



# **SINGLEHOOD STIGMATIZATION: EXPERIENCE OF SINGLE WOMEN IN RIVERS STATE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*This study investigated on the experience of stigmatization from the perspective of single women in Rivers State. The study adopted the ex-post facto research design using a population of 150 single women drawn using convenience and snowballing techniques. Data from the study was obtained using a structured questionnaire constructed on a four-point Likert Scale. The questionnaire was assessed for validity and reliability and was shown to be suitable as a data collection tool for the study. Mean, standard deviation and rank order were used to answer the research question, while the hypotheses were tested using independent samples t-test. Result from the study showed that major forms of stigmatization experienced by single women were loss of friends and social network, insult and name calling, disrespect by family members and discrimination in employment. The result further showed that older single women experience a significantly higher level of stigmatization than younger single women, less educated single women experience a significantly higher level of stigmatization than highly educated women, and never-married single women experience a significantly higher level of stigmatization than previously married single women. On the basis of these findings, it was recommended that women support groups should be formed which provide legal and policy backings to any single woman who feel stigmatized and discriminated against.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Singlehood, women, stigmatization, discrimination.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Marriage has been a staple feature in almost all societies. This is because, beyond the cultural relevance, marriage is a strategy through which society sustains itself. However, as society grows it has become inevitable that more people will remain single. Presently, the number of people that have remained single continues to increase, especially with advances in technology, science and greater job mobility. The question remains is singlehood a state of stigmatization or one of admiration

To appropriately answer this question, it is pertinent to define what we mean by singlehood as well as identify the definition of stigmatization. Within the

context of this study, the forms and incidences of stigmatization against single people in Rivers State were considered. In Rivers State, marriage is often celebrated and individuals who are married are seen as the bastion of societal progress. Therefore, few observers would question that the cultural images, public policies and personal attitudes elevate the status of being married relative to singlehood in River State. It is against this background that DePaulo and Morris (2005) argued that stigmatization against singlehood is pervasive, yet passive, and largely uncontested which has resulted in a new phenomenon called “singlism” or prejudice and discrimination targeted against the unmarried. Society often confers privileges,



opportunities and prospects to married individuals than to single individuals.

Commenting further, Ntoimo and Isiugo-Abanihe (2014) argued that many cultures in Nigeria hold the assumption that all young adults should marry except for religious reasons. However, modern trends, have necessitated an increase in the number of married as well as unmarried people beyond the age approved in many African societies. Citing the National Population Commission report of 1999, Ntoimo and Isiugo-Abanihe (2014) stated that there has been an increase in the number of people above 30 years that has never married. In 1999, it was 3.4% while in 2006 it increased to 6.7%. This increase in the number of unmarried people has not changed society perception on singlehood much. Rather there has been an increase in the pressure and the need for people to initial and sustain heterosexual marital relationships. While it might be agreed that stigma and disapproval against singlehood affect both genders it is often worse for female. Men who are single above a certain age may be spotlighted and experience some form of stigma, but the majority of the disapproval, stigmatization and condemnation for singlehood is often experienced by females (Byrne & Carr, 2005).

Stigma against singlehood is often met with adverse consequences. Research has shown that stigma affects the physical and mental health, psychological well-being as well as results in institutional barriers for personal professional progress. Furthermore, stigma results in stress and act as discouragement from taking up opportunities and achieving life goals. Given this negative consequences of stigma, it is important and urgent for us to understand how single people, especially females experience stigmatization in Rivers State but first of all, it is pertinent for us to understand what the concept of stigma is as well as operationalize it within the context of this study

## CONCEPT OF STIGMA IN SINGLEHOOD

As a social construct, the concept of singlehood and stigmatization has had fairly broad definitions. While being single might be considered straightforward, its definition has brought significant scholarly debates and arguments. For this research, a single person is defined as an individual who is not currently involved in a close relationship or in any marital relationship whether they have been partnered or married in the past as defined by Conley and Collins (2002).

One of the earliest definitions of stigmatization was provided by Goffman (1963), in which he defined stigma as any personal attribute that is discrediting to

its possessor and that reduces such a person from a whole usual person to a tainted and discounted person. Similarly, Crocker, Major, and Steele (1998) defined stigma as a social identity that is devalued in a particular context. These definitions conceptualize stigma in terms of social desirability and acceptance. More recent definitions of stigma which have shown the immense application to the study of singlehood have characterized it from a normative perspective. For example, Stafford and Scott (1996), described stigma as a characteristic that is contrary to the norm of a social unit. A norm in this context refers to a shared belief which determines what to behave in a specific way at a specific time considering this definition singlehood is considered a violation of societal norms in that at a specific age this individual ought to have been married. Furthermore, they are considered has been responsible for their solitary civil status due to some character flaws such as immaturity self-centeredness and lack of personal discipline (Morris, Sinclair, & DePaulo, 2007).

The way and manner in which single people experience stigmatization have been a source of debate. Link and Phelan (2001) proposed that singlehood is not uniform across all types of unmarried people. For example, they mentioned people who are single from birth, those who are single from divorce and separation, and those who are single because they are prevented from marrying those they wish to marry. Considering this distinction, it was further proposed that the experience of stigmatization is likely to be varied based on the nature of singlehood an individual is associated with. Using this perspective they gave further insight into the different components that must exist for a stigma to occur. These are labelling, stereotyping, status loss and discrimination. In their conceptualization of the stigma process, a labelled person experiences discrimination and status loss, which, in turn, may have harmful consequences for their life chances, including their psychological, economic, and physical well-being.

## PREVIOUS STUDIES ON STIGMATIZATION OF SINGLEHOOD

Research into discrimination of single individuals has continued to take a primary place in modern psychosocial studies. Evidence from developed countries such as the United States Germany China and recently in developing countries like Nigeria and South Africa, has shown that single individuals experience a higher level of discrimination than those who are married. A few of these studies are reviewed below to provide further context for the current research.



Using data from the United States Midlife Development Survey, Bryne and Carr (2005), found that never-married single persons are much more likely to report discriminatory treatment than their married pair. The result showed that single men reported a higher level of maltreatment than their married counterparts. This treatment includes harassment, threats and speech degradation. On the other hand, single women reported that they are being treated with less respect receive less and poorer service and have been called names more than their married counterparts. The conclusion from this study is that single people experience a higher level of intrapersonal and institutional discrimination those who are married.

Using a semi-structured interview, Macvarish (2006), investigated the discrimination experienced by women in London and south-east of Great Britain. The sample for the studying was made up of 15 women who were recruited using a snowball method. The result from the study showed that women reported being called "spinster" which is seen as a failure and poor achievement in the public. This was despite the fact that Great Britain had the lowest ranking of stigmatization among the countries in Western Europe. In China, older single women reported a low level of social acceptance and support compared to their peers who were married. The term used to describe such women is "*shengnu*" which literally means "leftover women". Furthermore, these women experience a high level of pressure from their government and parents to get married as reported by Gaetano (2010).

In a well-detailed series of studies conducted by Greitemeyer (2009), among women in Germany, it was revealed that both self and other ratings of single and partnered subjects yielded a more negative evaluation of single persons in a wide range of personality characteristics well-being and relationship status. The study further showed that individuals in a relationship reported a higher level of satisfaction in their relationship status than those who were single. These results are further confirmation that individuals who are single experience a higher level of personal dissatisfaction as well as a higher level of discrimination compared to those who are in a marital or heterosexual relationship. Research by Kalmijn, vanGroenou, and Fine (2005) showed that being single from divorce leads to a decrease in social segregation and a heightened level of stigmatization and discrimination. In another study by Toukhoushian (1998), it was revealed that single men receive lower salaries than their married counterparts and are less likely to get promotion even after controlling for the effect of performance and seniority. The findings of this study showed that single individuals, both male

and females experience a significantly higher level of individual, social and intrapersonal level of discrimination than tools in marital relationships.

Closely related to the current study was the research by Ntoimo and Isiugo-Abanihe (2014) who interviewed 25 women and also collected data from life histories and seven focus group. The women were 30 years and above and we never married. The results showed that respondent experience various forms of stigma such as name-calling, denigration of their marital status, suspicion, disrespect, difficulty in renting residential apartment amongst others. The major conclusion from the study is that while male and female might experience stigmatization from being single, women experienced a higher level of stigmatization Thus, highlighting the persistent gender equality in Nigeria.

An observation of the above studies confirmed the fact that being single is a challenge for many individuals, male and female alike. However, for most females especially due to gender inequality in Nigeria and Rivers State specifically the experience of gender inequality, singlehood discrimination and stigmatization is yet to receive the empirical attention it requires. While the above studies have shown the challenges of singlehood, no study has been conducted in Rivers State investigating the forms and incidence of singlehood experience by single women. It was to cover this gap in the literature that informed the conduct of the present study which seeks to investigate the forms and incidents of stigmatization experienced by single women in Rivers State Nigeria.

## PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the current study is to investigate the experience of single women in regards to the stigmatization they experience due to their marital status. In specific terms, the following were the aims of the study:

1. To ascertain the extent to which age influences the experience of stigma among single women in Rivers State.
2. To investigate the extent to which educational qualification influences the experience of single women in Rivers State.
3. To verify the extent to which separated and never-married women experience stigmatization in Rivers State.

## RESEARCH QUESTION

The following research question was further developed to also guide the study:



1. What is the experience of single women with regards to stigmatization in Rivers State, Nigeria?

### HYPOTHESES

The following null hypotheses were further used to guide the study and were tested at 0.05 level of significance

1. There is no significant difference between the stigmatization experience of younger women and older single women in Rivers State.
2. There is no significant difference in the experience of stigmatization among single women in Rivers State based on their educational qualification?
3. There is no significant difference in the experience of stigma of separated and never-married single women in Rivers State.

### METHODOLOGY

This study adopted the expost-facto survey design. Using convenience and snowballing techniques, 150 women were selected for this study from Obio-Akpor and Port Harcourt City Local Government Areas of Rivers State. An instrument titled "Experience of Stigmatization among Single Women Inventory (ESSWI) which was developed by the researchers was

used for data collection. The ESSWI was developed using a self-report rating scale format of Regularly (RE), Sometimes (ST), Rarely (RA) and Never (NV) which were scored as 4, 3, 2, and 1 points respectively. The ESSWI had 9 items and was adapted based on the items utilized by Ntoimo and Isiugo-Abanihe (2014). The questionnaire also had a section for respondents to report some demographic characteristics such as religion, age, educational status and singlehood status. The ESSWI was validated by experts in Counselling Psychology, Measurement and Evaluation for face and content validities. After the initial validation process, the instrument was subjected to reliability analysis using the Cronbach Alpha method. For conducting the reliability, the instrument was administered on 15 single women in Ikwerre Local Government Area of Rivers State, which were not part of the sampled groups. Further analysis showed that the instrument had an alpha coefficient of 0.81 which suggest that the instrument possessed suitable level of reliability. Mean, standard deviation and rank order were used to answer the research questions based on the data collected, while independent samples t-test was used to test the associated hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance. A criterion mean of 2.5 was used to select the stigmatization experience of the women.

### RESULTS

**Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents**

| Variables                              | N   | Percentage |
|--|-----|------------|
| <b>Religion</b>                        |     |            |
| Christianity                           | 139 | 93         |
| Others                                 | 11  | 7          |
| <b>Age</b>                             |     |            |
| 30-40                                  | 106 | 71         |
| 40 and Above                           | 44  | 29         |
| <b>Singlehood Status</b>               |     |            |
| Never Married                          | 98  | 65         |
| Separated/Divorce                      | 32  | 21         |
| Widowed                                | 20  | 14         |
| <b>Highest Education Qualification</b> |     |            |
| Primary/Secondary                      | 27  | 18         |
| OND/HND/Bachelors                      | 108 | 72         |
| Graduate Degrees                       | 15  | 10         |

From the Table shown in Table 1 above, it can be seen that 93% (n = 139) of the respondents were Christian, while 7% (n = 11) identified as being in from religions. Regarding age, 106 representing 71% were between 30 and 40 years, with 44 (29%) reporting that they were between above 40 years. On their singlehood status, 65% (n = 98) had never been married, 21% (n =

32) reported that they were divorced/separated, while 20% (n = 14) indicated that they are widowed. Finally, the table showed that about 82% (n = 82) of the respondents had some forms of tertiary education, with only 18% (n = 18) reporting both primary and secondary education as their highest educational qualification.

**ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES****Table 2: Single women Experience of Stigmatization**

| S/N | Kindly specify the extent to which you experience the various forms of discrimination. | Mean | SD   | Rank            |
|-----|--|------|------|-----------------|
| 1.  | Suspicion  | 2.91 | 0.92 | 5 <sup>th</sup> |
| 2.  | Insult and Name calling  | 3.05 | 0.82 | 2 <sup>nd</sup> |
| 3.  | Disrespect by family members   | 2.95 | 0.67 | 3 <sup>rd</sup> |
| 4.  | Loss of friends/network  | 3.17 | 0.71 | 1 <sup>st</sup> |
| 5.  | Public shame and embarrassment   | 2.65 | 0.74 | 7 <sup>th</sup> |
| 6.  | Threat and Violence  | 2.23 | 0.71 | 9 <sup>th</sup> |
| 7.  | Difficulty in renting an apartment   | 2.88 | 0.85 | 6 <sup>th</sup> |
| 8.  | Cheating and duping by prospective spouse  | 2.41 | 0.75 | 8 <sup>th</sup> |
| 9.  | Discrimination in employment/business  | 2.94 | 0.69 | 4 <sup>th</sup> |

From the result shown Table 2 above, the extent to which single women experience various forms of stigmatization was reported. According to the result obtained after the analysis of data, the highest place single women experience stigmatization was in the loss of friends (mean = 3.17, SD = 0.71), followed by insult and name calling (mean = 3.05, SD = 0.82), disrespect by family members (mean = 2.95, SD = 0.67), discrimination in employment/business (mean = 2.94, SD = 0.69), suspicion (mean = 2.91, SD = 0.92),

difficulty in renting an apartment (mean = 2.88, SD = 0.85), public shame and embarrassment (mean = 2.65, SD = 0.74). On the other hand, it was not agreed that cheating and duping by prospective spouse (mean = 2.41, SD = 0.75), as well as threat and violence (mean = 2.23, SD = 0.71) were significant stigmatization experienced by single women in Rivers State. Based on this result, the aspect of stigmatization experienced by single women was in the loss of friends/social network, while the least was on threat and violence.

**Table 3: Independent samples t-test of stigmatization experience of women based on their age**

| Age      | N   | Mean | SD   | DF  | t    | p     | Decision               |
|----------|-----|------|------|-----|------|-------|------------------------|
| 30-40    | 106 | 2.64 | 0.69 | 148 | 2.23 | 0.025 | Reject H <sub>01</sub> |
| Above 40 | 44  | 2.96 | 0.83 |     |      |       | P<0.005                |

From the result presented in Table 3, it is revealed that single women between the ages of 30-40 had a mean value of 2.64 (SD = 0.69), while those above 40 years had a mean value of 2.96 (SD = 0.83). This result therefore indicates that older single women experience more stigmatization than younger single women. Further testing using independent samples t-

test revealed that a t-value of 2.23 was obtained with a corresponding p-value of 0.025 which was lesser than the chosen alpha of 0.05. This result therefore indicates that older single women experience a significantly higher level of stigmatization than younger single women. The null hypotheses was therefore rejected.

**Table 4: Independent samples t-test of stigmatization experience of women based on their highest educational qualification**

| Highest Education Qualification | N   | Mean | SD   | DF  | t    | p     | Decision               |
|---------------------------------|-----|------|------|-----|------|-------|------------------------|
| Primary/Secondary               | 27  | 2.95 | 0.75 | 148 | 1.97 | 0.043 | Reject H <sub>02</sub> |
| Tertiary                        | 123 | 2.65 | 0.77 |     |      |       | P<0.005                |

From the result presented in Table 4, it is revealed that single women with either a primary or secondary educational qualification had a mean value of 2.95 (SD = 0.75), while those with secondary qualifications had a mean value of 2.65 (SD = 0.77). This result therefore indicates that single women with less educational qualification experience more stigmatization than those with higher educational

qualification. Further testing using independent samples t-test revealed that a t-value of 1.97 was obtained with a corresponding p-value of 0.043 which was lesser than the chosen alpha of 0.05. This result therefore indicates that single women with lesser educational qualification experience a significantly higher level of stigmatization than single women with



higher educational qualification. The null hypotheses was therefore rejected.

**Table 5: Independent samples t-test of stigmatization experience of women based on their singlehood status**

| Singlehood Status          | N  | Mean | SD   | DF  | t    | p      | Decision              |
|----------------------------|----|------|------|-----|------|--------|-----------------------|
| Never-Married              | 98 | 3.04 | 0.59 | 148 | 6.24 | 0.0005 | Reject H <sub>0</sub> |
| Separated/Divorced/Widowed | 52 | 2.56 | 0.93 |     |      |        | P<0.005               |

From the result presented in Table 5, it is revealed that never-married single women had a mean value of 3.04 (SD = 0.59), while those who were either separated/divorced/widowed had a mean value of 2.56 (SD = 0.93). This result therefore indicates that never married single women experience more stigmatization than those who are either separated/divorced/widowed. Further testing using independent samples t-test revealed that a t-value of 6.24 was obtained with a corresponding p-value of 0.0005 which was lesser than the chosen alpha of 0.05. This result therefore indicates that never-married single women experience a significantly higher level of stigmatization than single women who are either separated, divorced or widowed. The null hypotheses was therefore rejected.

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

From the result obtained in the study from research question one, it was revealed that most of the stigmatization experienced by single women in Rivers State were interpersonal in nature. This is because the highest ranking forms of stigmatization such as loss of friends and social network, insult and name calling, disrespect by family members and suspicions are related to the immediate social environment of the women. It was also shown that institutional stigmatization such as difficulty in renting apartment and discrimination in employment and business were also experienced by single women in the state. The result of this study is in agreement with that obtained by Macvarish (2006) who should that women in Britain were called derogatory names. Similarly, as Gaetano (2010) opined, women in China are referred to as leftover women, a form of insulting and derogatory term which affects their self-esteem and worth.

Regarding institutional stigmatization, the result of this paper is in line with the finding from Kalmijn et al (2005) who found that being single leads to wider social segregation. In a related study, Toukhoushian (1998) revealed that single men lose out on business and employment opportunities when compared to their married counterparts. Also, Ntoimo and Isiugo-Abanihe (2014) revealed in their study that insult and name calling was one of the major form of stigmatization experienced by single women in Lagos State. These mentioned studies further confirmed that

single women experience varied form of stigmatization due to their status.

From the testing of the developed hypotheses, the result showed that older single women experience a significantly higher level of stigmatization than younger single women. This result might be due to the fact that most of the older women are way beyond the age of childbearing and no longer as attractive as the younger ones. Furthermore, the younger single women might still be in a relationship with the hope that it might end in marriage as compared to the other women. Another of the hypotheses revealed that less educated single women experience a significantly higher level of stigmatization than those with higher educational qualification. This findings might have been obtained because those with higher educational qualifications might be more stable financially which could compensate for their status as compared to those who have lower educational qualification. Finally, the result showed that never-married single women experience a significant higher level of stigmatization than those who were previously married. This result might be due to the fact that those who were previously married have children as well as other family members despite the separation, divorce or death of their spouse. These findings corroborate the assertion of Ntoimo and Isiugo-Abanihe (2014: 6134) that “marriage is still the norm in Nigeria, heterosexual family is typical; and approved womanhood is still associated with the dyadic role of wife and mother.”

## RECOMMENDATIONS

From the result obtained in this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. There should be a policy that prevents stigmatization against single people, especially females. Such a policy should be enforced by the government through appropriate agencies to ensure that stigmatization against women is minimized.
2. During the filling of forms and other official documents, the sections for marital status should be eliminated to minimize bias against those who are still single.
3. Women support groups should be formed which provide legal and policy backings to



any single woman who feel stigmatized and discriminated against.

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