

# **DETERMINANTS AND CONSEQUENCES OF SPINSTERHOOD IN LAGOS, NIGERIA**

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## **Abstract**

*This paper examines the determinants and consequences of spinsterhood in Lagos, Nigeria. Little or nothing is known about spinsters (never married women age 30 and above) in Lagos. Spinsters are a category of women whose experience of singlehood differs qualitatively from the experience of other single women. They have experiences that provide the much needed indication on reasons for marital postponement and non marriage; and are more likely to experience the stigma associated with non marriage. The present study is based on qualitative descriptive data derived from never married women 30 years and over in Lagos, Nigeria's primate city. Twenty-five In-depth interviews, seven Focus Group Discussions and four Life History interviews with spinsters reveal how persistent patriarchal structures, widespread marriage and family ideology intermingle with modern, cultural and personal factors to foster spinsterhood and stigmatization of spinsters in Lagos. This paper contributes to the existing literature on cross-cultural understanding of singlehood.*

## **Introduction**

Two dominant features of traditional Nigerian nuptiality are early and universal marriage. The most recent Demographic and Health Survey conducted in Nigeria in 2008 shows that about 29.4 percent of Nigerian women aged 15-19 are married, and 94.2 percent are married by age 30-34. Marriage remains the important marker of adult status in Nigeria (Agbasiere, 2000; Smith, 2007). Prolonged non marriage is essentially disapproved in any Nigerian setting, and permanent non marriage for women has no place in Nigeria's socio-cultural system, except women who are espoused to "spirits" as priestesses (Basden, 1921 cited in Isiugo-Abanihe, 1994; Agbasiere, 2000; Otite, 2006). Every woman is expected to marry and remain married all her life. Women derive their status basically from their dyadic roles of wife and mother. However, changes that are transforming this characteristic nuptial behaviour have continued to take place at both the macro and micro levels. The process of modernization has brought about increase in female age at first marriage among certain socio-cultural groups in Nigeria (Isiugo-Abanihe, 2000). Selection of spouse is transforming

from the traditional pattern built around kinship and communal goals to more individualistic pattern based on love and self selection (Smith, 2007), especially for educated and urban women. These and other modern trends have led to the emergence of an increasing number of women who, by choice or constraint, remain unmarried till later age. Never married women aged 15-49 increased in Nigeria from 17.2 percent in 1990 to 25.2 percent in 2008, and always single women aged 30-34 rose from 0.9 percent in 1990 to 5.1 percent in 1999 and 2003, and 5.8 percent in 2008 (FOS, 1992; NPC & ICF Macro, 2009). Population census reports show that never married women aged 30-34 years increased from 5.2 percent in 1991 to 11.8 percent in 2006; those aged 45-49 increased from 2.2 percent in 1991 to 3.7 percent in 2006. In Lagos, of all women aged 30-34 years, 13.6 percent are never married (NPC, 2009). The increasing proportion of never married women age 30 (which is the upper limit of the most fecund ages) and above is indicative of definite celibacy. Given the continued onslaught of social change, it is not unexpected that the number of spinsters will continue to increase in Nigeria.

Though the number of these older never married women or spinsters is relatively low, they constitute a special category of women whose experience of singlehood differs qualitatively from the experience of other single women such as widows, separated, divorced and younger never married women (Ferguson, 2000). However, due to the predominant norms of marriage, the determinants and unique experiences and interesting lives of spinsters have not been documented as well as other aspects of family life. Hence, this study undertakes to investigate what causes spinsterness, the effect of that civil status on spinsters and the coping mechanisms of spinsters in a typical developing society with traditional patriarchal structures and marriage ideology. Spinsterness in this study is limited to heterosexual, childless and non cohabiting never married women, aged 30 and above. This excludes never married women who are not married due to obvious physical handicap such as

the lame or blind and those whose lifestyle preclude marriage such as Catholic reverend sisters and lay celibates. The empirical data for this paper is based on in-depth interview with 25 spinsters, Life History of four spinsters, and seven focus group discussion with spinsters from diverse socio-economic background resident in metropolitan Lagos, Nigeria. Aspects of Giddens' Structuration Theory (1991) and feminist theories - Silvia Walby's Theorising Patriarchy (1990, 1997) and Barrett and McIntosh's Anti-social Family (1982) - provided the theoretical framework to investigate and explain the determinants and consequences of spinsterhood in Lagos.

Giddens explains that modernity is characterized by distantiation, disembedding mechanism and reflexivity. Distantiation refers to time-space separation. Disembedding is the breakdown of geographical and time barriers in social interactions. Time-space distantiation, and disembedding mechanisms such as money and expert systems in modern societies entail the basis of the trust is no longer personal knowledge (Ritzer, 2008). Reflexivity extends to creation of self identity. In the modern society, people are no longer confined to roles and positions embedded in traditions. "Within the limits of the opportunities available to them people can increasingly shape who they are and who they think themselves to be" (Haralambos & Holborn, 2008:513). In Theorising patriarchy, Silvia Walby pulled different feminist perspectives together to construct a model that is relevant to understanding of how patriarchy limits women and the choices available to them. She identified six limiting patriarchal structures as paid employment, household production or relations, transformation of cultural expectation of women from domesticity to sexual attractiveness, sexuality, violence and the state. Barrett and McIntosh posit that the traditional family form as anti-social. It promotes a very strong ideology that support family life, shuts out single persons from social interaction, pales and makes life outside the conventional family form unsatisfactory.

## **Literature Review**

Spinsterhood has probably existed as long as human history. In Western Europe, for instance, high incidence of permanent celibacy and high age at first marriage are the two distinguishing features of Western Europe Marriage Pattern (Hajnal, 1971; Engelen & Kok, 2003). In countries such as Netherlands, high rate of permanent celibacy among children of the upper class and certain religious groups coexisted with early marriage as recorded for the late 19<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century (Engelen & Kok, 2003). Though a higher percentage of people still enter into heterosexual formal marriage, marriage rates have continued to decline in most developed (UN Pop. Div., 2003) and developing countries including those known for conservative marriage culture. In the USA, the percentage of never married women age 30 - 34 years increased from 7 percent in 1970 to 22 percent in 2000 and 28 percent in 2008. Never married women age 35 and above increased from 7 percent in 1970 to 8 percent in 2000 and 10 percent in 2008 (PRB Population Bulletin, 2010). In England and Wales, the proportion of older women age 35-44, the proportion single (unmarried, not widows) increased from 8 percent in 1991 to 15 percent in 1999 and 25 percent in 2007 (UK Office of National Statistics, Population Trends Spring 2009). In Malaysia, among the Malay Muslims, the total percentage of never-married women over the age of 30 increased from 3.1 percent in 1960 to 23.3 percent in 2000 and to 37.8 percent in Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia (Ibrahim & Hassan, 2009). The Demographic and Health surveys conducted in various countries in West and Sub-Saharan Africa reveal a rising trend in the proportion of never married women. Ghana experienced a consistent increase in the number of never married women aged 30-34 from 1.3 percent in 1993 to 2.3 percent in 1998, 5.1 in 2003 and 5.7 in 2008., In Cote d'Ivoire never married women aged 30-34 increase from 6.1 percent in 1994 to 7.7 percent in 1998-1999 (DHS, 2011).

A number of demographic and non demographic factors have been identified by demographers, family scholars and other researchers to explain spinsterhood phenomenon. Davis (1963:362) argued that “faced with a persistent rate of natural increase resulting from past success in controlling mortality, families tended to use every demographic means possible to maximise their new opportunities and avoid relative loss of status”. To him, sustained population increase in any societies produces multiphasic responses such as induced abortion, out migration, postponement of marriage. To Giddens (1991, 1992) and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) increasing incidence of singleness is a result of social trends such as individualism typical of late stage capitalism (Cited in Macvarish, 2006; Simpson, 2006). Berg-Cross, Scholz, Long and Roy (2004) attributed incidence of spinsterhood across several countries to the spread of American version of individualism and economic empowerment. Other empirical research by sociologists and women scholars linked singlehood to causative factors such as expanded educational and work opportunities for women (Isiugo-Abanihe, 2000; Berg-Cross *et al.*, 2004; Koropecykj-Cox and Call, 2007), marriage market dynamics (Kalmijn, 1998; Raley & Bratter, 2004), modernisation (Davis, 1963; Meekers, 1992; Isiugo-Abanihe, 1995; Giddens, 2006), birth position and parents’ marriage (Ferguson, 2000). Other determining factors of spinsterhood are demographic and non demographic marriage squeeze (Davidson & Moore, 1996; De Silva, 2000; Berg-Cross *et al.*, 2004), compulsory bride wealth and dowry (Isiugo-Abanihe, 1994, 2000; [www.polygamy.com](http://www.polygamy.com); [www.theworldonline.ae](http://www.theworldonline.ae)).

In many societies, to remain unmarried beyond a certain age is regarded as a misfortune; such women are pitied and blamed for their status and negative stereotypes are associated with their civil status (Berg-Cross *et al.*, 2004; DePaulo & Morris, 2005; Byrne & Carr, 2005; Hertel *et al.*, 2007; Ibrahim & Hassan, 2009). Byrne (2003:15) aptly noted that:

social identities for single women revolved around stereotypes of fussy, selfish, choosy, particular, spinsters, women who were dried up, 'staid, old, not living', single

women who hated men, old maids, wallflowers, women who were left on the shelf and who had 'something wrong with them

Spinsterhood, especially for women who did not set out to remain single is problematic. Negative social identity of single womanhood adversely affects construction of positive self identity for single women. (Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003; Byrne, 2003). Stigmatisation and marginalisation are still the dominant marks of singlehood in many societies because singleness is still seen as defying the norms of femininity – marriage and motherhood (Sandfield & Percy 2003; Isiugo-Abanihe, 2000; Hertel, *et al.*, 2007; DePaulo & Morris, 2005; Simpson, 2003; Adams, 1986; Byrne, 2003, 2008; Byrne & Carr, 2005; Ibrahim & Hassan, 2009). Spinsters are found to confront other challenges such as pressure to marry (Lamanna & Riedmann, 2003; Sharp & Ganong, 2011), inadequate finance (Lamanna & Riedmann, 2003), and exploitation in care-giving (Trimberger, 2002).

## **Method**

The empirical data are obtained from twenty five in-depth interviews, four life history interviews and seven focus group discussions with spinsters of diverse socio-economic background in metropolitan Lagos. All interviews and discussion groups were conducted between June 2010 and August 2011. The subjects were selected through snowball technique. Respondents were asked open ended questions relating to their experiences and decisions concerning marriage and family life. Questions on why they think women become spinsters, reasons for turning down previous marriage proposals, why they are not yet married and their mate selection preferences were asked. Additional questions were asked to probe how education, economic empowerment, family background affected their decisions and opportunity to marry. Then the spinsters were asked to recount the effects of their current marital status and how they cope with the challenges of remaining single. All interviews and group discussions were conducted in English, tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participants in the Focus Group Discussion were between 6 and 8. Groups were organised on

the basis of specific focus of ethnic origin, level of education and profession. Three groups were conducted for ethnic origin: Yoruba, Igbo and other ethnic groups; four groups were conducted on the basis of educational and professional sub-groupings. Two were among women who obtained secondary school, and are traders or low class workers and the other two were among graduates of tertiary institutions and professionals. Content analysis with the aid of qualitative data analysis software (Atlas-ti) was carried out to elicit themes and concepts on the determinants, and consequences of spinsterhood, and coping mechanisms.

### **Characteristics of the subjects**

The subjects for In-depth interview (IDI) consist of 25 spinsters, 12 Igbos, 6 Yorubas and 7 from other ethnic groups. More Igbo spinsters were selected because there are more spinsters in the Southeast than in other zones of Nigeria (NPC, 2006). The religious affiliation of the respondents indicates 27 Christians and 2 Muslims. Muslim spinsters were scarce. Confirming the rarity of Muslim spinsters, a Muslim who was contacted during the selection of subjects said any “good” Muslim girl should be married before age 30. The age of all the subjects ranges from 30 to 48, with an average of 37 years. All the subjects (n=74) have obtained secondary or higher levels of education. Forty-eight respondents disclosed their income; the mean annual income for the forty-eight spinsters is N689,000, which is about US\$4,593. Those who are currently employed are self employed (n=21) professionals (n=13) and other categories of workers in the public and private sectors (n=40).

### **Findings**

#### **DETERMINANTS OF SPINSTRHOOD**

Based on their personal experiences and observations, the spinsters gave various reasons why they and other women in Lagos become spinsters. The major determinants of spinsterhood as derived from the degree of groundedness or the number of quotations associated with each factor are economic empowerment (n=53), individual mate selection

preference (n=47), cultural practices and beliefs (n=43), and education (n=36). Other strong determinants are marital experience of other women (n=34), other modernisation factors such as intolerance for violence (n=24), marriage of significant others such as parents and siblings (n=23), differences in religious affiliation (n=23), personal factors (n=23), urbanisation (n=21), and aversion for polygyny (n=20).

### **Economic Empowerment**

Berg-Cross *et al* (2004) argued that the globalization of economic empowerment of women is one strong reason why women postpone or reject marriage the world over. They found evidence for this assertion in the USA, Japan, Germany, Poland and India. Alam, Mondol, Tapan and Rahman (2008) found women's participation in work a major determinant of later marriage in Bangladesh. These findings are confirmed by the highest number of quotations associated with economic empowerment as a reason or motivation for prolonged marital postponement among women in Lagos. Financial independence, financial insecurity in marriage, domestic egalitarianism, and the need to be a "deciding, shaping human being" (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002:22 cited in Roseneil & Budgeon, 2004) rather than an appendage to a man are common reasons why women in this study seek for economic empowerment before marriage. Other reasons are economic decline and the role model effect of successful women. A typical submission by the IDI subjects is:

Let me say yes, actually I have a fiancé...So to me sometimes I feel scared of going into it [marriage] without getting something done because it's not always easy. Even when a man tells you not to worry we can always manage, it's always easy to say, but by the time you go into the marriage and kids start coming it's not everything the kids want that you always run down to him and say give me. And there are times you might say give me this or that and he might tell you something that will provoke you. But if I am working, there are some things I can do on my own without his knowledge (IDI 15, 30 years old).

Her reluctance to wed is not only because of her need for financial independence, she further narrated that she is also afraid of losing her ambition and desire for a career, if she gets married before employment. During one of the Focus Group Discussion sessions, an

Insurance Executive pointed to the exigency of a woman's emotional and financial comfort in marriage, and also corroborated the perceived fear of losing one's career ambition after marriage.

And some women want to get a means of income because they want to build a home that they can call their home. If they depend so much on the man, it may not turn out as they want it financially, and emotionally. In terms of personal fulfilment, a woman who is educated, for instance, would like to have a career. Some men are subtle; they will come out and lure you into marriage; when you get there they cage you, and by the time you know it you are getting advice, 'he is your husband, do what he says'. Because of the things we see in the society these days some women want to take their time. We are not ruling out the fact that early marriage is good, no, we are not saying that those of us who are still single that we are at the peak of it, no (Res 1 FGD 3).

Statements similar to the above were heard repeatedly in the discussion and interviews. This finding supports the research finding that women's wage growth is adversely affected by marriage because the woman's career usually takes a back seat after marriage, if the man also has a career (Loughraan & Zissimopoulos, 2004).

Some respondents who are currently engaged in stable employment and have secure means of livelihood expressed little or no desire to enter into marriage for economic reasons. Though her income is relatively low, due to the stability of her career in the Nigerian police force a Police Constable said:

If you have work that can take care of you ...you will stay and do your work. What we are praying is God provide for us. Some men are not ready to take care of you, even when they marry you, they will leave you and go out. You will be taking care of yourself, then, what is the essence that you are married (IDI 10, 45 years old).

Previous studies show that increasing economic opportunities and independence for women lead to reduced desirability of marriage (Isiugo-Abanihe, 1994, 1998, 2000; Ferguson, 2000), especially for women of economic means who have less economic need for a spouse (Carr, 2002 cited in Byrne & Carr, 2005; Tanturri & Mencarini, 2008).

Economic empowerment is also found to affect the mate selection preference of individual subjects; it raises their desiderata for an ideal partner (Berg-Cross *et al.*, 2004). Women who are economically empowered, or who seek economic empowerment, are

reluctant to enter into marriage with men who will not be equal or higher contributors to family economic resources. A 37-year old staff nurse emphatically said she would not dare enter into marriage with a man who has no sure means of livelihood.

I cannot see a man that is not working and he says he wants to marry me and I will agree because I know that I won't cope. Not that he must be a millionaire or something but he must be doing something to earn a living. He must be doing something that I see that if I enter he can feed himself, feed me. It's not that he will bear the whole thing, but what I am seeing immediately he can feed himself and me. (Res 5, FGD 3)

Economic empowerment and engagement in professions that are considered unfeminine limit women's opportunity to marry. A 45-year old Police Constable narrated how she was discouraged from joining the police and her experience with lost marriage chances since she joined. Being in police force is considered unwomanly because such women acquire traits that make them question men's authority. Walby argues that much has changed in the patriarchal culture that expects different behaviour from men and women. This is true to an extent in Nigeria, however, as in other Sub-Saharan African countries, the cultural notion that women should be in certain kinds of work such as teaching and nursing still persist (Sharif, 2000).

Economic empowerment and the drive for wealth by women are like a double-edged sword for women. On one side, men want women who are economically empowered for improved family economy. On the other hand, men are more reluctant to enter into marriage with women who are wealthy or wealthier than them for fear of losing their headship position to the woman. A 43-year old respondent in a Focus Group discussion said:

Sometimes the men are intimidated or overwhelmed by the women's status or even things as simple or trivial as the woman's poise or self confidence. (Res 3, FGD 6)

Walby presents women's participation in paid work as a liberating factor for women from patriarchy. However, this study found that real or assumed high economic achievement works against a women's opportunity to marry due to persistent cultural stereotypical beliefs

about women of high economic means. Such women are often seen as unmarriageable, arrogant and too independent. Wealth and independence are closely associated with masculinity in Nigeria (Smith, 2007). A 45-year old social Development worker and university lecturer recounted her experience. Having a good job, a car and a rented flat makes her appear too expensive for a man to maintain. She wonders what gave them the impression that she will become financially dependent on a man after marriage.

This confirms a research finding that whereas possessing many economic resources increases men's likelihood of union formation, it decreases likelihood for women (Dykstra & Poortman, 2010). This finding further confirms other research findings that men prefer women of lower or equal status, but not higher, as marriage partners (Kiernan, 1988:259 cited in Simpson 2007; Berg-Cross *et al.*, 2004; Raley & Bratter, 2004).

### **Mate selection Preference**

Individual mate selection preference is found to be one of the significant factors that determine spinsterhood in Lagos. This is not unexpected considering the increasing decline in arranged marriage, parental and kinship control in spouse selection in Nigeria (Isiugo-Abanihe, 1995; Ekiran, 2003; Smith, 2007) The diffusion effect of modernity has meant that individuals tend to insist on personal values, goals and gains in selecting a suitable mate (Giddens, 2006). Insistence on values such as erotic love has been found to be one of the determinants of spinsterhood. To Berg-Cross *et al.* (2004), the globalisation of love as the primary criterion for mate selection is an out-growth of individualism and economic empowerment of women, a trend that has increased singleness for women. Personal gains and goals such as economic enhancement, emotional and physical wellbeing are receiving more attention in mate selection than communal or kinship goals. This novel emphasis on individual gains and goals in marriage decisions is clearly shown in the response of a respondent during a group discussion. She said:

I think the reason why some ladies these days don't get married on time is because we realise that in the time past our parents lived unfulfilled life .. But now we understand that marriage can only make or destroy you as a woman. There are so many women out there whose lives are in shambles by reason of marriage. When you get close to them you find out that they are supposed to be great women in different areas of life but because of marriage every vision, every gift is shattered. So now people are marrying based on "you help me as a man I help you as a woman" (Respondent 2 FGD 2).

In modernity, as more and new information is made available, individuals will exhibit greater reflexivity in all aspects of life including choice of marriage partner. Choice of who to marry will be based on reason instead of tradition. Implicit in the above statement is that romantic love is gradually being replaced by confluent love as argued by Giddens, which focuses on special relationships based on personal gains rather than special persons.

### **Cultural Practices and beliefs**

Certain cultural practices and beliefs are found to hinder women's opportunity to marry at their own time and on their own terms. The cultural practices found to play prominent roles in determining spinsterhood in Lagos are physical/sexual attractiveness, normative marriage processes, cultural stereotypes about women, ethnic prejudice and endogamy, high bride wealth, pronatalism, and gender socialisation

Walby argues that culture is a patriarchal structure that imposes constraints on women through gender-based behavioural expectations. She argues that in the traditional past, the cultural expectation for women is domesticity, but this has changed to a new culture of sexual attractiveness, whereby the femininity of both young and elderly women is defined by their sexual attractiveness. While there is a transition from domesticity to sexual attractiveness in the UK culture, in Nigeria and perhaps in other developing countries, it is an integration of domesticity and sexual attractiveness. The stronger factor of the two may be sexual attractiveness because the more sexually attractive a woman is, the larger the pool of prospective marriage partners she attracts. Research shows that physically attractive people tend to be judged more positively than less physically attractive persons, connecting them to

a several desirable rewards (Langlois et al., 2000 cited in McNulty, Neff & Karney, 2008). A 40-year old fashion designer in this study narrated her experience with men she dated, who preferred sexually attractive women to her domesticity. The 45-year old social development worker/University Lecturer thinks her physical stature is one of the reasons why she is not yet married. To her, she is not physically and sexually attractive enough because of her diminutive stature.

Insistence on traditional patterns such as the belief that men should be the one to propose marriage to women, payment of bride price, proper traditional marriage ceremony and church marriage resulted in loss of marriage opportunities for some of the respondents. A Life History subject, for instance, lost a marriage opportunity because she insisted on wedding in the church before cohabiting with the man. Experience of these women indicate that women who are unwilling to cut corners, to circumvent tradition, who insist on the 'right' tradition, who want to uphold the sanctity of matrimony are less likely to marry, especially in urban centres such as Lagos where men prefer casual/consensual union as found in this study. This supports Berend's (2000) finding that spinsters tend to be women who have high value for marriage and would have the best of it or none.

Ethnic prejudice and endogamy are significant cultural factors that affected marital decisions of some spinsters in this study. Ekiran (2003) noted that most Nigerian marriages are ethnically homogamous. Indeed, some of the spinsters in this study lost marriage opportunities because they wanted men from their ethnic groups. Although many of them have changed their inclination due to prolonged waiting, their preference for men of similar ethnic origin persists. When asked if she will marry men from other ethnic groups, a respondent from North Central Nigeria replied:

That's always my point. I never like other ethnic groups. I like my ethnic group, that's the point I have. May be, it contributes to my delay because I met a lot of people from other ethnic groups like Yoruba, Oh God ha, it's like if you dash me a Yoruba man I will tell you thank you.

I Asked why, she said:

I don't know. I don't like their attitude; God, no no. Only thinking of Yoruba people my head aches. I don't know, I don't like them for anything. Igbo people, I don't like them too, too proud and their mothers horrible. So when I now look round I say... (IDI 7, 35 years).

Bride wealth, presentations of materials and cash to parents and kinsmen of a woman as part of marriage rites, is also found to be a determinant of spinsterhood, especially if the bride wealth is high. Economic decline and increasing acceptance of exogamy increases the likelihood for men to select spouses from communities with relatively lower bride wealth. Previous study in Southeast Nigeria where bride wealth is known to be high found that high bride wealth encourages individualism and autonomy among women, a trend that inevitably results in spinsterhood especially if the women can have children, comfort, security, and love without marriage (Isiugo-Abanihe, 1994). Respondents, particularly those of Igbo origin, confirmed this trend of spinsterhood among the Igbos due to high bride wealth and the increasing tendency for Igbo men to select spouses from other ethnic groups.

Pronatalism is another cultural practice found to limit women's opportunity to marry.

Isiugo-Abanihe (2000:43-44) aptly noted that:

Nigerians marry to have children, and marriage has meaning only when a child is born, or in fact survives. Children, especially sons, are cherished as the means of cementing a marriage and perpetuating the family. Indeed, it is viewed as unusual if a child fails to come within the first years of marriage and women or men without children are pitied or looked down upon in the society.

It is against this background that some men want to be sure the woman would bear children before they concretize any marriage arrangement. This is partly the reason why women who insist on sexual continence before marriage may end up spinsters as confirmed in this study.

A respondent whose marriage was stopped because she lost a pregnancy said:

I am not yet married, I am still single, men come to me, they will want to have an affair with you just to know whether you can produce children ... I have a fiancé, really we tried I got pregnant, not that I didn't get pregnant but mid way I had miscarriage, later on I had to wait (IDI 18, 39 years).

When a woman does not see herself as different from men it is likely to affect her interest in marriage. She might live with the illusion that she can always marry like the men. Gender socialisation is the least of cultural factors that affected marital decisions and opportunity of women in this study. It is an indication of persistent and universal socialisation along gender lines in Nigeria. Gender socialization in many Nigerian societies prepares the mind of women to accept marriage and motherhood as conventional feminine roles (Aina, 1998; Otite, 2006).

### **Education**

Although family systems worldwide is not changing in the direction of European/conjugal form as predicted by modernisation theorists, one notable impact of modernisation is later marriage for both men and women in nearly every non western country (Smith, 1980; Meekers, 1992; Isiugo-Abanihe, 1995; Isiugo-Abanihe & Obono, 1999; De Silva, 2000). One modernisation factor responsible for this universal trend of later marriage is education. The trend of later marriage caused by education is confirmed in this study by the large number of quotations associated with education (n=35). Several spinsters referred to education as personal or perceived reason for marital delay in Lagos. Education in this context refers to formal education, and informal education through literature and media. Education has been found to affect women's perception of marriage, decisions and opportunities to marry in many societies (Koropecj-Cox and Call, 2007; Berg-Cross *et al.*, 2004; Tanturri & Mencarini, 2008). The length of time it takes to acquire education inevitably postpones marriage for so many women because they would not marry while attending school. In other ways, education refines women's world view, gives them a completely new value about ideal marriage and marriage partner. Life history one presents a typical case of how a resolve to complete tertiary education and economic empowerment results in spinstership.

Right from my first year in the university people were proposing marriage to me but I didn't feel I should get married at that age because I thought I was young. I entered university at 16 and I was young in the university so even after I graduated I didn't still feel I should get married immediately. I just felt I should work and make some money (44 years old).

### **Marital Experience of Other women**

One issue that is ubiquitous in the narratives of the subjects in this study is their reference to the experience of other women in marriage. It consistently reoccurred in the interviews and Focus Group Discussions. What happens in the confines of a home go a long way to chart the future of others who are not even near part of that home. Responses from the subjects in this study disclose that women empathize with one another. The experiences and life of women affect other women's world view and expectations in life. From the experience of married women around them, respondents perceive marriage as demanding and quite challenging; and they want to avoid the mistakes of women who have gone ahead of them into marriage. Marital experiences that are mentioned in this study as strong influences on the marital decisions of spinsters in Lagos include marital bliss, intimate partner violence, structure and power relations in the home, and irresponsible fatherhood.

Unhappy and conflictual marital experience of other women send discouraging signals to never married women about marriage; and makes mate selection preference more restrictive. On the other hand, happy or blissful marriage experience of other women encourages marriage and raises the expectation of women about marriage and would-be marriage partners. In her narration of reasons for non-marriage a respondent observed:

I learnt that marriage is an institution that fosters peace in a home. But this time around, if you see many homes no peace; there is no love. At times if you see the things that are happening, you will be thinking is this how marriage is, ... and there will be a kind of fear or something. Somebody may be coming you will be like if I marry this person I don't know what will happen at the end. It will be like I don't know what this marriage will become in the next five to ten years ... Many things are happening; a man will present himself as very good, but later you will see that he is the opposite. So if you rush into marriage and rush out which one is the better; is it to wait. One is waiting and time is going so you don't know which one to follow. So all those things are causing delayed marriage (Res 5, FGD 3).

Spinsterhood is often interpreted as the failure or fault of the woman. Spinsters are viewed as women with some fault who could not meet up with the acceptable norms of dating and marriage (Macvarish, 2006; Sharp & Ganong, 2011). The strength of the influence of failed or conflictual marriage of other women found in this study confirms that spinsterhood and the attendant stigma are consequences of the flaws in marriage/family institution and patriarchal system. Thus, Byrne's (2003) position is strengthened, that the flaws and contradictions in the marriage institution should be seen as a public issue rather than a private issue. Flaws in marriage are as much the failure of the society as that of the individual persons involved in the marriage. With time-space distantiation and experts systems in modernity the effect of marriage goes beyond the local context of affecting only the woman's daughters and near relatives, it transmits into tangible evidence for other women to adjust and readjust their views on marriage and family life.

### **Other Modern Lifestyle**

In addition to economic empowerment, education, and urbanization which will be discussed later, other modern lifestyle such as intolerance for early marriage, violence, infidelity and influence of western culture are found to be determinants of spinsterhood in Lagos. Resistance to early marriage is an attitude found to cut across respondents from the various ethnic groups. Rejection of early marriage is partly a result of expanded educational opportunities for women in Nigeria and a fall out of Nigeria's population policy that stipulates 18 years as the official age for first marriage, albeit not enforced.

Some respondents in this study became spinsters due to dread for violence. Display, traits and inclination to violence in men discouraged some the women from entering into marital relationship. Due to the violence experienced by her mother in the hands of her husband, IDI 5 calls off any date when she notices any trait of violence in the man.

Respondents 3 and 5 in FGD 3, LH 4 and IDI 2 quit dating men they really wanted to marry.

LH 4 said:

So, how I eventually broke up was when one day he turned on me; in fact, he didn't even know what he was doing. He wanted to snatch his wrist watch from my hand. So, he turned on me and was so violent... (48 years old).

Paradoxically, already married women in Nigeria are found to tolerate intimate partner violence; violence is not considered a reason for marital dissolution (Orebiyi, 2002; Oyediran & Isiugo-Abanihe, 2005; Aderinto, Nwokocha, Bankole & Obemeta, 2007; The Nigerian CEDAW NGO Report, 2008). This finding suggests that women are likely to be less tolerant of violence before marriage than after marriage.

Some of the respondents attributed spinsterhood to the strong presence of western culture in Lagos. Women's perception of womanhood, marriage and singlehood is changing as a result of influx of western and feminist ideals. Berg-Cross *et al.*, (2004) attributes high prevalence of singlehood to the globalization of American and individualistic ideals. The submissions of subjects in this study suggests that women want to be the best they can be, achieve what they can and still marry and have children. It is a struggle to marry at their own terms in a society where patriarchal structures are still traditional and marriage and family ideology is still extensive.

Intimate partner infidelity is the least of other modern lifestyles that affected the marital decisions of spinsters in this study. This result is expected considering previous research that show high prevalence of extra-marital relationship by men in Nigeria, and women never see it as a reason for divorce or separation (Orubuloye, Caldwell & Caldwell, 1995; Smith, 2007).

### **Marriage of significant Others**

The marital decisions and opportunities of spinsters in this study are influenced by their families of origin in various ways. Prominent among the family background

determinants are the marriage experiences of significant others such as parents, guardian and siblings. Good parental marital experience raises women's desiderata of ideal marriage partner. One effect good parental marriage experience has on some of the spinsters who claimed their parents had good marriage is the desire to marry men like their fathers. When asked if she thinks her parents' marriage influenced her desire and decisions about marriage a respondent said:

You know, like my parents' marriage, if I may say, I will like to get married to somebody like my father; because my Mummy as well as others speak so well about him. My father is such a person that if he sees any man maltreating his wife or kids, that man is in trouble (IDI, 14, 40 years).

There is the tendency for women who think their father is an ideal man to idealize marriage so much that they are unable to find the real and presumed qualities of their fathers in another man. Women who emphasise such "father" qualities are likely to become victims of endless search for a man who "embodies the masculine ideals of strength, protectiveness, clear thinking, and problem-solving" (Berg-cross *et al.*, 2004).

On the other hand, conflictual and unhappy parents' marriage also raises women's desiderata for desired marriage partner. The tendency to be "careful" in mate selection increases when parents have unsatisfactory marriage. Speaking on the negative influence of her parents' marriage, Life History two whose mother was an outside wife said:

So many experiences, sometimes you begin to ask yourself "is it worth it". OK even if I am going into it let me be sure, you understand. Human being cannot have hundred percent, but at least if he can just have 40 over 60, maybe I can stand ... One feels insecure because of past experiences or and what you see around you, you want to be sure who you are marrying or the home you are going into is yours, is where you can endure and persevere. Is he the kind of man you can spend the rest of your life with because I don't believe in divorce, I don't want it; I don't pray for it (40 years old).

Unhappy parent's conjugal union creates fear and aversion for domestic violence in women, and in some cases leads to a decision to remain unmarried. Ferguson (2000) found similar outcome among Japanese and Chinese American always single women in the USA. Spinsters whose parents have conflictual marriage whether in monogamous or polygynous union have

inclination to avoid men like their fathers. A research evidence substantiates avoidance of men with violent traits. A Population Reference Bureau study on domestic violence in nine developing countries found that women whose fathers abused their mothers are twice as likely to suffer domestic abuse themselves (Lalasz, 2004).

### **Differences in religious affiliation**

One of the causes of spinsterhood in Lagos is religion and other spiritual beliefs. Kalmijn, (1998) argued that third parties, such as religious groups, act to prevent exogamy through group identification and sanctions because mixed marriage threatens their internal cohesion and homogeneity. Kalmijn further argued that perhaps the strongest group sanction is that provided by religious groups. Insistence on religious identification and values is found to be one of the reasons for prolonged delay in marriage for women in Lagos. Spinsters in this study are unwillingness to enter inter faith marriage. Only three interview subjects would marry a man who has a different religion.

### **Personal factors**

Certain factors that are considered personal hinder women from entering into marital union at the conventional age. Such personal factors found in this study include unwillingness to become single mothers, unwillingness to date men/sexual continence, and preference for married men. Speaking on single motherhood, a respondent submitted:

I don't want to have a baby alone because I don't want to suffer alone. Adoption has not occurred to me (IDI 12, 36 years).

Expression of unwillingness to become single mothers is not unexpected considering the strong patrilineal descent culture in many Nigerian societies. Children born or adopted outside of wedlock by women in Nigeria have the problem of legitimacy and acceptance into the woman's lineage. Marriage is still widely regarded as the ideal setting for childbearing in Nigeria as in most African countries (Gage & Bledsoe, 1994).

In a pronatalist society such as Lagos, where the certainty of a woman's procreative ability is an incentive to contract a marriage, women who insist on continence are likely to lose out in the marriage market. From the narratives of some spinsters sexual relationship is important to men in every date. When IDI 14 and IDI 4 decided to stay off sexual relationship with their boyfriends, the men quit the relationship. Other respondents narrated how they are counselled to engage in sexual relationship with men to show their interest in marriage and prove their fecundity. This finding confirms Walby's notion of contradiction in sexuality as a patriarchal structure. Women who engage in sexual relations with men before marriage are labelled "slags", while those who do not are labelled "drags

Preference to date married men among some spinsters is found to be one of the reasons for spinsterness. Women who engage in such relationship tend to develop mistrust for never married men. IDI 14, for instance, unequivocally expressed her preference for married men because she said they are more faithful. Paradoxically, what she calls faithfulness to her is unfaithfulness to the wife at home. This is another form of contradiction in patriarchal sexuality. In other cases, the social notoriety associated with co-generational sex confines such women to involuntary spinsterness.

I trust married men more than young boys. I am telling you the truth. I love them more than young guys; they are there for you. They care for you, they give you advice, - the good ones (40 years old).

A Population Reference Bureau review of research and programmes on co-generational sex confirm the high prevalence of this phenomenon in Sub-Saharan Africa (Hope, 2007). Other studies found co-generation sex or "sugar daddy" syndrome, a common phenomenon in certain urban areas in Africa such Freetown (Gage & Bledsoe, 1994), in Ghana (Obbo, 1987), and in Lagos and Ibadan, (Wakaranja, 1987, 1994; Guyer, 1994; Mann, 1994), and in Southeast Nigeria (Smith, 2007). In Wakaranja's study in Lagos and Ibadan, some of such women prefer to remain in co-generational sex relationship to formal marriage.

## **Urbanisation**

One of the strong reasons for spinsterhood in Lagos is the influence of urbanization and city life. Isiugo-Abanihe (1995:515) noted that due to educational and economic opportunities in urban areas, urbanisation “provides an ideal landscape” that “attracts women some of whom are freed from parental or kinship control, and prescription of when or who to marry”

In the interviews and group discussions, urban factors such as urban men’s preference for casual sex and consensual union, negative stereotypes about city women and urban environment were shown to have influence on women’s opportunity to marry.

A common submission in the interviews and group discussions is that many urban men prefer relationships that will not end in marriage. In fact, some respondents observed a trend toward polygynous fatherhood, a concomitant of polyandrous motherhood found in Lagos by Guyer (1994), where some women expand their social network by bearing children for different men. These men prefer consensual relationships that do not require any commitment. They have children through several women with the hope of claiming the children in the long run since children usually bear the name of their fathers. The trend toward men’s preference for casual sexual relationship or polygynous fatherhood encourages some of the respondent to stay off dates with men, a decision that increases likelihood of remaining permanently single. This penchant for relationships that will not end in marriage may be due increasing freedom of choice in sexuality available to both men and women in modernity. It may also be a result of economic decline, high costs and standards of living in urban areas and difficulty with breadwinning, as indicated by a respondent:

One of the reasons, I think, is some men are not just ready to accept responsibilities. There are a lot of guys of marriageable age; what is stopping them? They don’t even necessarily have somebody, what is stopping them. Some of them, the ability to accept responsibility is just one thing (Res 1, FGD 7, 38 years old).

Due to limited economic resources, men try to avoid traditional marriage rites and weddings which usually involve high cost. Dowd and Pallotta, (2000) in Lamanna & Riedmann, (2003), noted that declining economy makes breadwinning more difficult and less attractive for men and makes unmarried men to postpone marriage longer. Dykstra and Poortman (2010) implied in their study that the economic contribution of women in household incomes makes consensual union increasingly affordable for low income men. This suggests that men's preference for consensual or casual relationships will remain high and rising with increasing poverty and unemployment in the urban areas (Iwasawa, 2004), and an inevitable consequence will be rising spinsterhood.

Some spinsters observed that some men who live in cities prefer selecting marriage partners from their rural places of origin. To such men, never married women who reside in urban areas such as Lagos are sexually loose and bereft of good morals, and so not good for marriage. They may date them for other reasons but not marriage. One of the features of modernism is increase in sexual freedom and choice. While this modern trend is seen as reinforcing masculinity, it works against women's opportunity to marry. This, according to Walby, typifies patriarchal control of women's sexuality. However, as noted by some respondents, not all city women take advantage of the sexual liberty in modernism, so they cannot all be conflated into the "slags" category. Urban men's preference for rural women for choice of marriage partners is a notion that is common among respondents with only secondary education and those who reside in low class areas of Lagos. This indicates that the mate selection preference of men of higher socio-economic status is not likely to be equally affected by any negative stereotype about urban women.

Urban environment is one of the reasons why some women remain unmarried till later age. Some of the respondents said cities such as Lagos are like a "no man's land"; social control mechanisms are limited. Rapid social change damages the organised society's web of

normative control. Breakdown in normative controls is accompanied by a similar breakdown in individual moral constraints in behaviours (Pfohl, 1994).

### **Aversion for Polygyny**

In some countries such as Cambodia, though the status of second wife is less valued, women still prefer to be second and third wives instead of remaining unmarried, due to strong privileges attached to the roles of wife and mother (Baldwin et al 2000, cited in Surtees, 2003). On the contrary, though marriage and motherhood are still the dominant features of femininity in Nigeria, evidence from this study shows that the contemporary woman in Lagos would rather remain single than enter a polygynous union. Modern monogamous marriage norm, and negative experience of women in polygynous unions are the major reasons for the strong aversion for polygyny. A respondent in a focus group discussion, whose statement is like a synopsis of other participants' opinion about polygyny said:

Getting involved in a polygynous marriage defeats the purpose of marriage. Therefore, it is better to remain single (Res 2, FGD 6, 46 years old).

Earlier studies show that polygyny exploits women (Olusanya, 1970 in Aina, 1998) promotes conflicts and instability in homes as a man tries to give his attention to his wives and children (Aina, 1998), and increases financial burden on women for the needs of their children (Akorede, 2010). Polygyny was considered a way to absorb excess women (Gage & Bledsoe 1994; Mann 1994), but it is fast losing its fancy among women as shown in this study. Previous studies show that the prevalence of polygyny in Nigeria as well as other African countries is declining (Meekers, 1992; Isiugo-Abanihe & Obono, 1999; Timaeus & Reynar 1998, cited in Coast, 2006; Smith, 2007; DHS, 2011). It has also been found that elite women do not generally accept de jure polygyny (WaKaranja, 1987; Mann 1994), and education and Christianity influence women against polygyny (WaKaranja 1987, 1994; Isiugo-Abanihe, Ebigbola & Adewuyi, 1993; Mann, 1994; Coast, 2006). Considering these

previous findings, and the aversion for polygyny by spinsters in Lagos as found in this study, the most likely option to these excess women is singlehood.

## **CONSEQUENCES OF SPINSTERHOOD**

There are positive and negative consequences of spinsterhood; however, the challenges outweigh the benefits. That spinsters experience many challenges may be a function of their being involuntary temporary spinsters. Involuntary singles are more likely to report that they are unhappy because they did not set out to be spinsters (Lamanna & Riedmann, 2003). Thus, they are more likely to construct their single status more negatively. Hence, the spinsters were more inclined to talk about the pains and disappointments. Also, due to the extant socio-cultural system that has little or no validation for the single adult status, spinsters grapple with a negative sense of belonging. Such a system does not allow full manifestation of the positive consequences of spinsterhood for the spinsters and the larger society. The positive consequences include freedom to be one's self, privacy, independence, and economic benefits to the spinsters' natal families. The spinsters were found to experience profound stigma (n=139). Irrespective of their position in society, spinsters are often reminded of their 'incompleteness' everywhere and every time through extensive pressure to marry (n=26). Also, identity challenge (n=21), loneliness (n=18), and inadequate finance (n=15) fear of permanent singleness and childlessness (n=12), are common experiences of spinsters in Lagos.

### **Spinsterhood as a stigmatised status**

There is overwhelming evidence from the narratives of the respondents to confirm the existence of prejudicial beliefs and discriminatory treatment against spinsters in Lagos. Virtually all respondents talked about this, underscoring various dimensions of stigmatising experiences. Commenting on the pervasiveness and perniciousness of stigma about spinsterhood a Life History interviewee said:

Consequences as in may be the stigma. It has a lot. In fact, I don't pray for my worst enemy to be a spinster when she is already in her forties. It's not a good experience to pass through. If anyone had told me I will be this late and not married I will say of course it's not possible. So, I know there are so many stigmas. They look down on you as a spinster, the respect you should have in a lot of places you don't receive it; and there is a complex, sometimes you have a complex, you feel bad. You feel frustrated, there was a time I used to be frustrated and I tell people see I am really frustrated,... (LH 4, 48 years old).

Previous studies confirm spinsterhood a stigmatised status in many societies (Byrne, 2008; DePaulo & Morris, 2005; Morris, Sinclair & DePaulo, 2007; Byrne & Carr, 2005; Ibrahim & Hassan, 2009; Sharp & Ganong, 2011). However, Byrne & Carr (2005) argued that the existence of prejudicial beliefs about singles does not mean single persons experience stigma. Byrne and Carr used data from the Midlife Development Survey in the United States (MIDUS) to examine whether single persons experience more interpersonal and institutional discrimination than married person. Twelve concepts were adapted from the set of questions used by MIDUS to examine experience of stigma from the narratives of spinsters in this study. Data from the IDI, LH and FGD indicate that spinsters in Lagos experience insults and name-calling in their natal families, neighbourhood and places of work. The single status is widely denigrated. Spinsters are suspected to be anomalous physiologically or morally and disrespected. Difficulty in renting an apartment is a common experience of spinsters in Lagos. Harassment, loss of social network, shame and embarrassment, cheating and duping are usual experiences of spinsters. Some spinsters experience discrimination in their offices; and many are maltreated by neighbours. Denial of employment opportunity and due positions and promotion are other experiences recounted by respondents.

### **Pressure to marry**

Irrespective of background, respondents in in-depth and life history interviews, and participants in the various focus group discussions, experience pressure from relatives, friends, office colleagues and even strangers to conform to the norm of heterosexual marriage. A Life History subject acknowledged the intensity of pressure to marry.

I'm talking from the point of experience, the pressure that one can face when you did not get married at a young age. There is a lot of pressure you know, emotional, a lot of pressure. There is so much that one can easily fall prey to and then make mistakes because it's really not an easy experience. You have to be a strong person to be able to marry late (LH 1, 44 years old).

Pressure to marry comes in other forms such as casual questions such as, when are we eating your rice or cake? What is happening? Sometimes it comes as direct as the experience Res 1 in FGD 5 had with an elderly woman in her family.

So, another one happened last year December. One of my in-laws made such a comment, an elderly woman. I didn't expect it from her. She said "you came back this time around and didn't bring your husband." I told her my husband is coming. She said: "or you don't want to marry, you are of age to marry, this is your time oh, if you don't marry this time around, we will give you a farm or we will buy this one [locally made robe for climbing palm tree] for you so that you will be using it to harvest palm fruits. I talked to her about it, but inside me I felt so bitter that I couldn't eat, I was just crying inside me...

Pressures are constant reminders to spinsters that they are getting late. In previous studies, spinsters experience pressure to marry in diverse ways (Gage and Blesdoe 1994; Shostak 1987:355 cited in Lamanna and Riedmann 2003; Byrne, 2003; Macvarish, 2006; Sharp & Ganong, 2011). Sharp and Ganong (2011) found that single women are pressured by parents to enter into marriage at least to have a child and then get a divorce. DePaulo & Morris (2005) argue that women experience more pressure to marry than men. This is confirmed by the narrative of some respondents who think the pressure to marry and stigma associated with non marriage is more of a woman issue. They know many men who are in their forties and fifties but the spot light is never on them to marry as it is on women.

### **Identity Challenge**

Spinsters in this study are encumbered with the challenge of constructing positive self identity due to the pervasive concept of womanhood as wife and mother. Due to this prevalent social concept of womanhood, women who become spinsters are viewed negatively. This is the impression of most respondents. A respondent said:

I believe things are really changing; but in the case of Lagos and Nigeria as a whole, we have a long mile to go. There is this stigmatization against singles even in churches. In our society, everywhere you go it's there, even in working places it is there, even in school. You will see the way those who are married pride themselves because some people see being married as the ultimate goal in life; that if you are not married it's like a taboo, it's like a curse. It's like you are living, no legs, no arms ... (IDI 15, 30 years old).

Another respondent added:

When you are single people think you are frustrated. They say maybe it is your bad character or some people see it as a curse from the village or some see it as you are not beautiful (IDI 10, 45 years old).

From the narratives of the respondents, the social identity of spinsters in Lagos include being seen as prostitutes, difficult, husband snatchers, old, too independent, choosy, too expensive, frustrated, aggressive, ugly, leftover, and bereft of good character, angry, occultic, and even a witch. The respondents do not agree with the negative conceptualisation of singlehood; but the majority agree with the social identity of a woman as mother and wife.

In spite of modernity and the declining influence of tradition on individual intimate life choices, as posited in Giddens Structuration theory, there is obvious influence of tradition in the self identity construction of spinsters in this study. Even though the majority view singleness as better than a bad marital union, the subjects in this study are still expecting to validate their womanhood through marriage. This confirms Byrne's (2003) argument that the prevalent social identity makes it difficult for single women to accept singleness as a normal lifestyle. That the majority prefer singleness to a bad marriage probably portrays the increasing importance of the conditions of marriage to women (Bruce, 1995) rather than a rejection of marriage or acceptance of singleness. Ambivalent response about identity is a reflection of the effect of macro-level marriage and family ideology, which makes life outside the assumed conventional heterosexual coupledness seem pale and out of course. (McIntosh & Barrett, 1982 cited in Haralambos & Holborn, 2008; DePaulo & Morris, 2005; Byrne, 2003,

2008). Even though the women would rather stay single than get into a conflictual marriage, they also do not think singleness promises any life fulfilment.

### **Loneliness**

Some respondents mentioned loneliness as one of the challenges they have as spinsters. Inadequate finance and sole responsibility for domestic maintenance aggravate the feeling of loneliness for spinsters and the lonely feeling increases with age. Spinsters confront difficult times such as when they are sick and there is no one to sympathise with them. Spinsterhood is a period when most siblings and friends are married and occupied with their family and personal challenges. Spinsters only get residual attention from close relatives and few married friends who remain in their social network. This confirms Barrett and McIntosh's position in their Anti-social Family that family members are so enclosed in family life that they ignore social contact with others. Couples interact with other couples, finding it difficult to fit in the circle of single people.

### **Inadequate finance**

Inadequate finance is one of the challenges of spinsterhood, expressed by some respondents.

No, I am not finding it easy alone. My landlord is requesting for one year rent. I am living with my brother's daughter, all these are responsibilities. If I am married my husband will take care of some of these things. So, sometimes it makes me to be annoyed, if I am married all these responsibilities will not be on me alone (IDI 24, 37 years old).

Inadequate finance experienced by some spinsters is largely due to their natal families' demand on their income. Apart from spinsters who are not employed, many spinsters who spoke about inadequate finances also related it to numerous financial responsibilities to their close relatives; many of them play the role of carers for close relatives. This role often involves a lot of financial expenses, which spinsters' are usually expected to meet not only as

a duty but because they are single. In the focus group a few respondents viewed inadequate finance as a challenge.

One of the challenges I do have is in the area of finance. When one needs a hand to lift one up and you look around there is nobody there; no member of my family. At such times you wish you are married, at least there will be a supportive hand (Res 4, FGD 3).

Although spinsterhood enhances wage and career growth for some women (Oderinde, 2002; Loughran & Zissimopoulos, 2004; Ibrahim & Hassan, 2009), inadequate finance has been identified as one of the challenges of single women, especially those who do not have steady and good jobs (Lamanna & Riedmann, 2003). Lamanna and Riedmann noted that satisfaction with singleness depends to some extent on income; hardship can impose heavy restrictions on such women. This notion is confirmed by the narrative of IDI 24 and other respondents who said they are not finding life easy alone because of heavy financial responsibilities.

Involvement of spinsters in care-giving as found in this study confirms previous studies that associate spinsterhood with caring for family and non non-family (Trimberger, 2002; Simpson, 2003; Byrne, 2003, 2008; Hassan & Ibrahim, 2009). One of the previous studies argued that marriage and family ideology entails that single women are more likely than their married siblings to be expected to provide care to aging parents because they do not have husbands and children to care for (Byrne & Carr, 2005). In the USA, for instance, 84 percent of never married women help their parents compared to 68 percent of married women (Gerstel, 2011). In this study, many spinsters are more involved in care-giving to parents and siblings than their married siblings. This findings indicate that modernity and the associated individualism have not resulted in a decline in family commitment among spinsters in Lagos.

### **Fear of permanent singleness and childlessness**

Fear of permanent singleness and childlessness is found to be a major concern to older never married women. They wish to marry, but there is a looming fear that it may not happen.

They are usually troubled by the thought of “who will take care of me in old age”, “who will inherit my property” and “who will bury me”? Articulating her worry, a respondent said:

But as a woman, I am now feeling it even to my bone. You know why, if I grow old who will take care of me? When will I start having children that will take care of me? (IDI 2, 46 years old).

Another respondent said:

No matter what a man or woman possesses, without marriage and children, who will inherit your money? (IDI 12, 36 years old).

Fear of permanent singleness and childlessness expressed by the subjects is influenced by the idea of marriage and motherhood as primary niche of women and the patriarchal mentality that one’s property must be inherited by an offspring or family members. Fear of permanent singleness and childlessness by always single women was found in a recent study in the USA by Sharp and Ganong (2011). It was also found among spinsters interviewed by Macvarish (2006) and Simpson (2006) in the United Kingdom. Permanent Singleness does not mean childless; however, many single women conflate singleness and childlessness. This is partly due to preference for childbearing within marriage prevalent in many Nigerian cultures and religion. Children born or adopted by unmarried women are stigmatised in some societies, as earlier noted by some respondents in this study.

## **COPING MECHANISMS**

Even though the proportion of women who become spinsters is increasing in many societies, spinsterhood has remained one of the most challenging lifestyle due to widespread stereotype associated with non marriage. The subjects were asked how they cope with the challenges of spinsterhood. In general, there is uniformity in the coping mechanisms adopted by spinsters of different ethnic and class backgrounds. Religion is the most preferred coping mechanism. Religion provides solace and a community for many spinsters in this study irrespective of ethnic and class background. This is expected considering that all the subjects still expect to marry; and surely need help beyond the natural to get into a union of their

choice, in a society where younger women are preferred marriage mates. Also, due to perceived or real social exclusion by married relatives and friends, spinsters turn to God and religious activities for succour. Studies in Nigeria show that many women are driven to religion due to their sense of unworthiness and inferiority complex, so they search for people who can pray for them (Awe, 2002; Oladipo, 2007).

Another coping mechanisms adopted by many respondents is friendship, especially with females. The vital role of non-sexual friendship as family, and source of social support especially for single women has been shown in previous studies (Trimberger, 2002; Lamanna & Riedmann, 2003; Roseneil & Budgeon, 2004; Phal & Spencer, 2004; Simpson, 2006). Engagement in paid employment or self-employment is another vital coping strategy for spinsters in Lagos, especially if they derive pleasure in the work. Another important way spinsters cope with the challenges of spinsterhood is supportive parents and siblings. A few respondents, especially those in their late thirties, forties and professionals are considering adopting a female child if the likelihood of marriage is ruled out. Some of the reasons the subjects gave for thinking of adoption is care in old age, inheritance and to satisfy their maternal instinct. Always single women in previous studies have been found to adopt single motherhood through artificial insemination, natural conception or adoption to quit the uncertain waiting for marriage (Siegel, 1995; Bock, 2000; Hertz, 2006, Simpson, 2007).

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

Findings on determinants of spinsterhood in Lagos clearly show how modernism intermingles with patriarchy and anti-social family ideology to constrain women to spinsterhood. The imperative of economic empowerment, marriage mate self-selection emblematic of modernism, integration of culture of domesticity and sexual attractiveness, education, and marital experience of other women impose inevitable constraints on women's decisions and opportunity to marry. In addition, other modern lifestyle such as intolerance for

early marriage and violence, marriage of significant others, religious affiliation, personal factors such as unwillingness to become single mothers or to date, urbanisation and aversion for polygyny limit women to spinsterhood in Lagos. It is obvious from the foregoing findings and analysis on consequences of spinsterhood, that spinsters in Lagos will continue to be stigmatised, pressurised to conform to the normative adult status of marriage and motherhood, confront identity dilemma, fear of permanent childlessness and loneliness if the extant patriarchal structures, patrilineage customs and marriage and family ideology remain unchanged.

The narratives of spinsters in this study on why they have remained unmarried and how they experience singleness does not portray the contemporary spinster in Lagos as yet in the identity “dilemma of representing oneself as a powerful woman with agency and control in her intimate relationships” (Reynolds, Wetherell & Taylor, 2007). They are still locked up in the patriarchal conception of womanhood as heterosexual, married and reproductive, and the cultural representation of singleness as a personal deficit (Byrne, 2003; Reynolds & Wetherell 2003). Byrne (2003) argued that the acceptability of singleness by single women is an agency for change of their social identity. However, the narratives of women in this study do not position them as having agency to transform the choices open in intimate relationships or the prevalent social identity of spinsters. This study recommends urgent re-definition of the social identity women through social science research and civil policies. Women are not always wives and mothers, and life outside these dual roles can be most unsatisfactory due to the extant definition of family in science and tradition.

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