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RESEARCH ARTICLE

DISCRIMINATION AGAINST SINGLE WOMEN BASED ON GENDER-CONSTRUCTED CULTURAL NORMS

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ABSTRACT

This article highlights fundamental indicators of discrimination against single women in the Methodist Church in Kenya and in society. It aims to examine gender-constructed cultural norms that result in discrimination against single women. Single women face challenges due to the tradition and cultural belief that everyone should marry apart from those who are not allowed to because of religious duties. This notion has been integrated into the contemporary church and society, making it more difficult for those who are single by choice and those forced by circumstances. This article also presents how single women regard themselves and how they are understood and labelled by others. This paper is the result of a preliminary empirical study carried out in the months of June-August, 2007. The data was gathered predominantly through face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions with single women, church leaders, elderly men and married couples. Empirical materials were employed as primary sources that provide a backdrop to help understand the situation of single women in the contemporary church and society. For clarity, fluency and privacy, the names given to the informants are not their actual names.

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INTRODUCTION

Women in Kenya can be classified into different categories, each associated with various problems. In Kenya, as well as in other parts of Africa and the world, single women often find it difficult to know where they “belong” in the church and society. Some single women feel that the social category of “unmarried” is between two worlds, namely the world of the unmarried and the world of the married and the respect that marriage brings for a woman. The discrimination against “single women” is more or less caused by the gender-constructed categories of men and women; this leads to the reality that men are more valued than women in African societies. Men, as custodians of the cultural norms, guide societies as to how men and women should act as different kinds of people and this opens a loophole for societies to categorise and discriminate single women as different, secondary and “other”. Single women raise their voices, or their equivalent capabilities, to various degrees, but the reality of being unmarried ties them to the societal expectations that every person should marry. It is from this background that I, as a Kenyan (although not single), have observed the challenges that single women encounter due to their dual status of being single and a woman. In the following discussion I will present the categories of “single women by choice” (SWBC) (acting as “husband-and-wife”), widowed (WSW), divorced (DSW), separated (SSW), and barren (BSW) single women. I will use these acronyms and full terms interchangeably.

Single Women by Choice as “Husband-and-Wife”

From the Ameru point of view, women are women and men are men, and each sex is understood as being different from the other. In Kenyan culture, when men display traits that have been culturally-stereotyped as “feminine”, such as foolish behaviour, indecisiveness or gossiping, they are categorised as women, a category which is despised by other men. Single women adopt the character of “men” because they are alone and do not have, or at least display, the desire to get married in the near future. Single women stand as “men” in this context because they, like men, take responsibility for their families without help from outsiders or kin. Often they are professional single women who, like men, are financially and socially able to meet the daily needs of their nuclear families. Thus, being a woman and single is attainable with the challenges of being a single mother and head of the household. Single women from all categories have the sense that it is now their time to work on their own, except for young widows who want to get married. During focus-group discussions, single women commented that they preferred the single life in many ways, as it is free of the hindrances experienced by married women. What single women see as difficult and a nuisance to their lives is the way in which people misunderstand them, accusing them of snatching other women’s spouses and wondering where they get money from to care for their family without a man to provide for them. They also feel uncomfortable with people who are troubled when they share their experiences as single women. Jane said:

As single women, we feel freer with each other when we are sharing our experiences than when we are

with the married women. Married women do not understand us, but we understand one another and we help one another. But we have no place in the church to meet as singles, unless we organize, not an office, but a friendly visiting in our own homes. Sometimes we are discouraged because nothing is done to bring us together unless on our own. Even the church prepares for couple outings but we are not involved. We feel excluded. The church holds on us because they know we can offer good money but not out of anything (Jane)

Single women are discriminated against based on cultural norms that do not provide space for a single woman to express her feelings.

Single Women and the Issue of Father to the Children

The issue of who is the father to children born out of wedlock is a burning one. Church priests, especially those in mainstream churches, ask publicly during the baptism ceremony "who is the father of the child?" The single women voiced worries about their children being pointed out as children "from the bush" (born out of wedlock and by unknown fathers), and being categorised as a "walking sin" by church priests in public. Understandably, single women wonder how they can maintain a relationship with such congregations that discriminate against them to that degree. What can be done to avoid the question of who is the father to your children? The single women proposed that the church needs to stop demanding the name of the biological father because, as single mothers, they play the roles of both father and mother. Answering the question posed to them, "what will happen when your children grow up and ask about their father?", the single women responded that time will tell because it is not yet a question for their young children.

Regarding the father of their children, single women who have children out of wedlock have different ideas. One woman said:

According to some people, single women are lacking in manners and they are going beyond the norms of the society because a single woman should not call her own father or grandfather the father to her children. Often, old men insist on the idea that women who give birth to children out of wedlock, should provide the real name of the father to their children, because by writing their grandfather's or their father's name in some of the Kenyans traditions and beliefs means having sex affairs with your grandfather or your father, which is an insult and a curse to both of the parties (Nancy).

In this study, of four single women, one noted that a child's curiosity as to his/her father stems from government policies that the mother should give information about the father to the child after the birth. According to the government, the birth certificate should provide the father's name. Single women having children out of wedlock proposed that the state needs to modify some policies so as to accommodate both the mother's and the father's names in the birth certificate.

Rejection of Pregnancy and Claiming of Child Ownership

Single women expressed the feeling that there can be rejection of a child by the man during pregnancy and then, later,

acceptance of the child when born. One of the single women in the focus group said:

Sometimes men want a woman to have an abortion to avoid their responsibility of a father but when the woman refuses to abort the foetus they change their idea and pretend they want the baby. Since now the child is born it is theirs. Men accept any child but they often long for a boy child. The aspect of acceptance comes in that it is a man who has made the woman pregnant hence he is a full man (Mary).

Like these single women, Edin and Maria indicated that some men reject a pregnancy, but when the child is born, they accept the child as a human being and feel that they have achieved something important in life, along with the mother of the child (Edin and Maria, 2005: 60). Interestingly, given this sense of fatherly bonding, men often demand at a later point that their names appear on birth certificates as fathers. In contrast, single women who went through the pregnancy and childbirth as single do not wish the biological father's name to appear on the birth certificate, given their social, psychological, and financial absence since conception. Edin's and Maria's indication, although from an American context, corresponds with what single women express about absent fathers. They believe that single women deserve the title of "father" more than the biological fathers who claim the title. Single women believe they are both "husband" and "wife" since they do not have a "real husband". This is the ideology of single women but not a societal requirement. According to the informant, SWBC, especially those who are financially stable with stable jobs, are not willing to marry for fear that everything they have acquired on their own would be under the control of any potential husband. Following this discussion about SWBC, I will now introduce another category of single women, the widowed single women (WSW).

Widowed Single Women (WSW)

Orwell, in his infamous ironic quote "all animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others" (Orwell 1954: 28), asserted that in the *Animal Farm* some animals were made more equal than others by treating themselves better than the animals of lower classes, who worked very hard but received little food. Married women and single women in the church are counted as equals, but when it comes to treatment, single women are simultaneously treated differently from the married women, yet they are still women. According to Orwell, the seventh commandment was that "all animals are equal", but this was broken by some animals who felt that they were better than others and hence dominated everything in the farm (Orwell 1954: 148). Single women and married women are equal regardless of marital status, whether it is by choice, divorce, or widowhood. The inequalities, as mentioned earlier, are due to the constructed cultural norms that are discussed below. The challenges of single women (with/without children) are reflected in the hierarchies established by whether women are single by choice, by having children out of wedlock, by divorce, by separation or by widowhood and barrenness, leading to a double discrimination against single women. In the context of some Kenyan churches and societies, single women are categorised and discriminated against according to the reason behind their singlehood. The discussion below will help understand these different

situations of single women. An elderly couple, James and Alice, identified the difference between the levels of discrimination among single women. Alice informed that:

Single women are categorised and discriminated against in accordance with their reasons for their singlehood. A widow is better to be considered a leader in the church and in the society than single women by choice, divorce or separation because people judge that her status as single is not a choice, but a result of the death of her husband. Church traditions and societal mores attest that single women, who divorce, separate and make choices of singlehood, break the normality (Alice).

According to the informants, widowhood appears to be respected more than the statuses given to the other categories of single women. Although it seems as if the discrimination level is slightly reduced for a widow, like other single women they suffer discrimination, such as inheritance, and are labelled snatchers of married men. Socially, the practice of inheritance previously avoided widowed women being single. In the Meru community, wife inheritance is no longer in practice. According to the societal norms, after the death of a woman's husband, the widow was to be inherited by a relative of the deceased to cover the loss and for reproduction. Through this inheritance, after the death of a husband, the husband still produces (as if he is alive) in the grave through the agency of a living relative. The abolition of wife-inheritance is due to the Christian faith.

Attitude Among the Widowed

In connection with the above, widowed women are greatly concerned about the abrupt death of a spouse. Widows encounter problems when the deceased fail to acknowledge them in a will or name them as next of kin, because they can lose all of their property. If they are not legally married, the husband will name his father and brother in his will as his next of kin. In such circumstances, widows are not given the opportunity to be next of kin other than through their sons if they are of age. One widow said:

We are not entitled for any inheritance. The situation is more apparent to an illegally married widow. Next of kin is given to our children but only when they are of age otherwise the next of kin is father in-law or brother's in-law. Note that this happens mostly to a widow financially unstable, without job. A widow with stable job will not be shaken because she can follow the case in the court of law or otherwise (Norah).

There are various attitudes based on discrimination against WSW as compared with widowers among the Ameru people. If a woman or man is widowed, their role and status changes; one is now a widow or widower, rather than a wife or husband (Ojwang and Mugambi 1989: 62). Ojwang and Mugambi point out that due to higher mortality rates for men, the widow has a low probability of remarrying. The traditional female role of housekeeping and cooking continues after widowhood, although the widow is no longer carrying out these tasks for two people. In contrast, widowers unaccustomed to performing everyday tasks find it more foreign, and often request help from relatives. It would be taboo for a widow to

request domestic help. However, other family members may assume responsibility for a widower's children (Ojwang and Mugambi 1989: 62). In Kenya it is difficult for men to deal with domestic work since their culture dictates that women are domestic workers: the kitchen is a woman's place. In some cases, Ojwang and Mugambi see widowhood as the release of a widow from situations where marital relationships may have been hostile. They contend that many married women consider single women to be a threat to their stable marriages. This negative perception can make a widow suffer from loneliness because of the apathy and withdrawal of married women. They place the burden of responsibility for social engagements on the widow. Widows who manage to re-engage in society tend to be those who have a higher education and greater flexibility. Ojwang and Mugambi view isolation as a primary concern for widows who encounter reduced interactions with the community and kin. Remarriage can be a solution, but brings risks along with it.

It is not as easy for a widow to marry immediately after the death of her husband as it is for a widower to remarry after his wife dies. Some informants pointed out that if a woman marries soon after the death of her husband, she may be accused of causing his death in order that she could marry another man. These single women believe that society often views the widow to have killed the husband through witchcraft to free her of a problematic marriage, or perhaps because she did not get all that she anticipated in the marriage, for example wealth. Due to this negative perception of society, these single women believe that many widows, who desire to remarry, refrain from doing so.

My Home is My Life: The Concept of Single Womanhood in Space and Time.

A case study is presented to illustrate common situations experienced by single women in a patriarchal society. The widow is discriminated against in a very indirect way, such that she does not realise how discriminating it is when outsiders, although insiders according to the societal norms, make decisions for her. In this case study I present a young family headed by a widow who seems to be happy in her status of singlehood but is inflexible to make a decision about marriage. Cathy was widowed in 2000 after her husband was shot dead by thugs at their village market. She described the incident emotionally, in that her husband died when her baby boy was one week old. He left them one evening to buy some meat so that they could prepare dinner. A short time later, Cathy and her in-laws were informed that her husband was dead. According to Cathy, this was serious and scary. Cathy felt she could do nothing except cry. Cathy asked God why all this happened to her at the very beginning of her marriage. Cathy stated that after the burial her father and the rest of her natal family wanted her to return to them so that she could remarry. This was too difficult a decision for Cathy to make at that time. On the other side, Cathy's in-laws wanted her to stay with them because of their grandson. Cathy said that to date she had not been in a position to decide whether to return to her family or to remain with her in-laws because she was torn between the two parties; the in-laws who want her to stay and not to remarry, but to take care of their little grandson, and her family who want her to return to her natal home so that she can remarry, as she is too young to live a single life. Cathy maintained that her family remains disturbed by her delay to

make the decision, in part due to their perception of her “getting older”, even though she told them that the delay was in no small part due to the fact that her in-laws want to care for her grandson and had promised her inheritance. She was 22 years old when the incident took place. Cathy noted that single women are always doubted especially at “her age”. People ask Cathy how she survives on her own and why she is not getting married. Cathy believes that because she is single not by choice but through widowhood, she has an increased likelihood of finding a new spouse, but the situation with her in-laws is very oppressive. Cathy believes it is better to be a widow than to choose to be single or to divorce and to separate. She would like to get married again but her in-laws are against the idea because they want their grandson to be taken care of at their homestead and not that of any other man. Cathy believes that she gains identity through her deceased husband and the fact that she has a son who will maintain the continuity of the family name since her husband was her in-laws’ only son. Cathy said that she was staying with the in-laws out of the fear that if she returns to her parents’ home they might not help her in any way since she does not have a stable job, whereas her in-laws are meeting some of her basic needs. The discussion of WSW leads on to another category of DSW and SSW.

Divorced (DSW) and Separated (SSW) Single Women

According to the research findings, divorced and separated single women are both unique and challenging subcategories for today’s church and society. People often point fingers at them and accuse them of “failing” their marital status. Informants said that divorce is caused by drunkenness, irresponsibility, marital infidelity, barrenness and different forms of marital abuse by the spouse. Traditionally, divorce was rare compared with separation. According to Mbiti, reasons for divorce include unfaithfulness, practice of magic and witchcraft, barrenness and desertion (Mbiti 1990: 141-142). It is apparent that divorce occurs when a woman is accused of practising magic and witchcraft as well as being barren. As Mbiti shows, sterility can be covered up through conception with the husband’s relative or brother. In some contemporary societies, however, this practice is not applicable because it has been rejected due to HIV/AIDS or by the individual themselves. The study of focus-group discussions of single women (SWBC, WSW and BSW) gave a comparative evaluation of divorced and separated single women in relation to the other categories of SWBC, by having children out of wedlock, and widows. The single women in these other categories perceived the divorced and the separated single women to be more “criminal” and less “morally upright” than women in the other categories. Divorced and separated single women, according to the women in the study, are labelled as “criminal” and as people of bad character because societal inequalities suggest women should compromise at all costs for the survival of their marriage. Additionally, some tribe members assume that women should be controlled by men when making decisions. If a woman decides to call for divorce or to separate due to unbearable problems she encounters in the family, then it is concluded that this woman is a criminal and she will no longer be a “good wife”. According to some divorced and separated women in focus-group discussions, singlehood is sometimes more free, without criticism from a husband. These divorced and separated women believe they have chosen a lifestyle that

is more honest than the hypocrisy of pretending to be happy in a bad marriage. One woman among the DSS and SSW reported that:

Many men exhibit a lack of concern for the family. We had wasted our time by adhering to the norms of the society and efficiently taking care of the family while covering the weakness of the husband. We enjoy our current status, regardless of societal perceptions. Taking care of the children alone is better, than compromising in a terrible and frustrating marriage. We can make our lives better than before (Ann).

It is conceived that divorced and separated women are the ones who request divorce due to various reasons given above. Women start divorce processes more frequently than men, but more men enter into a new marriage immediately after divorce than women (Aune 2002:14). Aune asserts that it is difficult for single women to find a new partner since they have the responsibility of children. She states that divorced women are more likely than divorced men to get into financial problems. Whereas women tend to initiate divorce, it is often men who initiate the problems leading to it by looking for ways to leave the marriage and by behaving badly, communicating indirectly to the wife that she should ask for divorce (Robinson 1991: 14). Robinson suggests that a woman who does not quickly engage in a new marriage is not the cause of divorce. Often, men plan for divorce first by looking for ways in which the wife can be blamed. Although Robinson has a strong point, it can be viewed as one-sided because the woman might be looking for a way to escape her husband’s problems. Societies, including the church, blame divorced and separated women for the decision to divorce or separate. One of the divorced and separated women said:

When the church ministers exercise pastoral care to families with marital problems they tell women to be courageous enough to go through the kind of oppressing marriage because it is not a good example for a church woman to divorce. Sometimes, some of the church ministers assume that the problem is caused by women who do not cook well or who do not make delicious food to their husbands, women who do not relate well sexually and women who live careless and clumsy lives, to mention a few (Teresa).

Many divorced and separated women are blamed for the consequences and failure of the marriage, but they themselves do not place blame on the other party because, according to societal norms, women should humble themselves before men and they should fulfil all that it takes for one to be a good wife. Societal norms are that a good husband is one who provides for the family’s needs, so that even if he has some weaknesses, the other members of society will never see it. Divorced and separated women concluded that so long as he is providing for the family he is a good man.

Douglass and Kay in their chapter “*The Structure of Male-Female Relationships*” illustrate that a man belongs to the field while a woman’s place is the hearth. They say that the man holds the head but a woman the heart, the man is there to authorise while the woman is to obey, and that the sword belongs to a man while the needle belongs to a woman (Douglass and Kay 1997: 74). For them the power belongs to

a man and the woman is there to obey the one who holds this power. The discussion of divorced and separated single women could be greatly expanded, but this would require more space than is available here. For this reason, I will move on to BSW.

Barren Single Women

BSW are discriminated against due to the lack of a child. The study demonstrated that BSW are discriminated against to the level of being reduced to a "lesser human being". Barren single women suffer "incompleteness". In a real sense, they are still human beings, but are considered different to other women. In some societies, a woman who does not give birth to a child is regarded as an outcast. She does not add any value to the society to which she belongs since her value comes from the fact that she can produce offspring. From the interview with a group of women representing all of the categories of single women, it was apparent that BSW are silenced in the church and society. One of the women said:

Barren single women are labelled as people with no future. People say that barren people die and are forgotten for good. They have nothing to be remembered of. When a person with a family and children dies in the same family leaving the barren one behind, people ask God why He picked up her or him and did not exchange with the one without children. The societies disvalue them to a point of despair. But who knows (...) God knows better than human beings. I think the discrimination against BSW is unfair. I mean any discrimination against human beings or anything is bad (Becky).

BSW have been disvalued and discriminated against to a level of status quo. The societal norms dictate to a high degree that they are different just because they can't bear children like other women. Additionally, barren women are without voices to the extent that they do not talk about or mention other people's children since they do not have their own. Discriminatory attitudes against BSW are unfolded in issues pertaining to marriage transactions that are deemed to be on transit due to threatening attitudes from co-wives, in-laws, husbands, and society in general. The ideological aspect in conjunction with BSW is apparent when a husband marries another woman for procreation. BSW suffer rejection and remain as laughing stocks to the co-wives, in-laws, husbands and society. This results in a barren woman renouncing her marriage, giving the new, productive woman a space in her homestead. On the other side of the coin, the in-laws make threats, requesting their son to divorce and remarry a fertile woman. One of the BSW told that a few men stand their ground and retain the barren wife without marrying another woman. She said:

A husband to a barren woman was threatened by the in-laws to get rid of his wife. Do you know the answer he gave? She asked. Laughter! He said that when you will be eating your children do not share with me. I wish all the men can stand by their barren wives to safeguard their social threatened conditions. She said. I wish we can get two or three men who can stand like this one man. We have many deceptive

men who get children out of wedlock without the knowledge of the wife. She added (Harriet)

BSW suffer discrimination from a number of different people; from co-wives, in-laws, husbands and society. The burden of childlessness is laid on their shoulders, hence lessening their dignity, as if their dignity emerges from bearing children. While these single women are retained by some Christian husbands, these men often hide behind their knowledge by conceiving with a woman out of wedlock and keeping it secret between the two parties. BSW learn from outside sources that their husbands have children in other places, either with one woman or different women. Some men later mistreat their first wives to provoke them to file for divorce. Although divorce, as Mbiti says, is not very welcome and is hardly known in some traditional African settings, divorce was and is allowed in such societies if a woman is barren. He states that "The causes of divorce include sterility or barrenness especially on the part of the wife. This is probably the greatest single cause, since inability to bear children blocks the streams of life" (Mbiti, 1990: 141). BSW face discrimination for something that they cannot solve by themselves.

BSW pointed out that the rejection is sometimes not only by their in-laws but also their natal family members. They informed that, like outsiders, some family members look down on them and judge unjustly. These judgments are based on vague grounds connecting abortion to the cause of barrenness. This makes it more difficult for BSW to clean up false accusations and rumours that spread within the village. According to the informants, some of the BSW end up becoming voiceless in the private and public arenas. BSW felt that it is difficult for them to socialise with other SWBC, DSW, SSW and WSW with children. They think that other single women with children do not trust them. Other categories of single women who have children think BSW are jealous of them because they don't have children. For instance, BSW who are teachers find it difficult to deal with children in schools since the parents confront them harshly by reminding them they do not have children of their own, and so they cannot instil discipline to other people's children. The plight of BSW is based on their inability to produce offspring for the continuity of lineages and false judgments based on abortion as a reason for barrenness and the assumption that they are, therefore, "loose" characters, to highlight a couple of examples. Inclusively, all single women face common and diverse discrimination because they are women and single.

Conclusion

Women of diverse categories all face different problems. Educated, middle class, rich and poor women encounter various challenges that are related to the traditional cultures and norms set forth in a male-oriented society. Single women in particular suffer from this kind of classification which originates from the fact that, traditionally and normally, every individual should marry and that not doing so is problematic. Some women have the dilemma of not being able to make decisions due to fear of what people will say and think about them, because in African societies an individual does not live on their own, but in a community where they need one another. As a result of traditional prejudices, cultures and values, women and especially single women face different

discriminations. The plight related to the single state is a challenge in the African continent. Different societies experience numerous issues that affect single women. Moreover, field work research and literature on this subject have revealed how single women currently suffer from discrimination. Single women have been accused of being sexually immoral because individuals are choosing to have children out of wedlock and are choosing to be single. All that is seen to be new should be dealt with in contextual theology because the world changes with the people within it. Since the status of single women is understood to be new, then their plight calls for a "new theology" that will emancipate them from all sorts of discrimination. Women need to learn about the experiences of other people through the means of dialogue as women critique the traditions by examining what confronts them today, and they also need to place effort in forming theologies that meet the needs of the people.

Since the world is not returning to where it started, and since due to change we will not revert back to what has happened culturally in the past, we need to realise the presence of God to every person, whether strong or weak and whether married or unmarried. Every person should have his or her own choice to some extent, although an individual also needs the community. With religion, everybody is free to make his or her own choice, for example, whether to be a follower of Christ, Mohammed, or Gautama Buddha. The same opportunity for personal decision needs to be presented when it comes to people making their own choices in life situations; people have their own reasons as to why they are in a religion, status, or place. The church of God is called upon to create space for each and every person and to work toward the establishment of peace and freedom. Single women may only experience this peace if the church and society change the negative attitudes towards them and create a new attitude that will accommodate them, regardless of the reasons behind their singlehood. Single women deserve dignity. People who label them as prostitutes, as women who snatch other women's spouses, as women who have love affairs with male ministers and as criminals doubt that these women can be respected. However, single women need to gain the respect that they are worthy of. They are women of dignity who are able to break the traditions that place them into captivity, and are able to think and make choices as to how they should behave. Their dignity is their consciousness of taking another way, a new way of being single. It is not a sin; it is a choice that calls for one's own worth, despite being single by choice, by having children out of wedlock, by divorce, by separation or by death of a spouse.

It appears that today's challenge of discrimination against single women will never cease, hence the church has a duty not to analyse the issue of differences, but to broaden the lens and recognise the social injustice in the system. There should be teachings to enlighten Christians on such issues because any woman can be a victim. Church priests should be the first to be trained in how to exercise pastoral care to single women. Women priests should be at the front of the line to advocate change in the gender-constructed cultural norms. Single women in some churches do not need financial help, but they do need assistance in learning how to relate with men and married women whilst avoiding suspicion of having love affairs with male priests and other married men.

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