

Conclusion

There is no smoothing out all the diverse stories of single women into a simple narrative, but some things have become clear. Increasingly, more women are choosing a single life in India, and new opportunities for education and advancement are thrusting singlehood upon more women. Yet, while single women may enjoy greater access to education, work, and leisure than their married counterparts, they are also more often than not subjected to more stigma, expected to sacrifice their sexuality, and left to fend for themselves.

The experiences of and possibilities for being single in India form part of a global trend of rising singlehood. Today, the majority of the world's population lives in a country with falling marriage rates.¹ Global delays and declines in marriage have been characterized as one of the major social transformations of our time, with profound impacts on women, gender, and sexuality. An upswell of recent books highlight this global trend, including Joanna Davidson and Dinah Hannaford's (2022) *Opting Out: Women Messing with Marriage around the World*, Marcia Inhorn and Nancy Smith-Hefner's (2021) *Waithood: Gender, Education, and Global Delays in Marriage and Childbearing*, Rebecca Traister's (2016) *All the Single Ladies: Unmarried Women and the Rise of an Independent Nation*, Roseann Lake's (2018) *Leftover in China: The Women Shaping the World's Next Superpower*, and Elyakim Kislev's (2019a) *Happy Singlehood: The Rising Acceptance and Celebration of Solo Living*.

Pushing this global trend of rising singlehood are several key forces illustrated in this book's stories. These include increasing educational and employment opportunities for women, which are providing more ways for women to assert their agency and secure independent forms of economic and social security beyond marriage. We also see a rise in alternatives to family-based housing across many of the world's metros, such as single-person households, senior living arrangements, and (in India) hostels for working women. Living outside marriage is also made possible by expanding paradigms for sexuality, intimacy, and reproduction

beyond conventional marriage, connected to modern ideals of sexual freedom and agency, and increased global recognition of feminist and LGBTQ+ rights. To the extent we can understand singlehood for some people as a matter of choice, living singly outside marriage also signals agency and aspiration, opportunities for pushing beyond many gendered norms in pursuit of personal development, freedom, and equality.

Yet, despite what can be seen as a major social transformation taking place around the world regarding the rise of socially accepted singlehood, it is important to note that in the majority of cultural contexts “(a) marriage is still a given, (b) childbearing is still expected within the bounds of marriage, and (c) both are closely linked to the achievement of social adulthood” (Inhorn and Smith-Hefner 2021: 394). We see all three givens in the stories of never-married single women in India.

My research with Indian single women also reveals just how profoundly socially and culturally situated are forms of single personhood. The marriage imperative takes different shapes, is grounded in different reasons, exerts different impacts, and possesses varying degrees of flexibility and constraint within each social-cultural context. As the growing scholarship on singles studies develops, one of its key agenda items must be to examine the unique ways possibilities for singlehood play out in particular locales. There is no one global, uniform “happy singlehood” (Kislev 2019a). Being single in North America or western Europe is not the same as singlehood in, say, China (Fincher 2014; Lake 2018), or Iran (Babadi 2021), or India. Further, even within any one national-cultural context, distinctions and inequalities tied to the identities of social class, race, caste, gender, sexuality, and forms of embodiment and ability play a powerful role.

In offering a few closing reflections, I wish to highlight further the ways social class and gender so powerfully intersect to shape women’s marital choices and possibilities in India, a theme that has run throughout this book. I then turn to contemplate the ways experiences of single women shed light on the problem of marriage itself.

ON SOCIAL CLASS AND SINGLEHOOD

“India is in the middle of an independence movement. For women,” Deepa Narayan asserts (2018a: 4). One feature of this women’s independence movement is the expanding possibility for women to say no to marriage. But for whom is opting out of marriage really a choice? And in what ways? What models of subjectivity and personhood underlie public conceptualizations of women’s life choices?

To delve into the issue of how social class profoundly shapes marital choices for women in India, let me turn to a weekend experience Medha and I shared in the midst of my fieldwork. One evening while Medha and I were visiting Shantiniketan, I was invited to an evening gathering at an outdoor restaurant with around

a dozen other women academics, both married and unmarried, Bengali and foreign, and I was eager to bring Medha along to introduce her to a wider community of scholars and friends. We all talked animatedly, mostly in English. We ordered Indian beers along with the food. It was an elite gathering, and this was the first time Medha had tried beer. On our way back to our guesthouse, walking through the moonlit lanes, we were both feeling a little tipsy, talking and laughing, when suddenly we could hear approaching a group of about four or five young men. Medha and I were both apprehensive, two women alone at night on a dark deserted road, but Medha immediately took charge, talking with the young men in a maternal, professorial tone, telling them that we were both professors, chatting in a manner as if they were her students and asking them to help show us the way with their flashlights. When we arrived to our guesthouse and closed the door safely behind us, Medha hugged me and exclaimed how proud she was at how she had “saved us!”

We then got to talking more about the evening. Medha had become enamored with Shoumi, a geologist who had attended the event. Shoumi was graceful and self-assured, had chosen not to marry, and seemed so strong and genuinely happy with her life. We had learned over dinner that Shoumi had been a successful professor, but had quit, tired of university and department politics. She still researches, publishes, and does contract work for the government, but on her own terms. Shoumi was likely around 50, near our age. Medha urged me to please email and message the others I knew better at the dinner to ask for Shoumi’s number so we could meet up again.

The plan worked, and the next afternoon, Shoumi, Medha, and I gathered to have green tea and conversation on Shoumi’s verandah. It was during this gathering, though, that Medha came to realize that Shoumi was in an entirely different class league, meaning they would not be able to be close friends. Medha divulged to Shoumi that she had been thinking that maybe she should also quit her university job, retiring early and living off the pension, to give her more freedom in life. Shoumi responded firmly yet affectionately to Medha, “You must not take me as a role model.” She explained how her world—her access to wealth, her upper-class background—gives her so much freedom and security that Medha would not be able to create on her own. Shoumi told us about how she spends half the year in her family’s hill-station home with her longtime lover, and the other six months moving between a lovely home she has access to in Shantiniketan, and her large family house in Kolkata where her widowed father, a retired London-trained surgeon, still lives. In the evenings in Kolkata, she and her progressive wealthy father sip whiskey together (an elite practice for women), and her father’s name remains on the plaque outside their Kolkata home, giving Shoumi social legitimacy and kinship protection. She urged Medha to keep her job.

Medha was a bit crestfallen as we walked back to our place that evening. Another potential friendship that would not work for her. “Shoumi’s right,” Medha

said. “Her world is entirely different from mine.” Then, after a pause, “What vast social class differences we are witnessing through your research, Sarah!”

Just a few days earlier, Medha and I had gone together to an utterly impoverished village near her university to meet with single women on a list of needy women provided by a charitable NGO. These women were mostly widows, in a village where the men were all dying in droves from drinking locally crafted alcohol made from mixing chemicals together. In addition to the widows, we located a few women who had never married because of poverty. These never-married women included the sisters Nabami and Srabani, introduced on several occasions above, and their aunt, who lived in a tiny hut made of crumbling mud walls and a blue plastic tarp for the roof, not tall enough to stand up inside. One unmarried woman we met there had not had anything at all yet to eat that day, by midday, and she told us of how terrifying worms appear from her nose at night, yet she has no money to seek out a doctor for a diagnosis or medicine.² Medha and I returned the next day bearing a huge carload of fresh vegetables to disperse, and some cash for medical treatment for this one woman, but this was not near enough to make even a small dent in these women’s poverty and suffering.

Then there was Shoumi. And all the women we had met in between. Medha remarked that all of the intimate mixing with women from such vastly different class backgrounds, which we were engaging in through my fieldwork and Medha’s concurrent search for single women friends, is something that normally no one individual Bengali person would ever experience.

I could reflect now that maybe all these women of radically different social classes should not be regarded as part of the same topic, should not be in the same book. Yet, in important respects, these women are living together in overlapping physical and social spaces. I am convinced that it is worth looking at such disparate class experiences, as a way to better understand the workings of both social class and gender in India, and at how class and gender so powerfully intersect to impact experiences of singlehood.

Even with all the hype about expanding opportunities for women to opt out of marriage, such as in the 2019 *India Today* cover story “Brave New Woman,” I must highlight again that it is mostly only women from highly privileged, educated, and cosmopolitan class backgrounds who are able to embrace singlehood as a distinctive lifestyle emerging from a sense of freedom of choice. Recall that the overall number of never-married women remains strikingly low in India, currently at less than 1 percent of the population of women aged 45 to 49, one of the lowest non-marriage rates in the world.³ As I have mentioned, recent media stories and anthologies celebrating the rise of single women in India focus also almost exclusively on the cosmopolitan, highly educated classes—and these stories seem often aimed more at promoting new ways of thinking about women and marriage than at reporting actual widespread societal transformations taking place beyond the most elite.

True to the public narratives, though, women among the most cosmopolitan, educated classes like Shoumi's do seem to be experiencing a relative degree of freedom from prevailing societal norms of gender, sexuality, and marriage that allow them more flexible life paths. Especially when the elite single women in my study were successful at establishing professional careers, which provide both economic security and societal respect, they are often able to craft secure, pleasurable, and socially respected lives beyond marriage. Further, because members of the elite participate in a cosmopolitan public culture emphasizing what they see as modern ideals of sexual freedom, and due to their privileged access to private spaces such as independent apartments, a few among this elite group in my study were successful in creating satisfying romantic and sexual relationships outside of marriage. Others, like Hanvi (chapter 4), seem very content to be unpartnered.

At the same time, we have seen how women across social classes in West Bengal contend with many similar norms of gender and sexuality. One is the ongoing near ubiquitous expectation that women (and men) will marry. I met no woman of any social class who had not faced forceful social and familial pressure to marry. Many women of all social classes also feel and internalize painful forms of stigma and exclusion directed at them by neighbors, colleagues, and kin due to their being unmarried.

As just one more example of how exclusions tied to being never-married operate in all kinds of ordinary, everyday interactions, I share how Indrani's mother described to me her own challenging efforts to legitimize her single daughter's and adopted granddaughter's nonnormative kinship as she negotiates with relatives and friends. For instance, wedding hosts treat and address a guest, including through the kinds of gifts and blessings bestowed, based on the guest's marital and adult status. Many of the family's relatives and associates call Indrani's mother to ask what should be done about Indrani and her daughter Nandini. If Indrani attends the wedding as an unmarried daughter, then she would be treated one way—basically as an attachment to her parents. Indrani's mother replies, "No, treat her the way you would any other independent adult attending." Yet many of their associates, all moving in elite circles, are flustered and don't follow through, choosing instead to treat Indrani as an unmarried daughter/child and failing to offer Nandini the same kinds of gifts and blessings they would give to a descendant of a married couple.

Other pervasive gendered norms that single women across social classes contend with concern ideals of feminine respectability—such as that single women should not spend time having fun in public spaces or be sexually active (so, even elite women tend to be discreet if they have partners)—and ideals of heteronormativity preventing lesbian women from living openly together or marrying. And as we have seen, single women across social classes can find it difficult to find housing, to obtain permission to adopt or bear a child, and to

gain their child's admission to schools. To forge a life path outside of marriage is not, at this point, straightforward or simple for women of any social class in India.

For women not born into the most elite, educated classes, the avenue of education and work can open up viable possibilities for non-marrying, as evident in the stories of Medha and Subhagi. Yet, I would not want readers to come away with the impression that Subhagi, the Scheduled Caste rural laborer who chose not to marry in order to stay with and support her natal kin, is a typical or common example of what is happening among the laboring classes in India today. I had to search hard to find never-married women from non-elite families in urban, semi-urban, and rural contexts. In Subhagi's whole large village of around five thousand residents, only Subhagi and one other woman, born with congenital dwarfism, had forged the path of never marrying. In Medha's natal village, which she took me to visit, we were able to locate two other women who had never married. One was Suravi of chapter 6, who had become pregnant out of wedlock and was then deemed unmarriageable; the only other never-married woman from this village, in her mid-forties, lived with her widowed mother. This woman's father had died when she was only 15, leaving the family near penniless and without money to fund the daughter's wedding and dowry. Medha could be said to be the third unmarried woman of this village. One could deem that she had achieved a remarkable success story, as the first girl from her village ever to graduate from class ten, let alone to then go on to receive a BA, MA, PhD, and prestigious job as a tenured professor. But Medha's ensuing mismatched class status—born into a poor, rural family but now with the education and professional position of an urban elite—made her highly unusual, virtually unmarriageable, and often feeling socially cut loose and in limbo.

In her examination of changing cultures of gender and sexuality in India, Deepa Narayan writes that she chose to focus on highly educated urban elite women "because these are the groups that can bring about change" (2018a: xvi). Whether more women across social classes, rural-urban contexts, and generations will choose the life path of non-marriage in coming years, time will tell.

ON THE PROBLEM OF MARRIAGE

Another goal of this book has been to probe the fundamental question of *why* it is that a society such as India's—like so many societies around the world—erects so many obstacles and deterrents to being an adult unmarried woman. At the same time, this book's stories highlight problems with marriage itself. As I note in the introduction, I came to realize through my fieldwork that in some ways single women were not the real or primary problem of my research, but rather marriage was—or the ways gender inequality is so intertwined with the institution of marriage in Bengali Indian society. As such, the book's stories contribute to the

emerging field of critical heterosexuality studies, aimed at examining the often taken-for-granted assumptions that surround dominant heterosexual institutions such as marriage.⁴

While writing this book, I came across lines penned in 1925 by the celebrated Bengali poet, writer, composer, and painter Rabindranath Tagore in an English essay titled “The Indian Ideal of Marriage.” Near the close of the essay, Tagore reflects: “That is why, in every country, marriage is still more or less of a prison house for the confinement of woman—with all its guards wearing the badge of the dominant male” (qtd. in Lal 2015: 300).

This discovery from the 1920s resonates with Sarah Pinto’s reflections in studying women in settings of psychiatric care in India: “Against an overwhelming popular discourse that said that Indian marriages are strong and Indian society (and minds, souls, and families) strong because of them, was a fierce counterdiscourse that saw oppression, control, and dependency in marriage” (2014a: 216). Srimati Basu, in her ethnography of lawyer-free family courts mediating cases of domestic violence in India, reflects similarly: “We can contemplate the categorical trouble of marriage itself: an institution fused with ‘trouble and strife,’ . . . persistently associated with conflict, deprivation, and exclusion” (2015: 3).

John Borneman critiques anthropology more broadly for rarely examining the relation of marriage “to the assertion of privilege, to closure, death, abjection, and exclusion” (1996: 215), and for often failing to consider that not all people follow an “eternal, putatively cross-cultural sequence of birth, marriage, death” (221).

We have seen in single women’s stories their perspectives on the profound gendered vulnerabilities and confinements that marriage can produce. Moreover, we have seen how a woman cannot be made “free” of constraining social institutions and conventions simply by not marrying. The catch-22 is that if it is not easy to be married for a woman in India, it is also not easy to be unmarried. In this way, single women’s stories make transparent the broader social-cultural and political-economic forces that impact both single and married women’s experiences and subjectivities in situated and often painful ways.

ON POSSIBILITY

Finally, though, in striving to represent single Indian women’s lives, I find it important analytically and politically not only to tell stories of suffering and exclusion. One evening, as Indrani and I were socializing at her home, I sought her advice in interpreting themes from this project’s fieldwork. There were so many themes of difficulty and constraint—stigma, loneliness, suffering, exclusion. Indrani was fascinated by anonymized stories I shared of other single Bengali women’s lives, while she also helped me understand various materials. At the end, though, Indrani made a warm appeal: “Please don’t make the book only about gloom and doom. That will be too depressing.” Her eyes twinkled as she spoke.

She was right to urge me to keep my eyes open to the possibilities for well-being and pleasure in single women's lives, and to acknowledge how many women—even while underlining the difficulties in their lives—would not trade their singlehood for marriage. Indrani also insists that singlehood in India is in many ways easier than in the West, such as in the United States where she lived for several years and witnessed the tremendous societal emphasis placed on being coupled up. The stories of Indrani and others make clear how and why, despite the challenges, many women are intentionally making the choice to live singly in India and often remaining confident in their decisions.

In doing research on unmarried women in the United States for *All the Single Ladies*, Rebecca Traister interviewed Anita Hill, now also my esteemed colleague in Brandeis's Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Department. Anita has chosen not to marry and commented to Traister: "I want everyone to understand that you can have a good life, despite what convention says, and be single. That doesn't mean you have to be against marriage. It just means that there are choices society should not impose on you" (in Traister 2016: 256–257).

Although the ideal of free choice is never as straightforward as it seems, many Bengali single women across social classes strongly articulate a clear desire for expanded choices and life possibilities—to be able to pursue alternative paths toward economic security, intimacy, social belonging, and living well—in ways not tied to marriage. And some are making it work.

I close by sharing my latest news from Medha, arriving by WhatsApp during the final stages of my writing this book: "I have been selected as a governing member of my college. The first female member of its 150-year history." Medha and others have helped me see that to analyze single women's stories only in terms of precarity and oppression would elide much of their content and force. This book's stories invite us to actively reflect on the ways people forge meaningful lives out of intersecting situations of both constraint and possibility. I suggest—as does Rebecca Traister in her exploration of the rising tide of single women in the United States (2016: 240)—that never-married single women in India, by circumstance and by choice, through argument and just through daily existence, are pushing the country to expand to make new spaces for them. Indian single women's narratives help us begin to imagine what it can mean for anthropologists, and for our interlocutors, to decenter marriage as an unquestioned norm.