

# Impact of Cultural Norms on Men's And Women's Choice of Singlehood

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**Abstract:** *The phenomenon of singlehood has gained prominence in contemporary societies, yet the role of cultural norms in shaping men's and women's choices remains underexplored. This study reviews existing literature to examine how cultural expectations regarding gender, marriage, and social roles influence individuals' decisions to remain single. Findings indicate that individualistic societies tend to provide greater autonomy, facilitating voluntary singlehood, whereas collectivist cultures often impose marital pressures, particularly on women. Gendered norms affect satisfaction with singlehood, with women generally reporting higher life and social satisfaction than men. Social stigma, family expectations, and stereotypes about single men and women further shape the singlehood experience across cultural contexts. Economic independence, changing social narratives, and urbanization are mediating factors that allow both men and women to negotiate singlehood as a legitimate life choice. Understanding these cultural dynamics has implications for mental health support, social policy, and the social recognition of singlehood as a valid identity.*

**Keywords:** Singlehood, Cultural Norms, Gender Differences, Life Satisfaction.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Singlehood defined here as remaining without a committed romantic partner has become an increasingly prominent life choice in many contemporary societies. While economic, demographic, and personal factors drive this trend, cultural norms around gender, marriage, and individualism play a crucial role in shaping how men and women experience and choose singlehood. This review examines how cultural expectations differentially influence singlehood for men and women, focusing on satisfaction, social stigma, and gendered motivations.

Singlehood, defined as the state of not being involved in a marital or long-term romantic relationship, has emerged as a significant sociological and psychological phenomenon in contemporary societies. Traditionally, marriage and coupledness have been regarded as societal norms and markers of adult identity, particularly in collectivist and patriarchal cultures where familial and social expectations prioritize marriage as a life goal (Mukherjee, Kumar, & Mukherjee, 2025). However, in recent decades, there has been a marked increase in individuals choosing to remain single voluntarily, driven not only by personal preference but also by broader socio-cultural changes, economic independence, and evolving gender norms. The decision to remain single is complex and multifaceted, influenced by an interplay of individual, structural, and cultural factors. Among these, cultural norms, shared expectations, values, and beliefs about appropriate social behavior play a crucial role in shaping how men and women perceive, experience, and navigate singlehood (Kowal & Adamczyk, 2025).

Cultural norms regarding gender and marital roles significantly shape the pathways and experiences of singlehood. In traditional societies, men and women are often ascribed specific roles: men are expected to be providers and protectors, while women are expected to fulfill domestic and caregiving responsibilities. These gendered expectations influence not only the timing and choice of marriage but also the perception of individuals who remain single. Women who remain unmarried beyond a certain socially sanctioned age often face social stigma, being labeled as 'leftover' or 'unfulfilled,' whereas men may be perceived as immature or socially incompetent if they remain single (Shahrak,

Brand, & Taghizadeh, 2021). Such gendered stereotypes create differential pressures for men and women, affecting their life satisfaction, social interactions, and identity formation. Empirical studies have consistently shown that single women tend to report higher life satisfaction and social well-being than men, partly due to their ability to cultivate broader social networks and draw emotional support from non-romantic relationships (Hoan & MacDonald, 2024). In contrast, men often rely more heavily on romantic partnerships for emotional fulfillment, making them more susceptible to societal judgment and feelings of inadequacy in cultures that prioritize couple hood.

The influence of cultural context is also evident in the distinction between individualistic and collectivist societies. Individualistic societies, which emphasize personal autonomy, self-expression, and self-fulfillment, provide more leeway for individuals especially women to remain single without experiencing severe social sanctions (Kowal & Adamczyk, 2025). In these contexts, singlehood may be framed positively as a conscious lifestyle choice, offering opportunities for personal growth, career development, and self-realization. Conversely, in collectivist societies, where family honor, social conformity, and interdependent relationships are prioritized, remaining single is often construed as a deviation from societal norms. In such contexts, singlehood can result in social alienation, familial pressure, and reduced perceived social value, particularly for women (Mukherjee et al., 2025). Even when men remain single in these societies, they may be criticized for failing to fulfill their expected roles as family providers or social contributors. Thus, cultural norms do not merely affect the prevalence of singlehood but also the lived experience and societal evaluation of single individuals.

Economic independence and urbanization have emerged as mediating factors that interact with cultural norms to shape singlehood. Women who achieve financial autonomy and higher educational attainment are better positioned to resist traditional pressures to marry, allowing them to assert greater agency in their relational choices (Mukherjee et al., 2025). Urban centers, in particular, provide alternative social networks, career opportunities, and social spaces that reduce dependence on marriage for social validation. Similarly, changing media narratives, social media platforms, and peer networks contribute to a redefinition of singlehood as an empowering lifestyle rather than a social deficiency (Kislev, 2019). These shifts demonstrate that while cultural norms continue to exert significant influence, they are neither static nor monolithic; individuals actively negotiate, resist, and reinterpret societal expectations to align with personal aspirations and identities.

Stigma associated with singlehood is gendered and culturally mediated. Women often face criticism for not fulfilling traditional roles such as motherhood, domestic care, or marital partnership, while men may be subject to negative perceptions related to immaturity, social failure, or emotional dependency (Shahrak et al., 2021). The consequences of such stigma extend beyond social perception, influencing mental health, social engagement, and life satisfaction. Recent studies suggest that social support networks, including friendships and peer communities, can buffer the negative effects of cultural judgment and enhance satisfaction with singlehood (Hoan & MacDonald, 2024).

However, the availability and quality of such networks are themselves influenced by cultural context, social stratification, and urbanization, highlighting the complex interplay between societal norms and individual well-being. Age is another critical factor intersecting with gender and cultural norms in shaping singlehood experiences. For instance, never-married women over the age of thirty-five in traditional societies often confront heightened societal scrutiny and familial pressure (Shahrak et al., 2021). This age-related stigma may affect self-perception, social participation, and access to support systems, creating distinct challenges for women compared to men. Moreover, men who remain single beyond culturally sanctioned ages may encounter different pressures, often linked to social competence, economic achievement, or status within familial and peer networks. These patterns underscore that cultural norms operate not only through gender but also through age-related expectations, shaping the social, emotional, and psychological dimensions of singlehood.

Research indicates that singlehood is increasingly recognized as a legitimate social identity rather than a temporary or failed relational status. Kislev (2019) argues that the rise of singlehood as a chosen lifestyle reflects broader socio-cultural transformations, including shifting gender norms, economic empowerment, and the growing acceptance of diverse life trajectories. In this context, singlehood is framed not as a deficiency but as a viable, autonomous mode of

living, offering opportunities for personal development, career advancement, and self-expression. Nevertheless, the persistence of traditional cultural norms ensures that singlehood remains a gendered and socially negotiated phenomenon, with experiences varying widely based on cultural context, social class, and individual agency.

The interplay between cultural norms and singlehood has broader sociological and psychological implications. Understanding how cultural expectations shape men's and women's choices provides insights into gender dynamics, social stratification, and identity construction. It also informs policy and social interventions aimed at supporting single individuals, promoting mental well-being, and reducing stigma associated with non-traditional life choices. As singlehood becomes more prevalent globally, it is essential to examine not only the structural and demographic determinants but also the normative and cultural frameworks that guide relational decisions and influence satisfaction with singlehood.

The choice to remain single is profoundly influenced by cultural norms, gender expectations, and social frameworks. While individualistic societies provide greater autonomy and reduced stigma, collectivist and traditional cultures impose pressures that shape the timing, acceptance, and experience of singlehood. Gendered stereotypes, social stigma, age-related expectations, and economic independence interact to create diverse pathways and lived experiences for men and women who choose singlehood. The growing recognition of singlehood as a legitimate social identity reflects the dynamic nature of cultural norms and highlights the importance of understanding singlehood not merely as a demographic phenomenon but as a culturally and socially constructed experience. Further research is required to examine cross-cultural variations, longitudinal changes, and the intersectional influences of class, religion, and age on the experience and satisfaction of singlehood.

## **CULTURAL NORMS AND SINGLEHOOD: KEY MECHANISMS**

### **1. Individualism vs. Collectivism**

Large-scale cross-national research shows that cultural-level values such as individualism deeply affect rates of singlehood. In a study covering 59 countries using World Values Survey data, sociodemographic and cultural factors predicted singlehood status: in more individualistic societies, men had a higher likelihood of being single compared to women. This suggests that in contexts where personal autonomy and self-fulfillment are more valued, traditional marital pressures may weaken, altering how men and women view relationship commitment.

### **2. Gender Roles and Well-Being of Singlehood**

Research on satisfaction with singlehood indicates consistent gender differences: women, on average, report higher satisfaction with being single than men. These differences appear across cultures: for example, in German and Polish samples, the predictors of singlehood satisfaction differed by gender women's satisfaction was strongly tied to life satisfaction and loneliness, whereas men's was more linked to mating confidence and the initiation of relationships. The persistent gap suggests that gender norms such as expectations for men to couple to gain emotional support or for women to derive value independently shape how singlehood is lived and evaluated.

### **3. Perceived Stigma and Cultural Judgments**

Singlehood can be culturally stigmatized, but the nature of the stigma often depends on gender. Societal stereotypes about single men and women differ: single women are sometimes cast as "leftovers" or seen as not having fulfilled their marital role, while single men may be portrayed as immature or lacking social competence. Furthermore, people often assume that being single inherently entails lower life satisfaction. In a recent study, participants rated others' life satisfaction based solely on relationship status, revealing a bias: singles were judged as less satisfied even without other context, indicating a cultural norm that equates being single with lack. This stereotyping can pressure individuals differently: for women, the stigma may be linked to traditional roles in family and marriage norms; for men, it may connect to expectations of success, provider roles, or emotional dependency.

### **4. Intersection with Economic and Social Change**

In specific cultural contexts, economic independence and changing social norms empower more people especially women to choose singlehood. An ethnographic study in urban India explores how single women navigate a deeply

marriage-centric society: although familial and social expectations remain strong, increased financial autonomy, social media narratives, and peer support are reshaping the singlehood experience. Additionally, rising education levels, cost of living, and changing identity norms contribute to rethinking singlehood not as a deficiency but as a legitimate lifestyle choice. These shifts show that cultural norms are not monolithic: even in traditional societies, there is negotiation and transformation, particularly among younger generations.

#### **5. Age, Gender, and Cultural Expectations**

The experience of singlehood also varies by age and gender in relation to cultural expectations. For instance, qualitative research on never-married women over 35 highlights the tension between personal desire and social pressure: such women often face expectations of marriage tied to age, family honor, and gender roles. Older single women may therefore confront unique cultural challenges, including loneliness, social criticism, and the negotiation of identity outside marriage.

#### **6. Gender Differences in Satisfaction and Social Support**

A growing body of research suggests that single women may derive more satisfaction from non-romantic social networks than men do. For example, pooled data from multiple studies (nearly 6,000 single adults) showed that single women reported higher life satisfaction, greater relationship-status satisfaction, higher sexual satisfaction, and lower desire for a romantic partner compared to men.

One explanation is that women often maintain stronger friendships and broader support systems outside romantic relationships, buffering them from the negative effects of societal expectations. In contrast, men may rely more on romantic partnerships for emotional and social fulfillment, so cultural norms that de-emphasize singlehood or frame it negatively can disproportionately affect their well-being.

#### **7. Cultural Change, Identity, and Singlehood as a Social Identity**

Singlehood is increasingly being framed not merely as a transitional state but as an identity in its own right. In societies undergoing rapid social change, cultural narratives around singlehood are evolving. Kislev's work (for example, *Happy Singlehood*) argues that solo living is gaining legitimacy and social acceptance in many contexts, driven by economic independence, shifting gender norms, and evolving community structures. This redefinition of singlehood as a chosen, stable way of life (rather than a failed relationship status) challenges traditional gendered cultural narratives and provides a pathway for both men and women to negotiate their identities outside marriage.

### **CHALLENGES AND CULTURAL BARRIERS**

**Persistent traditional norms:** In collectivist or conservative societies, marriage remains deeply embedded in cultural identity. Single individuals may face social alienation, familial pressure, or stigma, especially if they contradict gendered expectations of marriage and family.

**Gendered double standards:** Even as singlehood becomes more accepted, men and women may experience different types of judgment. Women may be criticized for not fulfilling traditional roles (motherhood, homemaking), while men may be stigmatized for emotional dependence, lack of achievement, or failure to "settle down."

**Intersectionality:** Factors like class, age, religion, and socioeconomic status intersect with gender to shape how cultural norms are internalized. For instance, urban, educated women might find greater freedom to remain single compared to women in more conservative or rural settings.

**Well-being disparities:** Although some studies show women report higher satisfaction in singlehood, it doesn't guarantee universal well-being. Loneliness, lack of social support, and mental health issues can still affect singles; these may be mediated by cultural acceptance and infrastructure (e.g., single-friendly social norms, community networks).

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE**

Understanding the cultural dimensions of singlehood has important implications:

**Mental health and social support:** As more people willingly choose singlehood, there is a need for mental health resources tailored to single individuals, particularly in societies where stigma persists.

**Media and representation:** Cultural narratives in media, education, and public discourse should reflect the diversity of singlehood experiences, breaking stereotypes tied to gender.

**Policy recognition:** Policies (such as housing, taxation, social security) often assume marital or family structures; recognizing singlehood as a valid and stable life choice may guide reforms to include singles in social welfare planning.

**Community-building:** Encouraging community spaces, social networks, and platforms for single individuals can help mitigate isolation and build supportive cultural environments.

## **FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

**Longitudinal studies:** More long-term research is needed to understand how satisfaction with singlehood evolves over the life course, and how cultural changes impact this.

**Cross-cultural comparisons:** Comparative studies across different cultural contexts can shed light on how cultural norms create different singlehood trajectories for men and women.

**Intersectional analyses:** Future research should integrate gender with age, class, religion, and other axes to understand diverse experiences of singlehood.

**Qualitative studies:** In-depth qualitative exploration can reveal how people internalize, resist, or reshape cultural norms in their decision to remain single.

## **II. CONCLUSION**

Cultural norms significantly influence men's and women's choice of singlehood, shaping not just the prevalence of singlehood but the quality and meaning of that experience. As societies evolve, traditional expectations around marriage and gender are being renegotiated, opening space for singlehood to be seen as a legitimate, even empowering, identity. However, gendered disparities persist: women often report higher satisfaction in singlehood and draw on stronger social networks, while men may feel more pressure to conform to coupling norms. Recognizing these cultural influences and addressing the stigma and institutional gaps is crucial to supporting individuals who choose singlehood on their own terms.

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