

THE PHENOMENON OF SPINSTER IN VILLAGE COMMUNITIES: ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL STIGMA

Asih Restu Fadhillah, Dhuha Hadiyansyah

Universitas Al Azhar, Indonesia

asihrestuu@gmail.com dhuha.hadiyansyah@uai.ac.id

Abstract

This research employs a qualitative method to explore social phenomena related to the stigma against spinster in Sidomulyo Village, Pangandaran Regency. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 16 participants from various segments of society. Utilizing Peter L. Berger's social construction theory, the main findings indicate that the term spinster carries negative connotations. However, this stigma is simply eclipsed by the stigma towards unmarried pregnant women, often making the women subjects of gossip. Women labeled as spinster face significant pressure to marry. Despite shifts in social norms, the stigma remains strong, and both conditions are still considered taboo. Individuals affected by the stigma learn to mitigate its impact and emphasize the importance of harmonious living. In conclusion, the stigma against spinsters persists strongly, with slight changes in social norms. Gender equality and respect for individual choices are crucial in addressing this stigma. A holistic approach is necessary to create an inclusive and empathetic environment.

Keywords: *Social Stigma, Spinster, Social Construction Theory*

INTRODUCTION

The term or context of "spinster" directs attention to a complex and relevant social phenomenon within gender and societal studies. This term refers to women who remain unmarried at an age considered older than the societal or cultural expectation. The concept of a spinster reflects intricate dynamics within social norms, gender expectations, and cultural values that govern women's lives in various social contexts (Mulyani & Sari, Y., 2024). The complex notion of a spinster also generates new perspectives and issues within the social sphere, resulting in increased and multifaceted pressures directed towards women.

The phenomenon of spinsters not only reflects cultural pressures to marry by a certain age but also how societal constructs regarding marital status can influence group identities and perceptions of individuals. The phenomenon of spinsters also compels individuals to conform to cultural pressures to avoid stigma and social judgment. Previous studies indicate that spinsters often face social stigmatization that influences their decision-making processes, psychological pressures stemming from this stigma, and questions regarding their personal choices (Septiana E. & M. Syafiq, 2013).

The substantial social pressures on women to conform to societal views and decisions, alongside the negative perceptions embedded in this construct, create complex considerations that often constrain personal freedoms (Oktawirawan, DH & Yudiarso, A., 2020). These pressures give rise to new terms such as "spinster" when women within social circles fail to meet cultural expectations and pressures. The emergence of the label "spinster" further complicates women's ability to form personal views free from coercion and existing pressures. The labeling of "spinster" also constitutes profound psychological pressure in shaping individual perspectives.

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In a continuously evolving global context, with shifting social values and changes in societal lifestyles, a profound understanding of the spinster phenomenon becomes increasingly important to discuss (Suhariyati, Haryanto, & Probawati, 2019). This research aims to explore public perceptions of spinsters, the factors influencing this status, and the associated social, psychological, and cultural impacts. Through comprehensive analysis, this study is expected to provide valuable insights into how individuals navigate complex societal expectations and manage their identities in diverse social contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The theory utilized in this research is Peter L. Berger's theory of social constructionism, a sociological approach highlighting how social reality is shaped by interactions between individuals and society. This theory posits that social reality is not objective and fixed but rather a product of social processes where humans attribute meaning to their experiences through social interactions (Sulaiman, A., 2016). This complex process results in ideas that are subsequently used within specific societal and cultural contexts and applied universally, thereby generating new perspectives and realities within a group.

Social reality formed through this process involves individuals producing and expressing their thoughts and actions into the external world or externalization. The process of externalization prompts individuals to act according to societal norms or rules. This externalization leads to a process of objectivation, where the products of externalization are institutionalized, normalized, or structured outside of the individual's direct control. Within this process of objectivation, existing norms become tangible and enforceable within their respective spheres. The culmination of these two processes results in internalization, where individuals adopt societal norms and values into their own thoughts and actions without explicitly considering the social processes behind these norms (Dharma, F. A., 2018).

Social constructionism emphasizes understanding perceptions and stigmas not as naturally occurring but as products of ongoing reconstruction through human interactions and their complex processes, necessitating scrutiny in applying these perceptions to actions (Andersen, M. M., Varga, S., & Folker, A. P., 2022). This construction has broad implications for understanding social changes related to societal occurrences, individual identities resulting from such social constructions, institutional roles in shaping collective worldviews, and offering new perspectives on norms and cultures within social contexts.

The distinction between facts, which are raw data or experiences considered objectively real outside the individual (such as history or observable natural phenomena), and interpretations, which involve giving meaning or interpretations to these facts, is crucial. Interpretations are not fixed or universal but vary based on the perspectives, values, and social contexts of individuals or groups interpreting them (Cuthbertson, L. M., Robb, Y. A., & Blair, S., 2020). For instance, two different individuals or groups may interpret the same fact differently based on their cultural background, religion, or personal experiences. Both aspects influence the formation of complex and diverse social realities in shaping societal social realities.

Critically examining absolute objectivity within social construction emphasizes that absolute objectivity does not exist in understanding social realities. Instead, social realities are always open to interpretation and changing interpretations over time, leading to the addition, shift, or disappearance of previously existing social realities depending on prevailing social conditions (Fuhse, J. A., 2022). Religion, for example, represents a primary form of social reality. Beliefs, rituals, and values associated with religion are not just products of individual beliefs but also of inherited traditions maintained and upheld by the community as a whole (Dunbar, R., 2022). Another example of social reality is popular culture, which highlights phenomena such as fashion trends, popular music, or media phenomena like films and television, as instances of social reality formed through collective interaction, popularity, and adoption by the wider society.

METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative method, focusing on an in-depth understanding of social phenomena and human behavior through observation, interviews, and the analysis of texts or narrative descriptions. This approach emphasizes context, interpretation, and subjectivity, aiming to uncover the meaning, patterns, and complexity within the collected data (Somantri, G. R., 2005).

The data collection took place in Sidomulyo Village, Pangandaran Regency, using in-depth interviews with 16 respondents conducted both face-to-face and online (via WhatsApp). Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) suggest that the number of informants is considered saturated when it reaches 12 people in a homogeneous group.

The selected respondents are progressive individuals representing various layers of society, ensuring that the perspectives gathered are more concrete. These categories include educators, young people aged 17 to 20 years who are unmarried, married individuals aged 20-40 years, men and women over 40 years who are married, pregnant women outside of marriage, and individuals classified by the local community as "spinsters".

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings from in-depth interviews with respondents regarding societal views on "spinster" and unmarried pregnant women reveal several significant facts:

1. Stigma and Negative Perceptions

The majority of informants perceive the term "spinster" as having unwarranted negative connotations. They tend to pity or feel ashamed for women who remain unmarried at a certain age. This reflects a strong stigma against unmarried women of a certain age in society. Based on interviews, 15 out of 16 informants did not deny or feel disturbed by the naming and stigma associated with it. This normalization of calling someone an "spinster" means there is societal acceptance of the term for unmarried women of a certain age. Survey results indicate that residents of Sidomulyo Village categorize a woman as an spinster if she is above 30 years old (74%), above 20 years old (14.3%), and over 17 years old (14.3%).

In a society where traditional values often place marriage as a desirable achievement, individuals who remain unmarried face significant social challenges. Interviews with single women informants (aged 40) indicate that despite expectations from family and society to marry soon, those who remain unmarried observe that marriage does not always alleviate life burdens. Instead, it brings significant responsibilities such as earning a living and taking care of a family, which can add rather than reduce burdens. For these informants, what matters more is living harmoniously and not causing harm to others, rather than solely focusing on marital status as a determinant of happiness or success.

However, negative stigma against unmarried women of a certain age deemed by society as should have been married is also part of the informants' experience. This stigma comes from various sources, including family, neighbors, relatives, and the general public. Initially, informants experienced mixed emotions such as anger, sadness, and frustration towards these negative views. Over time, however, they learned to be less affected by such stigma. They realized that negative views would always exist regardless of marital status, and they chose to live their lives without overly caring about others' opinions.

It can be noted that the main cause of stigma against unmarried may arise from the assumption that being unmarried is considered shameful or disgraceful in society (Rosanti, T., & Mumuroh, L., 2020). There are also concerns about the future, such as not having children to care for in old age (Tunggono, V. M., 2021). However, informants developed a belief that by doing good to others, such concerns would no longer be relevant. They believe that good attitudes will be rewarded with good, and this becomes their moral foundation in facing and responding to the stigma they face.

From this, we can observe that the experience of unmarried individuals shows the complexity in social and psychological dynamics. Although they face pressure from society to marry, they also face challenges in remaining true to their own personal values. This process not only reveals how social stigma can emotionally affect individuals but also how they can grow and develop in the face of unavoidable social pressures in community life (Marthaningrum, S. D., 2020).

2. Spinster vs. Unmarried Pregnant Women

There is a difference in how society views "spinsters" compared to unmarried pregnant women. Although both are viewed negatively, unmarried pregnant women tend to face more shame and are often the subject of gossip. According to informants, 14 out of 16 people stated that they had heard unmarried pregnant women being talked about and viewed negatively in society. In contrast, regarding "spinsters," only 8 out of 16 informants witnessed and heard direct mistreatment towards those labeled as "spinsters." This figure is much lower compared to the mistreatment faced by unmarried pregnant women. These facts indicate that stigma against unmarried pregnant women is heavier and more challenging compared to stigma against "spinsters."

The heavier stigma against unmarried pregnant women is due to the view that it is not in line with existing norms, both culturally in society and from a religious point of view (Alyana, P, A., & Fauzi, R., 2022). Based on a survey conducted in Sidomulyo Village on unmarried pregnant women, 57.1% said it was inappropriate, 14.3% pitiful, 14.3% terrifying, and 14.3% just ordinary. Meanwhile, the stigma weight to the so-called spinster was lighter because the concept called spinster was not to break in

3. Spinster and Pressure to Marry

Women labeled as "spinsters" face significant pressure to marry. Based on in-depth interviews conducted on the coercion to marry spinsters, 48% of the informants stated that spinsters should marry soon, 28.6% said they did not know, while 14.3% rejected the labeling of spinsters. This data confirms previous research indicating that such statements arise from the cultural expectations surrounding marriage within that community (Bawono, Y., Setyaningsih, S., & Hanim, L, M., 2022). Similarly, the views of Sidomulyo Village residents on the obligation of women to marry strengthen Susanto's (2020) research, which concludes that the coercion to marry is rooted in the community's belief that having children is a duty for women, making estimations of fertile age a basis for marriage demands.

4. Social Norm Changes

Based on the interview, 10 out of 16 informants noted changes in social norms regarding "spinsters" and unmarried pregnant women, while 6 out of 16 informants stated there had been no changes. Based on these numbers, changes in existing social norms have not been significant in recent years. "Spinsters" and unmarried pregnant women are still considered taboo by society. Changes in social norms tend to be more related to unmarried pregnant women. Eight out of 16 informants stated that society now tends to be more lenient towards unmarried pregnancies due to the increasing number of such cases (Lulzannah, A., 2023).

In the case of "spinsters," changes in social norms occur due to views on gender equality, where gender equality refers to the principle that all individuals, regardless of their gender, have equal rights to access opportunities, resources, and fair treatment within society (Women, U, N., 2020). This involves eliminating discrimination and creating an environment where everyone can develop to their fullest potential without being restricted by gender stereotypes (Akip, M., 2020). Women may choose to pursue careers first, receive education equal to men, thus current reasons for remaining unmarried are better understood by the social circle.

5. Resistance Against Stigma

As a response to the persisting stigma, embracing and reducing criticism and judgments on someone's decision to marry or not is one of the viable actions. The negative stigma significantly affects the outlook of individuals labeled as "spinsters" towards marriage in general, making it more complex and intricate (Zarri, D, N., & Sos, S., 2023). This stigma leads them to view marriage as burdensome and something that should be carefully considered, given the financial burden, family responsibilities, and other factors. The stigma and negative perceptions also make them more selective and understanding that not all

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marriages bring happiness, and that happiness does not solely depend on marital status. Thus, they view marriage not just as a sanctuary but also as a commitment that entails significant responsibilities, where more women become household heads.

This discussion indicates that the stigma against "spinsters" and unmarried pregnant women not only impacts individuals personally but also reflects complex social dynamics and strong societal values (Oktoriny, F., 2023). To change this paradigm, a holistic and integrated approach from various sectors of society is needed to create a more inclusive environment that understands individual differences in life decisions. Happiness or success is not always tied to marital status (Mulyani, A., & Sari, Y., 2024), and mutual respect should be emphasized in interacting with individuals who have different life choices. Furthermore, situations like these can happen to anyone, underscoring the importance of treating others with understanding and empathy.

The stigma against unmarried pregnancies remains highly relevant in society. Initial responses from families and other social reactions indicate a strong moral judgment still exists towards sexual activities outside marriage (Hanifah & RN Nurwati., 2022). Efforts are needed to enhance understanding and empathy within the community towards individuals experiencing such situations. Open discussions and non-judgmental approaches can help create a more supportive environment for individuals facing these challenges in their lives (Zahroh, S., & Na'imah, N., 2020).

CONCLUSION

The conclusion from this discussion is that stigma against "spinsters" and unmarried pregnant women remains strong in society. Although there are differences in the intensity of stigma between these two groups, both illustrate how strong social norms and traditional values influence perceptions and treatment of individuals. Women who remain unmarried at a certain age often face pressure to marry, while unmarried pregnant women frequently become the subject of gossip and harsh moral judgment.

Responses to this stigma vary widely, but there is a trend towards respecting individual choices more and reducing judgment towards their life decisions. Gender equality also plays a crucial role in responding to this stigma, emphasizing that all individuals have the right to make the best decisions for themselves without being constrained by gender stereotypes or expectations.

To change this paradigm, a holistic and integrated approach from various sectors of society is needed to create a more inclusive, empathetic, and supportive environment towards individual differences in life decisions.

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