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### **Staying Single in a Married World: The Life of Never Married Women in Yogyakarta and Medan**

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## **Staying Single in a Married World: The Life of Never Married Women in Yogyakarta and Medan**

Augustina Situmorang

### **1. Introduction**

Marriage remains a social institution of extreme importance in Indonesian society. When a woman is not married by her late twenties or early thirties, there will be pressure to marry from her family, relatives, or even colleagues. In addition, many Indonesian believe that marriage and raising a family is a religious obligation; hence marriage has been considered compulsory for most people and an unmarried person is considered 'incomplete'. Nevertheless, the meaning of marriage as a form of relationship and a type of behaviour has undergone substantial change in the last half century (Hull, 2002). Unlike in the past, today young people have more freedom to decide when and with whom to marry. More people are ignoring the traditional standards for men's and women's appropriate marriageable ages.

Although the proportions remain relatively small compared to its neighboring countries (Jones, 2004), statistical trends indicate that the incidence of postponed marriage in Indonesia is growing, especially among urban people. Over the past three decades, the proportions of never-married adults have increased significantly. According to the reports of the 1971 and 2000 censuses, the proportion of never-married females aged 30-34 years in Indonesia has risen from 2.2 percent to 6.9 percent in three decades, while the increase for their male counterparts was 6.1 per cent to 11.8 per cent (Jones, 2004). The proportion of never-married adults in big cities such as Jakarta was even higher. In 2000, 14.3 percent of females aged 30-34 in Jakarta were never-married, while the figure among males was 21.1 per cent (Hull, 2002). Considering the increased opportunities for women to study and enter the labour force, these proportions are likely to continue to rise.

In some large cities in South-East Asia such as Manila, Bangkok, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur and Yangon, the rates of never-married women in their 30s and 40s are so high that there appears to be an avoidance of marriage. In 1990, the proportion of females aged 45-49 remaining never-married had reached 9 per cent in Manila, 11 per cent in Bangkok, 8 per cent in Singapore-Chinese, 7 per cent for Kuala Lumpur-Chinese and 11 per cent in Yangon. By 2000, the proportion still single at ages 45-49 in Bangkok had leaped to 17 per cent, 13 per cent for Singapore-Chinese, 10 per cent for Kuala Lumpur-Chinese and 15 per cent in Yangon (Jones, 2004: appendix table 2). In Indonesia, the rise in never-married adults is more recent and although limited studies have been done on these issues, the trends are certainly pointing towards avoidance of marriage for a proportion of women.

Despite the growing incidence of postponed marriage, most societies still consider marriage as the most desirable state adults can attain. Consequently, singles are often

pitied or ridiculed, even though they are generally pictured as admirable people (Cargan and Melko, 1982:18; Anderson *et al.*, 1994:14). A single woman is often perceived either as an 'old maid' who could not get a man because she is unattractive, handicapped or incompetent; or a 'city single' who does not want a man because she is highly educated, ambitious, single minded, determined, active and career person. These social stigmas are also found in Indonesia, and as in most societies, they bring difficulty to the lives of never-married women.

Many studies in western countries suggest the state of being single is a result of a complex interaction between structural, cultural and biographical aspects (Gordon, 1994:63; Allen, 1989; 69). It is not likely to be a clear-cut choice. Stein (1981) categorizes states of being single based on an element of choice (voluntary and involuntary) and permanence (temporary and stable). Voluntary temporary singles include people who are single (never married or ever married), are open to marriage but place a lower priority on searching for mates than on other activities, such as education, career, politics, and self-development. Voluntary stable singles include people who are single and satisfied with that choice and do not intend to marry/remarry. Involuntary temporary singles are those who would like to be married and are actively seeking mates. Involuntary stable singles are primarily older singles who wanted to marry/remarry but have not find a mate and now accept their single status.

Explanations about singlehood in South East Asia are limited (Jones, 2004; Tey, 2004; Hull, 2002, Tan, 2001). Jones (2004:16) noted two arguments to explain delays in marriage: one is that women have lost faith in marriage, and instead, give priority to career and independence, and the second is that women still want marriage, but because they postpone it too long for other priorities, they are later unable to find suitable men to marry. Studies among never married women in their late thirties in Manila (Tan, 2001) reveal that despite their singleness, most women have positive attitude towards marriage and they still consider marriage as a desirable state. Most said they had expected to get married when they were younger. Nevertheless it did not necessarily mean that these women feel deprived or isolated because of their single status.

The phenomenon of delayed marriage for women aged 30 and over in Indonesia is relatively recent; hence few studies have been conducted related to this issue, especially related to the lifestyles of never married adults (Jones, 2004). This study aims to describe the patterns and gender differences of never-married adults in two Indonesian cities: Yogyakarta and Medan. It also explores the lifestyles of never-married women in both cities. These include the process of remaining single, views toward marriage and family, how they cope with pressures to marry and social stigma of being single, and their relationship with family of origin and friends, including intimate relationships.

## 2. The study

Yogyakarta and Medan are two Indonesian cities that have different characteristics. With a population of 2 million in 2000, Medan is bigger than Yogyakarta, which has a population of 750 thousand. Medan is known as a heterogeneous society while Yogyakarta is known as a homogeneous society and the center of Javanese culture. Table 1 indicates ethnicity and religious affiliation differences among women aged 30-49 in Yogyakarta and Medan. More than 90 percent of women aged 30-49 in Yogyakarta are Javanese. By contrast, in Medan there are at least five big ethnic groups: Javanese, Batak, Chinese, Minang and Malay. Therefore there is no dominant culture in Medan. The daily lives of those in this city are influenced by these major ethnics groups. Religious affiliation of females in Medan is also varied. Although two thirds of females aged 30-49 are Moslems, the proportions of non-moslem are significantly high (33 per cent). Considering the homogeneity of the Yogyakarta population, further discussions on issues related to ethnicity and religious affiliation differences will be restricted to Medan.

Table 1. Proportion of females aged 30- 49 by ethnicity and religious affiliation in Yogyakarta and Medan, 2000

|                  | <b>YOGYAKARTA</b><br>% of all females aged 30-49 | <b>MEDAN</b><br>% of all females aged 30-49 |
|------------------|--|---|
| <b>Ethnicity</b> |  |   |
| Javanese         | 94.0   | 34.3  |
| Batak            | 0.3  | 32.6  |
| Malay            | 0.7  | 6.5   |
| Chinese          | 1.9  | 13.0  |
| Sundanese        | 1.0  | N.A   |
| Minangkabau      | N.A  | 8.5   |
| Others           | 2.1  | 5.0   |
| <b>Religion</b>  |  |   |
| Moslem           | 81.1   | 66.6  |
| Protestant       | 6.4  | 17.4  |
| Catholic         | 11.9   | 2.9   |
| Hindu            | 0.1  | 0.8   |
| Buddhist         | 0.3  | 12.1  |
| Others           | -  | 0.1   |

Source: Indonesian 2000 census data

## 2.1 Methods

- Data Sources

The 2000 Indonesia Census data was utilized to gain information on patterns and gender differences of socio-cultural backgrounds of never-married people in the City of Yogyakarta (Kota Madya Yogyakarta) and the City of Medan (Kota Madya Medan). These include age at the time of the enumeration, educational attainment, main activity, ethnicity, religious affiliation and living arrangement.

To obtain information about the lives of never-married women, I conducted open-ended interviews with 35 women (20 in Yogyakarta; 15 in Medan) who were at least 30 years old; there was no upper limit (the oldest interviewee was 66). The interviews focused on current activities, residential arrangements, occupations and other detailed background information, views towards marriage and family, coping with pressure to marry and social stigma of being single, and relationship with family and friends including intimate relationships with the opposite sex.

In addition, to gain more information about the research issues, I also interviewed four women (two in each city) who were married at an age over 30, four mothers with never married daughter over 30, and *adat* and religious leaders in Yogyakarta and Medan.

- The interviews

The interviews with never-married women were conducted in places chosen by respondents. Most of them preferred to be interviewed in coffee shops, and some preferred to be interviewed in their own houses. Each interview ran approximately two to three hours. During the interviews most respondents were open and talkative, although for the first ten to fifteen minutes they appeared to be somewhat tense and only gave short answers.

Finding never-married women aged 30 and over in Yogyakarta and Medan was not a difficult task. Most people that I contacted during my fieldwork said that they had relatives/friends or colleagues over 30 who were still single. Nevertheless finding single women who were willing and had time to participate in the study was not very easy. Several of my contact persons (all of whom are married) felt hesitant to introduce me to women whom they did not know well. They were worried that the persons might feel bad (*tersinggung*). Many people, especially married women, believe that talking about singleness is sensitive for never-married women aged 30s and up. This is perhaps due to the social stigma about single people that still exists in these societies.

Before I started this study, as a single woman and over 30 years of age myself, I did not think that talking about singlehood to never-married women over 30 would be sensitive. However, I was certainly aware that on many occasions, single women experienced many irritating comments regarding their status from relatives, colleagues and from some people they had just met. In Indonesia it is common to ask about the marital status of

someone you have just met. Then it is followed by annoying comments such as -- “How come you have not married?”, “When are you going to settle down? “Don’t be too selfish, think about your mother, get married!”, “Don’t be too choosy, nobody is perfect!”, “Don’t be too preoccupied with your work, think about family!”--.

Finding suitable times for interviews was even more difficult. This is because many of these single women run very active and busy lives. Many interviews, especially in Yogyakarta, had to be re-scheduled because the respondents encountered unexpected events (meetings or having visitors). At the end of my fieldwork four women could not be interviewed because they could not find time for the interviews, and one woman refused without giving any specific reason. I had, initially, planned to conduct three FGDs in each city (single women age 30-39 years; single women age 40 up and married women who were married late/over 30), but it was not easy to arrange a meeting with five or six single women at the same time. Considering the situation and the limited time I had for fieldwork, I changed my plans. I decided to focus on open-ended interviews instead.

Being a woman and single made it easier for me to raise issues that might be sensitive for some single women (such as how to adapt to the pressure to marry, coping with social stigma and intimate relationships) without making the women in my study feel uncomfortable or defensive. However, there are also some disadvantages in being single, as in some cases some respondents responded by asking me the questions that I had asked them. Most of the time I managed to avoid answering the questions by telling them that for the purpose of the study, I had better share my views after the interviews were finished. Most of them understood. At the end of the interviews, I was rather surprised by many of the women commenting that they had enjoyed the interviews. This is because they could share and express their feelings freely without worry about being judged or pitied.

## *2.2 The women in the study*

The women interviewed in this study came from different ethnic groups: Javanese, Chinese, Batak, Minangkabau, Malay, Sundanese and a mixture of two or three ethnic groups. I made an attempt to cover all educational backgrounds. Nevertheless, I could not find women with Junior High school or less education. All women in the study have at least high school education; four of them are enrolled as PhD students. They work in a wide range of activities; university lecturer, woman activist, civil and private servant, shop attendant and ‘nanny’. All women interviewed in the study who live in the same city as their parents lived in their parental houses, whereas those who live in different cities from their parents lived with other relatives or a maid, in rented or their own houses. Only two women lived alone.

### 3. Patterns and Gender Differences of Never-Married Adults in Yogyakarta and Medan

Previous studies indicate that the increased proportion of never-married women in Asian countries is related to the increased educational attainment and participation in the labor force, which in turn gives more options and autonomy to women (Jones, 2004). While marriage remains a desirable state for most Indonesian women, increasing options and changing expectation toward marriage could lead some women to postpone or avoid marriage. In addition there is a great tendency as one grows older to become choosier; at the same time there are fewer choices for older women, because more desirable men are already married to other more desirable women (Hendrick and Hendrick, 1992).

#### 3.1 *The proportion of never married*

In contrast to some rural areas in Indonesia, where very early marriage is still found (Jones, 2001), the majority of males and females in Yogyakarta and Medan have postponed their marriage to a later age. Table 2 indicates that more than a half of males aged 25-29 in the city of Yogyakarta and Medan are never married, while more than a third of females in the same age group in both cities are still single.

Table 2. Proportion never married among males and females aged 15-19 to 45-49 in Yogyakarta and Medan, 2000

| Age groups        | Males<br>% | Females<br>% |
|-------------------|------------|--------------|
| <b>YOGYAKARTA</b> |            |              |
| 15-19 years       | 99.4       | 97.6         |
| 20-24 years       | 93.1       | 84.0         |
| 25-29 years       | 66.5       | 45.5         |
| 30-34 years       | 33.1       | 22.5         |
| 35-39 years       | 15.9       | 12.2         |
| 40-44 years       | 8.8        | 10.5         |
| 45-49 years       | 5.7        | 7.4          |
| <b>MEDAN</b>      |            |              |
| 15-19 years       | 98.5       | 97.2         |
| 20-24 years       | 89.0       | 72.0         |
| 25-29 years       | 52.7       | 36.2         |
| 30-34 years       | 21.0       | 17.0         |
| 35-39 years       | 9.8        | 9.0          |
| 40-44 years       | 5.1        | 6.0          |
| 45-49 years       | 3.1        | 4.9          |

Source: Indonesian 2000 census data

Compared with people in Medan, males and females in Yogyakarta in all age groups (15-19 to 45-49), are less likely to be married. Almost half (45.5 per cent) of females aged



25-29 in Yogyakarta were never married, while the figure for females in the same age group in Medan was significantly lower (36.2 per cent).

By age 40 and over, never-married women are less likely to have married than never-married men. In both cities, the proportions of never-married males among age groups 15-19 to 35-39 are higher than those for females. However, there is a “crossover point” and among older aged groups (40-44 and 45-49) the figures are the opposite. Similar patterns were also found in cities in other countries, such as Manila and Bangkok (Jones, 2004).

### *3.2 Ethnicity and religious affiliation differences in Medan*

Table 3 indicates that compared to other ethnic groups, Chinese aged 30-34 to 45-49 in Medan are the least likely to marry. This pattern seems to follow the pattern in other South East Asia countries such as Malaysia and Singapore. In both countries, the proportions of never-married among the Chinese population were much higher than among the other main ethnic group - Malays (Tey, 2004; Jones, 2004:8). The relatively small proportion of never-married among Javanese women may be related to socio-economic conditions of Javanese in Medan. The majority of this group comes from relatively less educated and low income families. Most of them are the third or the fourth generations of Javanese who came to North Sumatra as laborers during the Dutch colonial era (Pelly, 1983). In terms of religious affiliation, Moslems are more likely to be married than adherents of other religions. In contrast, Buddhists are likely to remain single. But this is related to the fact that the majority of Buddhists in Medan are Chinese.

### *3.3 Educational attainment*

Well educated women are more likely to remain single than less educated women. The filter theory of mate selection suggests that people searching for partners tend to go through a process of sifting eligible people according to certain specific criteria and thus narrow the pool of potential partners to a relatively small number of candidates (Kerckhoff and Davis, cited in Benokraitis, 1999:188). Based on this theory, as educated women have studied for a relatively long time and have postponed marriage and thus, may end up single, and as men tend to marry down and women tend to marry up, the available pool of partners for educated women has been further narrowed. This argument is also true for Indonesia.

Table 4 shows that there is a gradation in proportion of never married women in both cities, in which the proportion of never married among college-educated women was the highest, followed by senior high school, junior high school and primary-less educated women. This pattern applies for women in almost all age groups (30-34 to 45-49), especially in Medan. Among all age groups in Medan, women with university education were twice as likely to be never married than those with primary or less education. Nevertheless the proportion of never-married women with junior high school and primary school was quite substantial. For males, the pattern whereby the more educated are more likely to remain single than the less educated only appears among those in age group 30-

34 (for both cities). In contrast to never-married women, college-educated men are more likely to be married than those less educated, especially among those in age group 45-49 for both cities.

Table 3 Proportion never married among females & males aged 30-34 and 45- 49 by ethnicity and religious affiliation in Medan, 2000

|                              | <b>30-34</b> | <b>35-39</b> | <b>40-44</b> | <b>45-49</b> |
|------------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| <b>Ethnicity</b>             |              |              |              |              |
| <b>Females</b>               |              |              |              |              |
| Javanese                     | 10.5         | 5.1          | 3.1          | 2.2          |
| Batak                        | 19.6         | 9.8          | 5.5          | 3.7          |
| Malay                        | 14.3         | 7.3          | 5.3          | 3.0          |
| Chinese                      | 29.4         | 18.4         | 14.1         | 12.9         |
| Minangkabau                  | 16.3         | 8.0          | 4.9          | 3.8          |
| Others                       | 18.9         | 11.5         | 7.9          | 7.2          |
| <b>Males</b>                 |              |              |              |              |
| Javanese                     | 14.4         | 5.9          | 4.0          | 1.8          |
| Batak                        | 23.6         | 9.2          | 3.0          | 2.3          |
| Malay                        | 20.1         | 8.9          | 4.5          | 2.7          |
| Chinese                      | 38.8         | 22.2         | 13           | 8.4          |
| Minangkabau                  | 21.1         | 9.1          | 4.6          | 2.2          |
| Others                       | 25.5         | 11.5         | 6.9          | 3.2          |
| <b>Religious Affiliation</b> |              |              |              |              |
| <b>Females</b>               |              |              |              |              |
| Moslem                       | 13.6         | 6.9          | 4.4          | 3.1          |
| Protestant                   | 21.6         | 10.2         | 5.2          | 3.6          |
| Catholic                     | 18.6         | 10.7         | 7.3          | 5.3          |
| Hindu                        | 29.9         | 17.9         | 15.1         | 15           |
| Buddhist                     | 29.4         | 18.7         | 14.3         | 13.1         |
| Others                       | 27.1         | 23.7         | 11.4         | 8.8          |
| <b>Males</b>                 |              |              |              |              |
| Moslem                       | 17.8         | 7.4          | 3.7          | 2.1          |
| Protestant                   | 26.2         | 10.6         | 4.7          | 2.4          |
| Catholic                     | 24.3         | 10.1         | 5.1          | 3.7          |
| Hindu                        | 37.5         | 18           | 11.5         | 8.1          |
| Buddhist                     | 39.7         | 22.6         | 13.5         | 8.7          |
| Others                       | 32.3         | 12.5         | 14.3         | 0            |

Source: Indonesian 2000 census data

Table 4 Proportion never married according to the highest educational attainment: females and males aged 30-34 to 45-49 in Yogyakarta and Medan, 2000

|                        | YOGYAKARTA |       |       |       | MEDAN |       |       |       |
|------------------------|------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
|                        | 30-34      | 35-39 | 40-44 | 45-49 | 30-34 | 35-39 | 40-44 | 45-49 |
| <b>Females</b>         |            |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| Educational Attainment |            |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| Primary/less           | 16.9       | 9.6   | 8.5   | 7.2   | 9.9   | 5.9   | 4.5   | 3.8   |
| Junior High            | 15.4       | 9.8   | 8.4   | 6.0   | 10.2  | 7.0   | 5.5   | 4.7   |
| Senior High            | 23.3       | 13.2  | 10.4  | 8.1   | 19.6  | 11.5  | 7.5   | 5.8   |
| Dip/Acad/Univ          | 26.3       | 16.6  | 12.3  | 9.0   | 27.9  | 13.3  | 8.5   | 7.8   |
| <b>Males</b>           |            |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| Educational Attainment |            |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| Primary/less           | 24.6       | 14.5  | 8.3   | 6.3   | 18.4  | 9.3   | 5.6   | 3.9   |
| Junior High            | 26.9       | 14.7  | 8.5   | 5.9   | 17.2  | 8.1   | 4.7   | 3.1   |
| Senior High            | 35.3       | 17.2  | 9.2   | 5.4   | 22.5  | 10.5  | 5.3   | 2.9   |
| Dip/Acad/Univ          | 36.6       | 15.7  | 9.1   | 5.4   | 28.2  | 10.1  | 4.4   | 2.4   |

Source: Indonesian 2000 census data

Table 5. Proportion never married according to main activity: females and males aged 30-34 to 45-49 in Yogyakarta and Medan, 2000

|                      | YOGYAKARTA |       |       |       | MEDAN |       |       |       |
|----------------------|------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
|                      | 30-34      | 35-39 | 40-44 | 45-49 | 30-34 | 35-39 | 40-44 | 45-49 |
| <b>Females</b>       |            |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| <i>Main activity</i> |            |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| Schooling            | n.a        | n.a   | n.a   | n.a   | n.a   | n.a   | n.a   | n.a   |
| Working              | 27.9       | 15.5  | 11.8  | 8.9   | 24.6  | 12.7  | 7.6   | 6.3   |
| Not working          | 11.9       | 6.9   | 8.9   | 5.1   | 10.2  | 5.8   | 4.5   | 3.5   |
| <b>Males</b>         |            |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| <i>Main activity</i> |            |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| Schooling            | n.a        | n.a   | n.a   | n.a   | n.a   | n.a   | n.a   | n.a   |
| Working              | 27.5       | 13    | 7     | 4.8   | 17.6  | 7.9   | 4.1   | 2.4   |
| Not working          | 70.1       | 56.7  | 39.0  | 24.7  | 71.7  | 50.8  | 32.7  | 22.6  |

Note: n.a: not applicable. The proportion of never married females and males who are schooling was very low (less than 3 per cent) for almost all age groups in both cities.

Source: Indonesian 2000 census data

### 3.4 Labour force participation

Female labour force participation is often associated with delayed marriage. Gordon (1994:74) argued that there is no direct connection between working and remaining single. For some women work becomes more important in constructing their lives because they are not married, while others do not marry because work is already important in constructing their lives (Gordon, 1994:74). Nevertheless for whatever reasons, working was important to single women.

Table 5 shows that the proportion of working women who are never married is higher than for those who are not working. In contrast, among men, singlehood is more prevalent for those not in the labour force. This applies for both cities. This may be due to the fact that men are expected to be the breadwinner in the family. Thus, those who are unemployed tend to remain single. Compared to women in Medan, Javanese women are more likely to be working. This is consistent with generally higher labour force participation rates of females in Java than in Sumatra.

The increase of female labour force participation was often connected to the rise in female educational achievement through the additional skills or training it provides. Women with higher education are more likely to be in the labour force than those with lower education. However, previous studies in Java suggested that in urban areas modestly educated women are placing themselves out of the job market because they are not qualified enough for advanced jobs and are too sophisticated for the lower level jobs common among less-educated and usually more traditional women (Hull, 1979; Jones 1993).

Table 6. Percentage in the labour force among never married and ever married females aged 30-34 to 45-49 according to educational attainment in Yogyakarta and Medan, 2000

|                        | YOGYAKARTA |       |       |       | MEDAN |       |       |       |
|------------------------|------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
|                        | 30-34      | 35-39 | 40-44 | 45-49 | 30-34 | 35-39 | 40-44 | 45-49 |
| <b>Never Married</b>   |            |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| Educational Attainment |            |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| Primary/less           | 70.6       | 71.4  | 69.6  | 67.1  | 55.7  | 53.2  | 46.8  | 48.8  |
| Junior High            | 69.8       | 71.5  | 72.7  | 71.8  | 59.2  | 57.4  | 57.3  | 59.0  |
| Senior High            | 72.4       | 74.1  | 76.1  | 73.8  | 64.0  | 66.6  | 64.0  | 63.4  |
| Dip/Acad/Univ          | 75.4       | 80.4  | 85.5  | 80.8  | 74.0  | 80.0  | 80.3  | 82.8  |
| <b>Ever Married</b>    |            |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| Educational Attainment |            |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| Primary/less           | 53.0       | 58.5  | 61.2  | 61.4  | 36.7  | 40.7  | 43.0  | 43.3  |
| Junior High            | 43.9       | 46.6  | 50.2  | 51.1  | 35.3  | 37.9  | 41.0  | 40.9  |
| Senior High            | 48.5       | 53.3  | 53.9  | 54.4  | 39.9  | 44.0  | 46.9  | 46.4  |
| Dip/Acad/Univ          | 60.5       | 67.9  | 73.4  | 77.5  | 60.9  | 67.2  | 73.3  | 76.0  |

Source: Indonesian 2000 census data

Table 6 shows that the positive association between education and employment among women in Yogyakarta and Medan only appeared among never married women, not for those who are ever married. Those with highest educational attainment (university) are more likely to be working followed by those with senior high school, junior high school and primarily or less education. Unlike those who never married, there is evidence of a negative or U shaped relationship between education and participation in the labour force among never married women. Those with primary school education or less are more likely to be working than those with junior high and senior high school education, especially in Yogyakarta. And those with university education are more likely to be working than those with other levels of education. These findings are consistent with the studies on labour force participation by educational attainment in Java mentioned in the previous paragraph.

### 3.5 Living arrangement

As in most Asian societies (Tan, 2002; Raymo, 2003:307), never-married people in Indonesia are generally expected to stay in their parental home until they marry. In some cases, even the married children reside in the parental household. Table 7 confirms this pattern. The majority of never married in both cities live in the household headed by their parents.

Table 7. Distribution of never married females and males aged 30-34 to 45-49 by living arrangement in Yogyakarta and Medan, 2000

|                      | YOGYAKARTA |            |            |            | MEDAN      |            |            |            |
|----------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
|                      | 30-34      | 35-39      | 40-44      | 45-49      | 30-34      | 35-39      | 40-44      | 45-49      |
| <b>Females</b>       |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |
| Living arrangement   |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |
| Head of household    | 14.5       | 11.3       | 18.2       | 19.7       | 6.8        | 7.9        | 10.4       | 13.8       |
| Living with parent/s | 63.7       | 62.2       | 50.8       | 44.6       | 69.2       | 63.2       | 52.1       | 40.4       |
| Others               | 21.8       | 26.5       | 31.0       | 35.7       | 24.3       | 28.9       | 37.5       | 45.9       |
| <b>Total</b>         | <b>100</b> | <b>100</b> | <b>100</b> | <b>100</b> | <b>100</b> | <b>100</b> | <b>100</b> | <b>100</b> |
| <b>Males</b>         |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |
| Living arrangement   |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |
| Head of household    | 20.2       | 17.9       | 21.3       | 30.1       | 10.3       | 12.8       | 17.2       | 21.3       |
| Living with parent/s | 62.6       | 63.2       | 56.0       | 40.4       | 68.2       | 62.9       | 49.1       | 38.7       |
| Others               | 17.2       | 18.9       | 22.6       | 29.4       | 21.5       | 24.3       | 33.7       | 40.0       |
| <b>Total</b>         | <b>100</b> | <b>100</b> | <b>100</b> | <b>100</b> | <b>100</b> | <b>100</b> | <b>100</b> | <b>100</b> |

Source: Indonesian 2000 census data

Nevertheless, older groups are less likely to remain living with their parents. Less than half of those aged 45-49 are living with their parents, and at the same time, those who become head of household and live in households headed by others increase. As expected, never married males are more likely to be head of household than never married females and less likely to live in households headed by others.

The never-married in Yogyakarta are more likely to be heading their own household than those in Medan, for both sexes. This may be related to the type of family in Yogyakarta and Medan. Javanese families tend to be nuclear families, while the Bataks, the Chinese and the Malays tend to be extended families. In addition, since only sons will inherit the parental house, it is unlikely that a Batak or Chinese woman will remain living in her parental house alone after her parents died. Among Javanese, on the other hand, this is not uncommon.

#### **4. The lifestyles of never married women**

##### *4.1 The process of remaining single*

Previous international studies suggested that the reasons for remaining single were not simple matters (Gordon, 1994; Allen, 1989). The process may consist of a series of events and transitions during childhood and young adulthood that cut across several life course careers (Allen, 1989). Some combinations of events related to family, friends, education, work and residence, interacted to limit their opportunity or desire to marry.

Using Stein's typology of singlehood, the women in this study can be categorized as involuntary temporary and involuntary stable singles. None of them said they had chosen to be single. When they were young, most of them voluntarily postponed their marriage, but as they become older they are starting to seek partners. Those in their early and mid thirties said they are still expecting to get married one day. Those in mid 40s and over can be categorized as involuntary stable single. As they are starting to accept their singleness, they no longer put marriage as a priority. Nevertheless, all said that they would marry if they meet someone suitable.

Hull (2002:8) noted that for growing numbers of well-educated women in Indonesia "the problem of the marriage market is not lack of available males, but the shortage of men who share their values and expectations". This argument seems to be true for most women in this study. When asked to describe the process of remaining single, none of them could give clear answers. The most typical and spontaneous answer was "I have not found my soul mate (*belum ketemu jodoh*)". All women said that they had had at least one serious relationship in the past, but it did not work. When asked why, they gave a combination of reasons including education, career, taking care of family, social-status and religious affiliation differences and being cheated. As stated by three women interviewed in this study:

I had a serious relationship for about 4 years when I was a postgraduate.  
He was my class mate. The relationship ended when we finished study and

he had to return back to his home town (Bali). I did not want to follow him. I could not leave my late aged father alone at home. My former boyfriend also could not leave his aged mother. It was not easy, not to mention about other problems such as career, culture and religion. I am Javanese and Moslem, he is Balinese and Hindu. (Mn, 51 year, Yk)

My last relationship ended when I was 26 years. We started dating (*pacaran*) when I was an undergraduate, he was also a student in the same university but from a different faculty. When we graduated he asked me to marry, but I asked him to wait for a year, at that time I was just starting my work here as a lecturer, and received a scholarship for master degree in Java. But he refused. He broke the relationship and in less than a year he married another woman. Since then I had several relationships but not really serious. (Ln, 39 years, Mdn)

When I was in high school, I always thought that I would marry my boyfriend soon after I finished high school. He was my neighbour and worked in the same plantation with my father. We broke up because he had to marry a woman that he made pregnant. I was very upset. I left my home town for a year. Then when I came back home, my mother told me that my father cheated on her and had a mistress. He did not marry his mistress, but I knew he kept their relationship. When my mother died three years ago, he married her. Since then I left home and live with my married sister. Maybe that is why I found it is difficult to trust a man. (Yl, 37 years, Mdn)

Only one woman (66 years, Yk) said she did not marry because she had to raise 2 nieces and 2 nephews since she was 23 years old. She lived with her married brother when she was studying. When her sister in law was sick with cancer, she took care of her and the children. After 2 years sickness, her sister in law died and her brother re-married in the following year. She did not get along with her brother's second wife, so she moved out and rented a room in the neighborhood. A year later her nieces and nephews also left their parents house, and preferred to live with her. For her, finding a man who was willing to take care of a woman with four 'children' was not easy.

I did not think a lot about marriage when I was young, I was too busy raising my 'children'. And also I believed no young man would marry a woman with four children. I never regret my choice. All my 'children' now are married and they treat me as their own mother. I am happy and satisfied.

Some women mentioned that to some extent, living in a city like Yogyakarta may have influenced them to remain single. Compared to a small town or rural areas, living in the city was relatively easier for single women. A woman whose parents were living in a small West Java town where most women married at a young age said:

Here I feel fine with my singleness, many of my friends are like me, still single. It is different if I live in my home town, most women in my age would have already married at least once. Many of my cousins or even my own sisters were married when they were teenagers (Hb, 41 years, Yk).

I think Yogyakarta is very conducive for single persons, because not many people question your marital status, well... at least not to your face. (Et, 39 years, Yk)

This feeling was also shared by parents who have never-married daughters in Yogyakarta. As stated by a mother (72 years) who has three never-married children (two women aged 46 and 38 years and one son aged 34 years);

Nowadays delayed married for career is increasingly common. Many of my friends or relatives have never-married children. In the past an old maid would be shameful for the family. Now it is ok. For me I do not want to pressure my children to marry, although as a mother I am still hoping they would marry one day. But if not, it is fine as long as they are happy.

#### 4.2 Attitude towards marriage

Similar to their counterparts in Manila (Tan, 2001), marriage is still an important institution for most women in this study. However, they agreed that marriage is not a must or an obligation. All women in the study have positive views toward marriage. As stated by two women below:

I still believe that marriage is important. I think nobody has an intention to remain single forever, but it doesn't mean that one has to marry. For me, if I haven't met the right person, why should I force myself to marry (*kenapa harus dipaksakan?*) (Tk, 49 years old, Yk)

According to Islam, those who married received a lot of God rewards (*pahala*), so it is much better to marry than remain single, however marriage is a *sunnah* not an obligation (*wajib*) (Et, 39 years old, Yk)

Since all women in the study believed that marrying and having a family is important, most of them still expect to marry one day, especially those in their 30s and early 40, but on their own terms.

I still believe that I will marry one day, I could not imagine being single for the rest of my life. But I don't want to marry someone I don't love. I don't mind marrying a widower or divorced man but absolutely not a married man (Ln, 39 years old, Mdn).

Nevertheless, some women also pointed out the facts that many of their married friends or relatives have serious marital problems and are trapped in unhappy marriages or



divorced. Considering problems faced by these married women, they said they feel lucky to be single.

#### *4.3 Coping with pressure to marry*

All women said that to some extent they experience pressure to marry from many people around them. Many said that they felt most pressure to marry when they were in their late twenties to early thirties. For many women the main source of pressure comes from their mothers and other female relatives such as married sisters or aunts.

Family pressures are always there. When my late mother was very sick, one of my sisters-in-law said that my being unmarried caused her to be sick. Feeling terribly sorry, I asked my mom about that. Mom said “No”, I was relieved but it still made me feel upset. (Ms, 42 years old, Yk)

My mother once asked with tears when I would marry--at that time she just came back from my cousin's wedding ceremony; then I questioned her “Would you agree if I marry with just anyone? She said “of course no”. I kept trying to convince her that my spouse (*jodoh*) is in God's hand. Since then, my Mother never asked me again. (Ln, 39 years old, Medan)

A few respondents -mostly from the Batak ethnic groups- reported they feel pressured by their fathers, married brothers or other male relatives. This is maybe because of the patriarchal system among Bataks, in which males were responsible for females in the family. When asked how they cope with pressure to marry, most women said ‘be patient and show to others that being single does not necessarily mean unhappy’. These seem to be the most popular strategies in coping with the pressure to marry for many women in the study.

#### *4.4 Coping with social stigma*

According to Cargan and Melko (1982:22), since marriage is the social norm, remaining unmarried or choosing against marriage leads to negative stereotypes, biases and discrimination. The social stigma attached to single women makes single women's lives more difficult. Never married women may feel personally inadequate because they have not formed partnerships. This is also true for Indonesia. One woman, one of whose best female friends was going to get married said:

At first I felt fine (for being single), but then since people are always asking me why I'm still single and have no boyfriend while many of my friends have married, makes me wonder maybe there's something wrong with me. Especially nowadays since my best friend is going to get married (Yk, 30 years, Yogya).

Most women in this study said that they often have to explain their singleness to many people, not only their family but also friends or even people they have just met. It was not

easy; some people would pity them for being never married while other ‘blamed’ them for being too choosy or too selfish. Usually, to avoid awkward situations some women said they just took the comments jokingly although they felt irritated. As stated by one respondent:

Being single, you had to have a lot of sense of humor and make jokes every time you receive annoying comments about your status. Because if you showed that you are upset, people would say that you are too sensitive and started to feel pity for you. So better take them as jokes (Rt, 41 years, Mdn)

Other women said, although nowadays the stigma for being single was not as negative as in the past, many people still could not accept that ‘a normal’ woman could remain single throughout her life, feel happy and satisfied. Most people still believe that if a woman has not married, she must have some problems and unhappiness.

#### *4.5 Relationship with family of origin and relatives*

In traditional societies marriage is considered as a pathway to adulthood, those who are not married are considered as immature. Many single women with married sisters noted that parents treated them differently; parents interfered in their lives, gave them advice and commented on their lifestyles. Parents found it easier to receive advice and comments on their lives from their married children (Gordon, 1994:73). This also exists for many societies in Indonesia. In Batak culture, a never married person regardless of her/his age or economic status is not included in *adat*. Singles have no role or obligation in any *adat* activities.

Nevertheless all women in this study said they are close with their parents, siblings, nieces and nephews. They often treat their siblings’ children like their own. Giving and taking financial support from family of origin is common among Indonesian families. All women who lived with their parents said they share household expenses with their parents, even though their parents never ask. Others who lived in a different city from their parents said they received financial support from their parents or siblings to buy big things such as houses or cars. In turn, when their parents or siblings need financial support, they would help.

Many women, especially Batak women, stated that unlike their married siblings, they did not feel close to their extended family including aunts, uncles and their parents’ cousins’ families. This is because they were never included in any extended family activities. A single woman who was a senior lecturer in Medan said that many of her relatives would look for her only when their children needed help in university. But when their children married, they never sent her any invitation, while her married younger sister who lived in the same house received one.

Javanese families seem to be more open toward never married people. Many Javanese said they were often included in preparing their cousin’s wedding or other family

occasions. Two women in Yogyakarta said once in a month they attend the family *arisan* (extended family gathering).

#### *4.6 Friendships*

Previous studies suggested that friends were more important for singles than for those who were married (Cargan and Melko, 1982; Gordon, 1994). Compared to the married, singles were likely to spend more time visiting with friends (Cargan and Melko, 1982). Similar to their sisters in western countries, most women in this study also mentioned the importance of friendships in their live.

Many women said they have close friends with whom they can share problems and happiness. Some women reported they were more open to their best friends than to their parents or siblings. Three women stated they were treated as part of the family by their married friends. One woman said she is often invited by her friend's family for picnics or dinners. Nevertheless, most of them said they are likely to maintain close relationships with other singles. This is because singles have more time to hang out with their friends than those who are married. One woman said:

Actually I am quite close with my married female friends, but going out with other singles is more fun. Being single we do not need to think about husbands or children at home. It is different if you go out with married women (Wk, 46 years, Yk).

#### *4.7 Intimate relationships with the opposite sex*

For some people, delaying married does not necessary mean delaying sexual relationships. Studies in western countries suggested that the rise of singlehood was in line with the increase in cohabitation (Axinn & Thornton, 2000:156). In Asia, information about cohabitation among never married adults is limited, nevertheless, studies among young people in the Philippines and Bangkok indicate that cohabitation is relatively common (Jones, 2004).

In Indonesia, although several micro studies (YKB, 1993; Situmorang, 2003) indicate that premarital sex was common among young people, cohabitation was rare. This is because cohabitation is unacceptable in the society. Those who were in cohabiting relationships would likely pretend to be married if questioned by neighbors. In addition, currently there is an effort to introduce morality and religion (Islam) into Indonesian criminal law. The new criminal law bill includes an article prohibiting living together before marriage, adultery, polygynous marriage without permission and homosexual relations with children under the age of 18 (Katjasungkana, 2004:159). Recently, many Indonesian television channels broadcast programs where police caught non-married couples who stayed in the same room in a hotel or who lived together in a house with no other people.

No women in this study stated they have friends or relatives who are in cohabitating relationships. Nevertheless many women, both in Yogyakarta and Medan, said that they would not be surprised if single women in their age group have sexual relations with their partners. A woman in Yogyakarta mentioned that a mother in her neighborhood to some extent 'facilitated' her daughter having intimate relations with her boyfriend by suggesting that they go for vacations several days out of town. Maybe this is because the mother wanted her daughter to get married.

As mentioned before, all women in the study had ever had at least one serious relationship with the opposite sex. Seven women said that they are currently in a relationship with a man. Three women said they are planning to get married in a year or so. Others said they still have no plan to marry. This is mostly because they are not sure with the relationships. Below are their answers when asked whether they plan to marry soon:

I do not know, I can not decide yet. You know..I just started this relationship, and I am still not sure about my feeling, I like him but...the 'chemistry' is not that strong. Now we have problems, I just received a scholarship for PhD overseas, but it seems to me that he does not like it, although he did not say anything yet. He has a stable job but he only has a *sarjana* degree (undergraduate). I do not mind about that actually, but not for him. (Lk, 32 years, Mdn)

No, as long as he is still married. We started the relationship about 10 years ago when both of us were overseas studying for master degree. At that time he was separated, but then after we graduated he went back to his wife and his 2 children. Well, I did not mind, because in a way I kind of suggested it. But I definitely do not want to be a second wife. (Wk, 46 years, Yk)

I do not think I will marry him. He is too young for me - he is only 22 years and has no stable job. I dated him just for having fun. (It, 38 years, Mdn)

Some women said they do not want to think very much about being intimate with the opposite sex. They preferred to improve their religious activities rather than spending time for unnecessary things. One woman said:

I do not want to add more problems to my family by doing something shameful. I am aware that being single I could not fulfill my family wishes. To occupy my time, I am involved in many religious activities. (Rs, 52 years, Mdn)

## 5. Conclusions

Despite the pressure to marry and social stigma attached to never married women, the number of women who remain single in their 30s and 40s, especially in big cities in Indonesia, is likely to continue to rise. While marriage remains a desirable state for most Indonesian women, increasing opportunities to study and enter the labour force and changing expectation toward marriage have led some women to postpone their marriage. Some women may end up remaining single for the rest of their lives.

The growing number of never married adults is starting to be a concern among many Indonesian families. Most people, especially those who are married, consider singlehood as a social problem. They cannot accept the idea that a never married 'normal' woman could be happy and satisfied with her life. On the other hand, many single women, despite their positive attitude toward marriage, believe that being single is not identical with unhappiness or a dull life. Some women in this study showed that single women can also live 'happily ever after', especially when they can adapt to the way many people, including families and friends, treat the never-married.

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