

Living Beyond Norms: A Qualitative Study on Public Perception and Lived Realities of Unmarried Middle-Aged Women in Medan

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ABSTRACT

Marriage is often considered an important phase in the lives of Indonesian women, reflecting the success and completeness of a woman's identity as a wife and mother. However, an increasing number of middle-aged women (aged 40–60) are unmarried in an ever-evolving social context. This phenomenon elicits diverse responses from society, ranging from negative stigma to social pressure, which ultimately affects the comfort and psychological well-being of women who experience it. This study aims to explore middle-aged women's perceptions of marriage, identify factors hindering marriage, and understand their conditions and expectations as unmarried women. The study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with in-depth interviews with four main informants and four supporting informants in Medan. Data were analyzed through thematic reduction and categorization. The study results show that middle-aged women perceive marriage as a form of worship and a long-term commitment. Although they had a desire to marry in the past, they experienced various obstacles, including emotional trauma, the absence of a serious partner, and social and cultural pressure. Nevertheless, they demonstrated economic and emotional independence and were able to build a positive meaning of life outside the institution of marriage. Family support proved to be an important factor in maintaining psychological stability. This study concludes that the single status of middle-aged women results from a complex life process, not merely a form of failure. Therefore, society needs to stop stigmatizing and build a more inclusive understanding of women's life choices.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the social context of Indonesian society, marriage is still regarded as an important achievement in a person's life cycle, especially for women [1]. Cultural and religious norms

position marriage as a form of maturity, social development, and a symbol of a woman's success in fulfilling domestic and social roles [2]. However, in recent decades, there has been a shift in women's life orientation, where more and more women are postponing or even choosing not to marry at an age considered mature by social standards [3]. This phenomenon is increasingly visible in urban areas such as Medan City, which is experiencing complex social, economic, and cultural dynamics.

Women in middle age, specifically those aged between 40 and 60 who are unmarried, often become the focus in social spaces within families, communities, and the media [4]. On one hand, they represent financially and educationally independent women capable of making autonomous life decisions [5]. However, on the other hand, society often labels them negatively as 'unmarketable', 'old maid', or considers them deviating from the prevailing social norms. This stigma reflects society's judgment and creates psychological and social pressure on the individuals concerned [6].

This condition reflects the gap between the realities of the lives of unmarried adult women and the perceptions of society that are still rooted in traditional social constructs [7]. In some cases, middle-aged unmarried women face layered pressures, both in the form of personal questions that invade their privacy, family expectations to get married soon, and moral judgments expressed openly or implicitly. The decision not to marry or to postpone marriage is not always related to an inability to form relationships. However, it can be a rational and conscious life choice, for example, due to considerations of career, education, family responsibilities, or the search for a broader meaning in life.

In addition, the emergence of the concept of *waithood* or the period of delaying the transition to a certain social status, such as marriage, shows that the phenomenon of unmarried women in middle age cannot be understood narrowly. This concept reflects that marriage is no longer the only path to adulthood, but one of many options in life's journey. In modern society, women increasingly have access to higher education, professional job opportunities, and economic independence, making them freer in designing their futures.

This phenomenon becomes interesting to analyze further in the city of Medan, as one of the major cities with a multicultural society. Various local factors such as ethnic cultural values, religious teachings, education levels, and access to employment contribute to shaping the mindset of society towards unmarried women. Therefore, examining the social realities of middle-aged unmarried women and public perceptions of them is essential to provide an objective and in-depth picture of the ongoing social dynamics.

Research on middle-aged unmarried women has gained attention in various studies, especially related to social stigma, mental health, and gender construction in patriarchal societies. For instance, Nurliana's research highlights the psychological pressures experienced by middle-aged unmarried women in conservative family environments [8]. Likewise, a study by Sihombing & Saragi revealed that single women over the age of 35 are often faced with negative social labels such as being considered undesirable, incomplete, or even deviating from cultural norms [9]. Nonetheless, most previous research has focused on individual aspects such as psychological impacts and personal coping strategies. In contrast, broader socio-cultural dimensions, such as societal perceptions and how social reality is

constructed against them, have not been explored in depth, especially in multicultural urban communities like Medan City [10].

Furthermore, there remains a gap in the literature (research gap) that simultaneously examines the social realities experienced directly by middle-aged unmarried women and public perceptions of this group. Many studies position research subjects as passive objects experiencing pressure, without examining how they interpret, respond to, and negotiate their social identities in public spaces. In addition, the local context is often overlooked. Medan, as a large city with ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity, has complex social dynamics. This makes it important to examine public perceptions specifically in this area, as social constructions regarding unmarried women are likely to differ from one region to another.

Based on this description, this research offers novelty in two main aspects. First, this study juxtaposes two perspectives simultaneously: the social reality of middle-aged unmarried women and public perceptions of them, thus providing a more holistic understanding. Second, the contextual approach used, focusing on Medan City as a plural social space, offers new contributions to the discourse on family sociology and gender studies in Indonesia. Therefore, this research aims to analyze the social reality of middle-aged unmarried women in Medan City and how societal perceptions are formed towards them. With this approach, it is hoped that a more equitable and contextual understanding of women's life choices in adulthood can be found, as well as opening a more inclusive and humane social dialogue regarding the diversity of life forms.

2. METHOD

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach to explore and deeply understand the social realities and public perceptions of middle-aged unmarried women in Medan City. This approach was chosen because it can represent the subjective meanings experienced by the informants and explain social phenomena based on their complex life contexts [11]. Data was collected through three main techniques: observation, interviews, and documentation. Observation was conducted directly in the informants' living environment to capture the social dynamics, interactions among residents, and non-verbal expressions that reflect the social perceptions developing in the surrounding community.

Interviews were conducted in a structured manner, using a question guide formulated based on the research focus. Each interview session lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and was carried out in Indonesian. The interview process was recorded with the informants' consent, then transcribed verbatim and analyzed using a thematic approach to identify patterns of meaning from the narratives presented. Before the interview began, the researcher provided clear and open information regarding the research's purpose, the participants' rights, and the form of data publication. Each informant expressed their willingness by providing informed consent verbally and in writing. Aspects of confidentiality and anonymity of informants were strictly maintained, including masking identities in publications and storing digital data in an encrypted form to prevent access by third parties [12].

The informants in this study consist of eight women aged 40-60 who are unmarried and reside in Medan City. They come from different social and economic backgrounds, with

professions as peddlers, tailors, embroidery tailors, and employees of food stalls. The researcher purposively selected the informants based on criteria relevant to the focus of the study so that the data obtained would be rich in information and context. To strengthen the depth and accuracy of the information, this research also involves four supporting informants, such as family members and neighbors who have close relationships with the main informant. The number of informants is considered sufficient because by the fourth interview, both from the main and supporting informants, the data obtained showed a consistent pattern and began to experience repetition of information. This indicates that data saturation has been reached, where no new significant findings were discovered from additional informants.

The validity and legitimacy of the data are strengthened through source triangulation techniques, namely by comparing information from various informants and different data collection methods. Information from primary interviews is compared with field observation results and documentation in the form of photos, diary notes, and personal archives. This approach ensures that the data used in the analysis has a high level of consistency and reliability, and reflects an accurate representation of social reality [13]. This research is expected to produce a comprehensive, credible, and meaningful understanding of the social phenomena under study through data collection techniques, strict ethical procedures, and conceptual considerations in determining the number of informants.

The subjects of this study are middle-aged women (40–60 years old) who are unmarried and reside in the city of Medan, North Sumatra. The main informants in this study consist of four women with diverse social, economic, and occupational backgrounds, but who share the commonality of being unmarried at middle age. The researcher used purposive sampling methods, which involve selecting informants based on specific criteria that are relevant in order to provide in-depth information in line with the focus of the study.

The four main informants work as peddlers, embroidery tailors, and employees at food stalls. They represent the diversity of the socio-economic conditions of middle-aged women in the area. Details of the main informants are presented in the table below:

Table 1. Main Informants

No	Code/Initial Name	Age	Occupation
1	RM	52	Pecel Vendor
2	MGS	57	Tailor
3	DKS	40	Embroidery Tailor
4	KM	48	Food Stall Employee

Table 2. Supporting Informants

No	Code/Initial Name	Age	Status of Supporting Informant
1	AC	52	Resident near the main informant
2	NS	48	Relative of the main informant
3	W	61	Neighbor of the main informant
4	PH	65	Parent of the main informant

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Results

3.1.1. Independence and Conscious Life Choices

The observation results show that middle-aged unmarried women in Medan City exhibit a high level of independence in various aspects of life, such as economic, social, and emotional. They do daily activities independently, such as starting businesses or working from home, without relying on others. In decision-making, the informants seem to fully understand their life choices, including the decision to remain single. Their social interactions are natural and positive, although they still face social pressures regarding marital status. However, the informants can respond to these pressures maturely and rationally. In the family environment, they continue to play an active and responsible role, both as breadwinners and as companions to their parents. Overall, this observation indicates that being unmarried is not an indicator of dependence or weakness, but rather a result of a conscious life choice with responsibility and independence. The findings from the observations are also in line with the results of the interviews; these are the findings from the interviews.

DKS informant (40 years old, Embroidery Tailor)

"I have been used to handling everything independently for a long time. This small business I started from scratch. Even though I am not married, my life is still meaningful. Being able to earn my own money and help my younger siblings attend school is enough for me."

MGS informant (57 years old, Tailor)

Many people ask why I have not gotten married. However, for me, that is not a priority. I am more focused on the sewing business that I have been running for the last 10 years. I feel more at ease managing my life and not depending on others.

Informant KM (48 years old, Employee at a Rice Stall)

I live with my elderly mother, and I take care of everything. I choose not to get married because I want to continue supporting my mother. I made this decision consciously, not because no one wants me. I feel this is the most appropriate path in life for me.

Informant RM (52 years old, Pecal Seller)

"I am active in the subdistrict's environmental activities and women's organizations. Many are surprised that I am unmarried, but I never feel inferior. I have a lot of time to do more for the community. Life is a choice, and I choose to remain single but be beneficial."

The observations and interviews indicate that unmarried middle-aged women in Medan City have high independence and live their life choices with full awareness. They are economically, socially, and emotionally independent, engaging in daily activities such as starting home businesses, working from home, or actively participating in social activities without relying on others. In decision-making, especially concerning marital status, the informants demonstrate a rational and mature attitude. Despite facing social pressure, they can respond positively and maintain important roles in the family, both as breadwinners and as companions to their parents. The statements of the informants, ranging from those focused on self-employment, choosing to care for parents, to being active in the community, reinforce the finding that the choice to remain single is not due to coercion, but rather a form

of awareness about the meaning of life and the contributions that can be made. Thus, being unmarried is not an indicator of weakness, but rather a reflection of independence and responsibility for life choices made consciously and with dignity.

3.1.2. Relational Trauma and Perception of Marriage

The results of observations on unmarried middle-aged women in Medan revealed a close relationship between past relational trauma experiences and their perceptions of the institution of marriage. Some informants showed ambivalent or even skeptical attitudes towards marriage, which were reflected in non-verbal expressions such as decreased eye contact, long pauses when discussing romantic relationship topics, and changes in intonation when recounting past experiences. In everyday social life, they tend to keep a distance from discourse related to intimate relationships, focusing more on personal development and social roles that they consider more emotionally secure. The choice to remain single seems to be based not only on independence but also as a form of protective mechanism against emotional wounds that have not yet fully healed, such as the experience of being abandoned by a partner, the failure of a first love, or prolonged family conflicts.

This observation shows that relational trauma affects how individuals interpret marriage not as a primary necessity, but as an option filled with emotional considerations. Thus, the perception of marriage among respondents cannot be separated from their previous relational experiences, shaping their narratives about the meaning of intimacy, trust, and emotional risks. This reinforces the understanding that the choice not to marry for some women is not solely due to social or economic pressures, but is also closely related to the need for psychological security and emotional stability. Similar findings were noted in the interview results, as seen in the responses from the informants below.

Informant RM (52 years old, Pecal Seller):

I once had a serious relationship, but I was ultimately betrayed. Since then, I have struggled to trust men again. Now I feel more comfortable being alone and focusing on teaching. Sometimes I think about getting married, but the fear of that old hurt still lingers.

KM informant (48 years old, rice stall employee):

"I come from a family full of conflict. My parents often fought, even to the point of violence. It made me afraid to start a household. I do not want to repeat the same patterns in my life."

Informant MGS (57 years old, Tailor):

"I have been proposed to, but my fiancé was too controlling and possessive. I felt pressured and eventually called off the wedding. Since then, I think being alone is better than living under pressure."

DKS Informant (40 years old, Embroidery Tailor):

"I often accompany women who are victims of domestic violence, and from that experience, I have learned a lot. For me, marriage is not a guarantee of happiness. I choose to live my life independently, in a way that I feel is emotionally safe."

Based on the results of observations and interviews, it can be concluded that the experience of relational trauma has a significant influence on the perceptions of unmarried

middle-aged women in Medan towards marriage. Trauma stemming from personal experiences such as betrayal, oppressive relationships, and dysfunctional family backgrounds shapes a cautious, ambivalent, and even skeptical attitude towards the institution of marriage.

The informants indicated that the decision not to marry is not just a form of independence, but also a self-protection strategy against emotional wounds that have not fully healed. The choice to remain single is positioned as a form of seeking psychological safety, not merely as a result of social or economic pressure. This emphasizes that perceptions of marriage cannot be separated from the construction of past emotional experiences, where trust and intimacy are seen as risks that require deep emotional consideration.

3.1.3. Social Pressure, Patriarchal Culture, and Stigma Against Single Women

The results of observations on middle-aged unmarried women in Medan show a considerable social pressure from their surroundings, which indirectly shapes a negative perception of single status. This pressure is evident from social interaction patterns that corner individuals, cynical comments, and jokes that imply that women should marry by a certain age. In various social situations, such as family gatherings or religious activities, single women often become the subject of passive-aggressive discussions highlighting their marital status. Patriarchal culture is still very dominant in the social construction of society, where women are assessed based on their domestic roles as wives and mothers. This is reflected in the expectations of families and society that continually position marriage as the primary achievement of a woman. Observations indicate that unmarried women are considered not yet 'complete' or 'failed' in fulfilling their destiny, which ultimately creates a psychological burden of its own.

The stigma against single women also appears in the form of symbolic exclusion, such as being left out of family decision-making, considered too independent to the point of being 'intimidating' to men, or suspected of having certain deficiencies. This impacts how single women position themselves in society: some choose to withdraw, while others negotiate their identities through achievements, careers, or other social roles as a form of resistance to dominant norms. Overall, this observation indicates that social pressures and patriarchal cultural norms not only shape the stigma against single women but also affect their psychological well-being and social relationships. The decision not to marry is not merely a free choice, but also a result of the struggle between personal needs and collective expectations that often are not friendly towards the diversity of women's life choices. The findings from observations align with the findings from interviews with several informants, and the results of the interviews are presented below.

Informant RM (52 years old, Pecal Seller):

Whenever I return to my hometown, someone asks when I will get married. Sometimes they do not realize that the question is hurtful. It is as if I am not complete as a woman just because I am not married yet.

Informant MGS (57 years old, Tailor):

In our culture, unmarried women are considered not to have 'succeeded'. Meanwhile, I have a promising career and live independently. However, there is still the notion that women must marry to be considered normal.

Informant KM (48 years old, Employee at a Rice Stall):

I was once shunned at a family event because I was considered too stubborn for refusing to be matched. They said I was too picky. I just want to live peacefully without pressure.

DKS Informant (40 years old, Embroidery Tailor):

In my community, people often say that I am too 'opinionated' to be a wife. Such stigma arises because they are used to women who submit. Being single makes me see differently, as if I made the wrong choice in life.

Based on the results of observations and interviews with unmarried adult women in the city of Medan, it can be concluded that they face intense social pressures due to the still-dominant patriarchal cultural constructions. Being single is perceived negatively, marked by cynical comments, demeaning jokes, and discriminatory treatment in social and family environments. A culture that places marriage as a woman's main achievement creates psychological burdens and symbolic marginalization for those who choose not to marry. Single women are often regarded as not 'complete,' too independent, or having certain deficiencies, which affects their social position and interpersonal relationships.

The results of interviews with four informants reinforce this observational finding, depicting real experiences in the form of painful questions, exclusion within the family, and the negative judgments that persist. Some women respond by withdrawing, while others demonstrate resistance through career and social achievements. This finding emphasizes that the decision to remain single is not merely a personal choice, but rather a result of the struggle between self-identity and social expectations that are still gender-biased.

3.2. Discussion

3.2.1. Independence and Conscious Life Choices

This research finding shows that unmarried middle-aged women in Medan City have a high level of independence economically, socially, and emotionally. They demonstrate the capacity to lead their daily lives without relying on partners or other family members and have full control over their life choices. This finding is consistent with the study conducted by Alfinuha, which states that middle-aged single women tend to have a strong internal control, characterized by the ability to make autonomous decisions and live according to the values they believe in [14].

Furthermore, the results of this study also strengthen the research by Renanita & Hidayat, which found that single women in middle adulthood prefer to develop their potential and enhance their social roles rather than being tied to a marriage relationship that does not align with their values [15]. The informants in this study even play an active role as household economy managers, caregivers for the elderly, and social activists in the community, which shows that being unmarried does not hinder their contributions to their social environment.

In the socio-cultural context, research by Komalasari & Agustin highlights that cultural pressures and patriarchal expectations still loom over unmarried women, especially in traditional urban societies like Medan [16]. However, the results of this study indicate that the informants were able to respond to this social pressure with a mature and non-reactive attitude. This attitude aligns with the concept of adaptive coping proposed by Nurullah, Amalia, and Fadillah, which refers to the individual's ability to face pressure with healthy emotional and rational responses [17].

The choice to remain single among the informants is not a result of social failure or psychological pressure, but rather a form of mature self-determination. As explained by Shahbaz, Zakir, and Awan in the theory of intrinsic motivation, individuals who can determine the direction of their lives based on personal values and beliefs tend to have a high level of psychological well-being [18]. Thus, these findings not only challenge negative stereotypes against middle-aged single women but also reinforce the narrative that life without marriage can still be lived with dignity, productivity, and a positive contribution to society. The observations and interviews emphasize that these women are not 'victims' of circumstances, but are conscious, active subjects responsible for their life choices.

3.2.2. Relational Trauma and Perception of Marriage

The findings of this study indicate that past relational trauma plays an important role in shaping the perceptions of middle-aged women towards marriage. Most informants showed ambivalent to skeptical attitudes towards the institution of marriage, as evidenced by their non-verbal expressions and personal narratives. This attitude cannot be understood solely as a form of independence but as a psychological protection mechanism from unresolved emotional wounds.

This research strengthens the findings of Hidayah, Hamzah, and Basri, which state that negative interpersonal relationship experiences, such as betrayal or excessive control in a relationship, can lead to the emergence of defense mechanisms in the form of avoidance of new relationships [19]. In this context, the decision to remain single is a way for individuals to manage the fear of repeating emotional wounds. Informants RM and MGS illustrate this through narratives about losing trust and fear of oppressive relationships.

In addition, research by Yahya & Zainuddin found that childhood trauma, especially related to violence and conflict within the family, has a long-term impact on individuals' perceptions and readiness to form long-term relationships [20]. This is reflected in the story of Informant KM, who stated that a dysfunctional family background made him reluctant to build a household for fear of repeating a similar negative relational pattern.

This finding is also consistent with the study results by Mulyani & Sari, which state that women who are active in issues of women's protection, especially those who often deal with cases of domestic violence (DV), tend to view marriage critically [21]. The DKS informant represents this view by placing marriage not as a guarantee of happiness, but as an institution fraught with risks for women if it is not based on equality and emotional security.

Psychologically, this finding supports the concept in adult developmental psychology that experiences of relational trauma can shape a more cautious or even avoidant

attachment style toward emotional closeness [22]. This affects how individuals interpret intimacy, trust, and commitment in relationships. In this case, middle-aged women prefer to develop social roles or careers to achieve emotional self-identity, as Informants RM and MGS stated.

Thus, this discussion shows that the decision not to marry is not solely a result of social, economic pressure or rational free choice, but is closely related to the internalization process of past traumatic experiences. This trauma leads women to construct a personal narrative about marriage as something to be wary of, rather than merely celebrated. This emphasizes that a psychosocial approach is necessary to understand the dynamics of single women, especially in middle adulthood, within a more comprehensive and empathetic context.

3.2.3. Social Pressure, Patriarchal Culture, and Stigma Against Single Women

The results of observations and interviews in this study show that unmarried middle-aged women in Medan experience strong social pressure, rooted in a patriarchal culture and stigma against single women. These findings are consistent with the research by Syahputra & Eliza, which states that single women in adulthood are often stigmatized for being considered deviant from social norms that place marriage as an indicator of women's success [23]. This social pressure is also reinforced by passive-aggressive comments, family interventions, and symbolic ostracism, as illustrated in the informant interviews.

The phenomenon of the marginalization of single women has been studied by Mabdeh, who states that women who are unmarried at a certain age are often seen as "imperfect" or "abnormal", making their social position vulnerable [24]. In the context of the Medan society, this is evident in the strong expectations regarding women's domestic roles as wives and mothers, as reflected in the notion that single women are seen as "too independent" or "intimidating to men." This social pressure also shapes women's negative perceptions of marriage, viewing it not as an equal emotional bond but rather as a burden of norms that must be fulfilled. This is consistent with the findings of Natasha & Ningrum, which state that single women experience identity conflict because they have to negotiate between self-actualization needs and collective cultural pressures [25].

From a psychological perspective, this pressure also has implications for mental well-being. Firdausi, Iswahyuni and Imaduddin state that social stigma can lead to feelings of worthlessness, loneliness, and prolonged interpersonal tension [26]. The informants in this study revealed emotional responses such as psychological exhaustion, withdrawal, or showing resistance through career achievements. This indicates that single women are objects of social judgment and active agents negotiating the meaning of their lives within repressive social structures.

Thus, it can be concluded that the social pressures and patriarchal cultural norms inherent in society not only influence public perceptions of single women but also shape their life experiences, identity, and psychological condition. The decision not to marry cannot be understood merely as a free choice, but rather as a result of complex socio-cultural struggles.

4. CONCLUSION

The results of this study indicate that unmarried middle-aged women in Medan experience considerable social pressure due to the deeply rooted dominance of patriarchal culture. This pressure creates a stigma that unmarried women are considered unsuccessful or incomplete in fulfilling their role as women. Findings from observations and interviews show that this pressure manifests as cynical comments, mocking jokes, and symbolic exclusion in social and family spaces. However, many of these women demonstrate high economic, social, and emotional independence levels. Some of them choose to live independently as a form of protection from traumatic relational experiences in the past. However, being single often forces them to negotiate their self-identity amidst collective expectations that demand marriage as a benchmark for women's success. This research has limitations in terms of the number of informants and the scope of the area, but it opens up opportunities for further research with a broader and deeper approach. The implications are that society and policymakers must build a more inclusive perspective towards the diversity of women's life choices.

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