familial disapproval. The practice of seeking a spouse within one's caste and the cultural significance placed on same-caste marriages among relatives underscore the persistent impact of caste considerations on marital decisions (Herath, 1999, p. 182).

Social Factors

Broken Family and Eldest Sibling Responsibilities

A fractured family, which includes situations where parents pass away, get divorced, or separate, puts more obligations on the oldest family member, which is usually the oldest male. Nonetheless, the oldest female member assumes this duty in the event that the male members are not present. The research revealed cases where the death of the father placed financial obligations on the oldest family member, who was typically employed in manufacturing jobs like clothing or tea. The family was able to meet its various expenses, including schooling and other needs for younger family members, thanks to the monthly earnings from these endeavours. One of the

interviewees related a moving story about taking on family responsibilities and how it affected their decision to delay marriage.

"When I was in the ninth grade of school, his father disappeared... and his mother could not do anything... she was sick... then my sister also studied in a small class... I went to garment after a while... I worked in one garment... What I earned was spent at home... I did it of my own free will... Now I am working in the factory. We are doing... We are not given the garment work now... Many garments are covered... Now looking after mother. There is... I didn't have time to think about marriage..." (Age 64 years old, Discussion 04)

The premature death of a father not only disrupts children's education but also compels the eldest daughter to assume familial responsibilities, necessitating a pause in her education. The garment industry, especially prominent in Sri Lanka during the 1980s, emerges as a vital source of employment for young women. This trend is attributed to the concept introduced by former President R. Premadasa, involving the establishment of 250 garment factories. This strategic move not only addressed rural women's unemployment but also injected financial resources into rural areas, offering a temporary solution to economic challenges (Nelson, 2006, n. 87).

Love breakup

Traditional views on marriage in ancient and medieval Sinhalese society were predominantly shaped by arranged unions facilitated by older relatives, where the prospective partner's consent was sought. However, contemporary times witness a shift towards love marriages, a trend prevalent in Western European countries, emphasizing the importance of love and satisfaction in both marital and sexual relationships (Kumara 2017, p. 277). Love relationships among young individuals in Sinhalese society historically required the consent of parents. However, contemporary dynamics have shifted, with romantic unions evolving through mutual understanding and negotiation between partners. The sanctity of one's initial true love, lasting a lifetime, is regarded as a profoundly impactful experience. Parental initiation of such romantic relationships, culminating in engagement, remains a widely accepted societal norm. The lack of parental consent, as revealed in a participant's narrative, is identified as a contributing factor to celibacy.

"I was in a love relationship with a boy. When it comes to marriage, my family was strongly opposed to marriage. They assured me that they would find a suitable person with a decent career and the capacity to live well. Then I heard that he had married another woman. But I could not forget him. So, I did not consider marrying anybody else." (Age 59 years old, Discussion 05)

In the marriage of the daughter of the family, the parents consider the financial ability of the youth. In the context of a daughter's marriage, parents play a pivotal role, taking into account the financial capacity of the prospective groom. The acknowledgment by parents that economic stability is integral to a successful marriage underscores the significance attributed to financial considerations. In instances where economic backgrounds are not conducive, daughters may face restrictions in marrying according to their wishes. This suggests that financial factors are not always considered in the romantic relationships of young individuals. The prevailing scenario underscores parental influence, indicating that contemporary decisions align with socio-economic conditions.

Conclusion

The journey from school education to real-world employment for young women is intricately linked to family dynamics. In cases of broken families or where the woman assumes the role of the eldest, the pursuit of education often experiences disruptions. As these women transition to employment and family responsibilities, time slips away unnoticed. Beyond the conventional marriageable age, their unmarried status is a consequence of the intricate interplay between familial structure and societal expectations. Astrological considerations have gained prominence in the matrimonial landscape for young women. The alignment of celestial bodies and the blessing of elders are pivotal elements. Particularly in upland Sinhalese marriages, the meticulous matching of astrological vows assumes heightened significance. The absence of mention of the girl's marriage in the birth certificate is identified as a contributing factor to her unmarried status. Caste, as a determining factor in marriage, holds considerable sway in Sri Lanka. Parents and elders, especially in the context of a daughter's marriage, prioritise the caste of the potential groom. Instances of caste mismatch have resulted in the disruption of marital plans, subsequently influencing the celibacy of the young woman.

The responsibility for arranging marriages, notably for daughters, predominantly rests with parents. Employment status, particularly for the young man, receives heightened attention in this process. Love relationships, unsupported by parental consent, often lead to heartbreak and, consequently, contribute to the woman's decision to remain celibate. The economic status of families plays a pivotal role in shaping marital decisions. Poverty-induced challenges, such as the inability to construct suitable housing and provide essential amenities, contribute to the rejection of marriage proposals for young women. The economic capacity of the family directly impacts the ability to fulfil traditional dowry expectations, further influencing the celibacy of young women. In essence, this summary encapsulates the multifaceted societal factors intertwining with familial and economic dynamics, collectively influencing the celibacy status of young women in Sri Lanka.

References

- Handaragama, S. and Rasnayake, S. (2011). *Development of Sociology*. Battaramullala: Sameera Publications.
- Herath, H.M.D.R. (1999). *Kinship. Maharagama*: Taranji Printers.
- Hettigoda, H. De S. (1999). *Life and Planets*. Nugegoda: Tusita Bookstore.
- Kumar, N. V. G. H. (2001). *Family and Marriage*. Borellala: Wijesuriya Granth Kendra.
- Kumar, N. V. G. H. (2017). *Kinship and Marriage*. Galle: Ruhuna Study Circle.
- Nelson, M. D. (2006). New trends in the textile industry in Sri Lanka. *Samaja Vimasuma Journal*, No. 12, Peradeniya, Department of Sociology.
- Silva, K. T. (1997). *Caste Class and Changing Ceylon Societies*. Kandy: Community Study Circle.