

Challenges Faced by Unmarried Tribal Women: A Study of Kinnaura Tribe

Paper Submission: 15/01/2021, Date of Acceptance: 27/01/2021, Date of Publication: 28/01/2021



Monika Negi

Research Scholar,
Dept. of Sociology,
Panjab University,
Chandigarh, India

Reena Chaudhary

Assistant professor,
Department of Sociology,
University School of Open
Learning, Panjab University,
Chandigarh, India

Abstract

India is a country where marriage is considered a sacred bond between men and women. The status of Indian tribal women is always analyzed by the name and position of her husband. Women in Indian tribal society have always been looked upon as an appendage to man where her identity is looked upon as a daughter, wife, and mother. While considering the tribal social norms, remaining single i.e. unmarried is considered a social stigma. Society starts finding many faults as to why they are not married. Unmarried women were accused of being selfish, picky, or un-adjustable for not being married. They confronted many challenges in tribal as well as in mainstream societies, such as financial dependency, domestic violence, loneliness, discrimination in family and society, mental stress, health issues, and so on. The present study sets in the backdrop of Kinnaur district of Himachal Pradesh, to examine the status of unmarried tribal women and to describe the challenges which they faced. The study emphasizes the need for better law enforcement, the active role of panchayats, women empowerment etc. to counter such issues of unmarried women and secure the well-being of tribal women.

Keywords: Unmarried Women, Stigma, Customary laws, and Challenges.

Introduction

India is a country where marriage is regarded as one of the most significant life-cycle rituals with certain societal expectations. In India, marriage is regarded as a women's ultimate goal in life and if women are unmarried she is bound to be stigmatized. Women who never marry are exceptionally rare throughout rural India. An unmarried adult woman belongs to no recognized social category and consequently lacks a definite status in her home village or in the wider local community (Phillimore, 1991). Like mainstream Indian society, the status of tribal women is always analyzed by the name and position of her husband. Women in Indian tribal society have always been looked upon as an appendage to man where her identity is looked upon as a daughter, wife, and mother. In India while considering the tribal social norms, remaining single i.e. unmarried is considered a social stigma. Unmarried women face constant pressure from their parents and relatives, obliging them to get married as they believe that the right place for a girl is in her husband's house. If women left unmarried society starts finding many faults as to why they are not married, they were accused of being selfish, picky, or un-adjustable for not being married, society gets ahead by considering unmarried women have 'defects'. Being unmarried is considered an ill-fate for women in Indian society (Krishnakumary, 1987).

Review of Literature

Despite stigma many women choose to remain unmarried, they do so out of personal choice or as a consequence of family circumstances or a mixture of both. There are various factors and reasons for not being married. The early death of parents and the need to provide care to younger siblings or to look after children of widowed siblings have also been identified as contributory factors. Irrespective of whether the reason for their unmarried status is circumstantial or voluntary, these women are routinely condemned for defying the conventions of society (Gandhi, 2016). In today's modern India, unmarried women are probably well qualified and financially independent; they consciously decide to remain unmarried (Gaughan, 2002). But in tribal society, it was not necessary to have a similar scenario there are various other reasons for not getting married such as poverty, to provide family support, religious reasons, and lack of education, etc. The tribal society holds different customs and traditions;

E: ISSN No. 2349-9443

they follow their customary laws which tremendously affect tribal women's life (Bhasin, 2007).

The challenges faced by unmarried women are not less in Indian society. They confronted many challenges in tribal as well as in mainstream societies, such as financial dependency, domestic violence, loneliness, discrimination in family and society, mental stress, health issues, and so on (Verma, 2015). The present study is confined to district Kinnaur, which is a tribal district of Himachal Pradesh. The inhabitants of Kinnaur are popularly known as the Kinnauras or Kinnaurese. They have their unique cultural pattern which is quite distinct from the rest of the country. Women occupy a prominent social and economic position in the Kinnaura society; they practiced polyandrous and monogamous form of marriage (Verma, 2002). There are few drawbacks of the polyandrous marriage system which were faced by women in the Kinnaura tribe. Due to the polyandrous style of marriage among Kinnaurians, several marriageable girls were left unmarried (Raha, 1985). Most of such girls were forced to become jomos (Buddhist nuns) in monasteries, even if unmarried daughters lived in the family, and neither had they any share in the ancestral property nor they had a legal right to claim over the family property. Women in Kinnaura tribe live under the shade of customary law, which denies tribal women a share in ancestral property. Difficulties of unmarried women increased even more after the demise of her parents (Sharma & Niranjana, 2001).

Asian Resonance

Objective of the Study

The present paper has the following objective:

To examine the challenges faced by unmarried women in the Kinnaura tribe.

Methodology

The present study is an exploratory analysis of the lives of unmarried women in the Kinnaura tribe. Kinnaur district is divided into three developmental blocks namely Nichar block, Kalpa block, and Pooh block, for the present study one village from each block was selected. These villages are namely Urni Khas, Kothi, and Lippa Khas. A purposive sample of 60 unmarried tribal women including nuns, whose age varies from 35 to 65 years and above residing in the selected three villages, was included. To collect the real and factual information data was collected by using an in-depth interview schedule, observation technique, and informal discussion. Secondary data concerning the village under study was collected mostly from the village surveys of selected villages. District gazetteers, books, and other unpublished reports were also taken into account to construct a coherent picture of the status of unmarried tribal women in Kinnaura society.

Findings

Socio-Demographic Variables

Through socio-demographic variables, an attempt has been made to provide clear insight into the background of the respondents.

Table 1 Socio-demographic characteristics of unmarried Kinnaura women

Characteristics	Category	Number (Percentage)
Age	35-45yrs	13(21.6)
	46-55yrs	20(33.3)
	56-65yrs	18(30)
	+65yrs	9(15)
Family	Nuclear	16(26.6)
	Extended /joint	36(60)
	Staying alone	8(13.3)
Education	Illiterate	29(48.3)
	Primary	6(10)
	Middle	7(11.6)
	Metric	6(10)
	+2	8(13.3)
Occupation	Graduation	4(6.6)
	Domestic worker	36(60)
	Buddhist Nuns	14(23.3)
	Group D employee at primary School & veterinary hospital	4(6.6)
	Aanganwadi teacher	2(3.3)
	Aanganwadi helper	4(6.6)
Income	Up to Rs3000p.m.	26(43.3)
	Rs 3000-5000 p.m.	24(40)
	Rs 5000-10000 p.m.	10(16.6)

The distribution of respondents according to socio-demographic categories indicates that 33.3 percent of the respondents belong to the 46-55yrs of age group. 60 percent of the respondents belong to joint/extended family and 48.3percent of the respondents were illiterate. The majority of the respondents considered themselves as domestic workers as they work in fields as well as in the

household; the percentage of the domestic worker is 60 percent. 23.3 percent of the respondents were Buddhist nuns and only less than 12 percent were working in government services in the post of Group D category, Aangan wadi teacher, and the post of helper. The monthly income of the respondents was not more than five thousand (5000), 43.3 percent of the respondents earn up to three thousand (3000) per

months. The only 16.6percent of the respondents earn up to ten thousand (10,000) per month.

for a variety of reasons such as not been able to find a good partner within the short interval of 'marrying age', desire for a spouse with higher social and economic status, career commitment, and biological factors and so on (Celik,2018; Ang,C et al., 2020). In the present study, we try to find out certain reasons for Kinnauri women; why they were not married.

Reasons for not getting Married

Indian society is very prejudiced towards unmarried women, for a society, marriage is the final "achievement" for women. Women remain unmarried

Table 2 Reasons for not getting married

Reasons	Frequency	Percentage
No suitable match was found.	12	20
Became a Buddhist nun at a very early age.	14	23.3
Due to the early demise of the father/mother which bound them in family responsibility.	10	16.6
To provide care and support to bedridden father/mother and siblings.	8	13.3
Personal choice.	10	16.6
Due to physically impaired conditions.	6	10
Total	60	100

As table 2 shows 23.3 percent of the respondents were Buddhist nuns, they are religiously bound to remain unmarried and follow celibacy throughout life. Their main purpose is to practice dharma and spend life in the service of mankind. 20 percent of respondents reported that they did not find a suitable match according to their desire and family background; they further said marriages did not take place only between two individuals but between two families. 16.6 percent of the respondents were unmarried due to the early demise of one of the parents, being a female child they bear all the responsibility of the family, they raised their younger siblings. 13.3percent of respondents were unmarried because they were providing care and support to bedridden father/mother and unmarried bedridden sibling. Women are known as the epitome of love and care, women are the prime source of care giving within the family (Cancian & Oliker, 2000). But unfortunately, the care provider suffered. Only 16.6 percent of respondents accepted that remaining unmarried was their conscious decision they wanted to lead their life independently. 10 percent of the

respondents were unmarried because they were physically impaired, in tribal society beauty and physical strength is one of the parameters for the selection of the bride. According to those respondents, they were not suitable for marriage, as they were not able to work in fields like other women. One of the respondents said that she was partially blind and it was the major reason for not getting married. The majority of respondents understudy said that they considered marriage as an important institution and they were not against it. Few of them still hold some prospects of getting married in the future as late marriages were prevalent in kinnaura society.

Social condition of Unmarried Tribal Women

The social condition and status of unmarried women are not being very high in Indian society; they seem to be harassed both by society as well as by their family members. "If one is not married, she will face the rubbish comments from society (Blumberg & Dwarki, 1980). In the present study, we analyzed the tribal society's attitude towards unmarried women.

Table 3 Social condition of unmarried tribal women

Attitude	Frequency	Percentage
Get respect if unmarried women are a nun.	14	23.3
Constantly questioning why they are not married.	10	16.6
Finds faults in unmarried women's personality.	16	26.6
Sometimes defaming the image of unmarried women.	8	13.3
Respect their decision of not getting married.	12	20
Total	60	100

The data presented in Table 3 depicts that the social condition of unmarried Kinnaura women is much better than mainstream unmarried women as 20 percent of the respondents said society respects their

decision of not getting married and 23.3percent of respondents were nuns and they got full respect in society, because of their religious practices. 16.6 percent of the respondents admitted that they had

faced constant questioning about their marriage; generally, they got suggestions for getting married at the right time otherwise will suffer in old age. 26.6 percent of the respondents have faced unwanted attention from society; they find faults in these unmarried women's personalities like they were not so good-looking, stubborn, selfish, un-adjustable, and many more. Only 13.3 percent of the respondents reported that their image was defamed by society, by linking their name with a married man. Their joyful nature was misinterpreted, although the joking relationship was prevalent in Kinnaura society.

Discrimination with Unmarried Women within The Family

Discrimination is recognized as a form of inequality and an issue for women around the world. It affects the capacity of women to participate freely and fully in society and turn brings psychological harmful consequences (Pokharel, 2008). As a male-dominated society, India is not exceptional in discriminating against women. Women in Indian society were discriminated against on various levels, no matter whether they are married or unmarried.

Table 4 Discrimination with Unmarried Women within The Family

Type of discrimination	Frequency	Percentage
Faced more work burden.	12	20
No right of decision making in family matters.	8	13.3
Unpaid labour within the family.	10	16.7
Left alone in the winter season to take care of house and cattle.	10	16.7
Ignorance of their basic necessity.	5	8.3
Total	45	100

*15 respondents have not faced any discrimination within the family.

The present study focuses on what kind of discrimination the Kinnauri unmarried women faced within the family. It can be observed that most of the respondents faced more work burden within the family. 20 percent of the respondents agreed that because they were dependent on the family and it was expected from them to do a major share of the household chores and work at fields as well. 13.3 percent of the respondents reported that they were not included in the family matters; they were not consulted by a family member for making decisions. They were treated as an outsider. Further, they complained that they do not get any appreciation for the work they do for the family. It is simply considered a moral obligation to work for the family. 16.7 percent of the respondents revealed that if they work outside the household as wage labour, they will earn some amount of money, as they were working only for the family their labour was left unpaid. 16.7 percent of the respondents shared that they were left alone in the harsh winter season to take care of the house, domestic animals, and taking part in traditional fairs and festivals. While other family members visited their

other residences in towns and cities like Shimla, Rampur, and so on for better facilities in winters as compared to Kinnaur. 8.3 percent of the respondents said that they are made to feel like an economic burden on the family, sometimes family neglects their basic necessity.

No Property Rights To Women and Its Impacts on Unmarried Women's Life.

Women in Kinnaura tribe had no legal right to their ancestral property. The customary law wajibu-ul-urj was written in 1926, according to this law women were not considered as the legal heirs of ancestral property. Women had no rights on their father and husband's property, only male child could inherit ancestral property. In the absence of inheritance rights on the ancestral property the condition of deserted women, widows, and spinsters is deplorable (Devi, 2014). They were dependent on the mercy of their relatives. Female work participation rates are very high in Kinnaura tribe; most women are classified as 'marginal workers'. Wage disparity between men and women is also prevalent (UNDP Report, 2005).

Table 5 Property rights and its impact on unmarried women

Impacts	Frequency	Percentage
Financially deprived.	19	31.6
Work extra hours for a little amount of money.	17	28.3
No savings for future requirements.	5	8.3
The wage difference between men and women.	11	18.3
Total	52	100

*8 respondents own a share of parental property.

The present study concentrated on property rights and their impact on unmarried women in their tribal setting. Table 5 highlighted that 31.6 percent of the respondents accepted that they were financially deprived, and they don't have any kind of property to generate a minimum income. They are completely

dependent upon the natal family. 28.3 percent of the respondents said they have to work even in unfavourable weather conditions for a little amount of money. 8.3 percent of respondents were worried about their future, as age grows they become more vulnerable. Their health will decline and they may

suffer from major diseases like cancer etc. Therefore, without property rights and a lack of source of income, these women suffer a lot in old age. These tribal women were compelled to work as agricultural labour in others' fields or orchards for their survival. 18.3 percent of the respondents argued that in these tribal areas women were less paid than men for the same work. The wage difference is also a responsible factor for the poor financial condition of Kinnaura women. 8 respondents own some share in the parental property, these respondents were nuns and single girl child in the family. In certain villages of Kinnaur, there is a tradition to provide any kind of property to the unmarried daughters called chankhs or pono for their survival. They cannot sell or mortgage these properties. After the death of the unmarried daughter, her property was transferred to the family again. But in the current scenario, this kind of tradition was followed by very few families.

Table 6 Challenges of Unmarried Tribal Women

Challenges.	Frequency	Percentage
Painful old age.	15	25
Financial dependence on family.	19	31.6
Health issues.	13	21.6
Psychological issues.	13	21.6

The present study explicit the various challenges faced by Kinnaura women. Table 6 highlights that 31.6 percent of the respondents were financially dependent on their natal family. According to them, a financial dependency is an actual reason for their other problems. It affects their dignity; it increases the feeling of loneliness and thus, affects their financial, social, physical, and psychological well being. 25 percent of the respondents felt constant fear of painful old age; they said this is the time they sometimes regret their decision of staying unmarried, as there was no one to take care of. 21.6 percent of the respondents admitted that they faced various health issues, as they were growing old day by day. They lost appetite, their bone density was low, and they suffered from high blood pressure, joints pain, and respiratory diseases. According to few respondents they were living in high altitude areas, during winters they suffered more, due to heavy snowfall, their mobility was restricted and health care facilities were not available for them. 21.6 percent of the respondents reported that due to chronic illness and neglecting behaviour of family members they become psychologically more vulnerable, they felt isolated within the family. Loneliness is the toughest challenge faced by unmarried women (Lamb, 2018). Unmarried women are more prone to anxiety, depression, and in the worst situations, have suicidal tendencies also.

Conclusion

It may be concluded that women in Kinnaura tribe were unmarried due to their personal choice, there is no such stigma attached to the status of unmarried women. Society respects their choice and if unmarried women become Buddhist nuns, they earned a respectful position in society. Unmarried women were pressurized for marriage until they crossed the marriageable age by their family and relatives, as marriage is a universal social institution

Asian Resonance

Challenges faced by Unmarried Kinnaura Women

The challenges of Indian unmarried women are multi-dimensional. Women in Indian society face number of problems within the family or outside the family. The main challenges of unmarried women are classified in terms of financial, occupational, familial, neighborhood and insecurity for the future (Jethani, 1994). In India higher mortality and morbidity have been observed among unmarried women relative to married women (Anderson & Ray, 2019). In Indian society marriage is believed to be associated with socio-economic and psychological benefits. The challenges of tribal women are not less than mainstream women, both suffered equally in their respective ways. In the present study, we try to examine the various challenges faced by unmarried kinnaura women.

that provides security and companionship to the women. According to the findings of the study, unmarried tribal women suffered mostly because of the customary law of inheritance. Lack of property makes them financially dependent on the family. The education level of tribal women is low, only a few of them were employed, rest of them were engaged in agricultural work. Unmarried aged women faced the most discriminatory practice within the family. They felt they were ignored by family members because of their physical illness and economic dependence. They were seen as an economic burden for the family, their health was often ignored, which caused some psychological issues in unmarried women. Loneliness, anxiety, depression were the common ones.

Suggestions

1. There should be a government organization for single women; that can generate village-level employment programs for women, especially unmarried women. Further, these unmarried women should be made aware about their rights and also be encouraged by Aangan wadi workers,
2. Village Panchayats should work actively for unmarried women, their problems should be listened to and resolved. Self-help groups can be created for self-dependence, economic upliftment, and financial stability of these women.

Acknowledgment

This work was done with the financial support of Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), New Delhi, India (vide no. 3/1/3/JRF-2014/HRD-90) to the first author.

References

1. Anderson, S., & Ray, D. (2019). *Missing Unmarried Women. Journal of the European Economic Association*, 17 (5), 1585-1616.

E: ISSN No. 2349-9443

Asian Resonance

2. Ang, C., Lee, K., & Lie, X. (2020). *Understanding Singleness: A Phenomenological Study of Single Women in Beijing and Singapore*. *The Qualitative Report*, 25 (8), 3038-3100. Retrieved february 19, 2021, from <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol25/iss8/10>
3. Bhasin, V. (2007). *Status of Tribal Women in India*. *Studies on Home and Community Science*, 1 (1), 1-16.
4. Blumberg, R., & Dwaraki, L. (1980). *India's educated women: options and constraints*. Delhi: Hindustan Publication Corporation.
5. Cancian, F. M., & Oliker, S. J. (2000). *Caring and Gender*. United States of America: AltaMira Press.
6. Cilik, K. (2018). *Unmarried Women with Closed "Windows of Opportunity": Professional Women's Reasons for Not Getting Married*. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 66, 48-55.
7. Devi, N. (2014). *Gender Inequality of Tribal Women with Special Reference to Inheritance of Ancestral Property in Himachal Pradesh*. *C P J Law Journal*, 4, 133-140.
8. Gandhi, K. (2016). *Living Single Being A Single Women in India*. New Delhi: India Exclusion Report Yoda Press.
9. Gaughan, M. (2002). *The Substitution Hypothesis: The Impact of Premarital Liaisons and Human Capital on Marital Timing*. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 64 (2), 407-419.
10. Jethani, U. (1994). *Single Women*. New Delhi: Rawat Publication.
11. Krishnakumary, N. (1987). *Status of Single Women in India: A Study of Spinsters, Widows, and Divorcees*. New Delhi: Uppal Publishing House.
12. Lamb, S. (2018). *Being Single in India: Gendered Identities, Class Mobilities, and Personhoods in Flux*. *Ethos*, 46 (1), 49-69.
13. Phillimore, P. (1991). *Unmarried Women of the Dhaura Dhar: Celibacy and Social Control in Northwest India*. *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 47 (3), 331-350.
14. Pokharel. (2008). *Gender Discrimination: Women Perspectives*. *Nepalese Journal of Development and Rural Studies*, 5 (2), 80-87.
15. Raha, M. (1985). *The Kinnaurites of the Himalaya*. Calcutta: Anthropological Survey of India.
16. Sharma, S. K., & Niranjana. (2001). *Social Structure and Fertility Behaviour*. Jaipur and New Delhi: Rawat Publications.
17. UNDP. (2005). *Beyond Practical Gender Needs- Women in North-Eastern and Hill States*. New Delhi: Institute of Social Studies Trust.
18. Verma, M. (2015). *Changing Status of Tribal Women in Baster District of Chhattisgarh*. *International Journal of Development Research*, 5 (03), 3886-3872.
19. Verma, V (2002). *Kanauras of Kinnaur a Scheduled Tribe in Himachal Pradesh*. Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation.