

Never-married women face social stigma, researchers find

March 23 2010

In 2009, approximately 40 percent of adults were single, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. In a new study, "I'm a Loser, I'm Not Married, Let's Just All Look at Me," a University of Missouri researcher examined the familial and societal messages given to women who are not married by their mid-30's. Although the number of single women has increased, the stigma associated with being single at that age has not diminished, according to the women in this study.

"We found that never-married women's social environments are characterized by pressure to conform to the conventional life pathway," said Larry Ganong, co-chair of Human Development and Family Studies in the College of Human Environmental Sciences. "This pressure was manifested in [women](#) feeling highly visible and invisible. Heightened visibility came from feelings of exposure and invisibility came from assumptions made by others."

Ganong and Elizabeth Sharp, associate professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at Texas Tech University, conducted 32 interviews with middle-class, never-married women who felt that considerable attention was directed at them because of their age and single status. They felt heightened visibility in situations such as bouquet tosses at weddings. These events brought about unwanted, intrusive questions. Feeling invisible, on the other hand, was likely when others made assumptions that they were married and had children or when they had to justify their singlehood. These interactions made them feel that their actual lives weren't important or went unnoticed.

Specifically, single women's social worlds include:

- Awareness of shifting reality as they become older; for example, the shrinking pool of eligible men and increased [pregnancy](#) risks.
- Reminders that they are on different life paths than most women when others inquire about their single status and during events, including social gatherings and weddings.
- Feelings of insecurity and displacement in their families of origin when parents and siblings remark about their singlehood and make jokes or rude comments.

The visibility and invisibility factors were impacted by age, according to Ganong. The mid-20's through mid-30's is a time of intense contemplation and concern for single women regarding their future family trajectories. Women older than 35 tend to be content with being single and don't express as much dissatisfaction as do younger women. Women ages 25-35 felt the most [stigma](#), which may be attributed to the fact that being single is more acceptable before age 25. After reaching that age, they feel more scrutinized by friends, family members and others.

"Mainstream media also enforce these ideas," Ganong said. "For example, shows like 'Sex and the City,' which portray female protagonists who are hyper-focused on finding men, and end with the majority of those characters getting married, are popular."

Ganong has a joint appointment in the MU Sinclair School of Nursing. The study will be published in the *Journal of Family Issues*.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

Citation: Never-married women face social stigma, researchers find (2010, March 23) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-03-never-married-women-social-stigma.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.