

## Abstract

A triangulated design was used to investigate the influences of remaining unmarried on Palestinian women's self-perception and mental health status. Three-hundred, never-married women between the ages of 25 and 50 years were selected using a convenience sampling technique. All these unmarried respondents filled in the Derogatis SCL-90-R (a self report measure of mental health symptomatology) by themselves. One hundred and sixty three participants of the 300 were successfully interviewed by means of a face-to-face, semi-structured, tape-recorded interviews with 15 open-ended questions. The SCL-90-R was analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 10, guided by Derogatis's (1983) booklet guide. The 163 interviews were transcribed verbatim, typed on Microsoft Word and analyzed qualitatively using thematic and content analyses according to the guidelines of the phenomenological method. Descriptive statistics, Kruskal-Wallis Tests, Spearman Correlation Coefficients, and multiple regressions were used to analyze the Derogatis SCL-90-R. A comparison of the major findings of the current study with the findings of relevant previous national and international research was presented.

Analyses of the SCL-90-R indicated that unmarried Palestinian women in the current study have more psychological problems as represented through the 3 indices and 9 symptom dimensions of the SCL-90-R, than do Palestinian women in general, and more than the female normative group studied by Derogatis (1983). The findings indicated that about one-third of the respondents complained of moderate and above rates of psychological distress on the SCL-90-R's 'global severity index' and the eight of the nine symptom dimensions. Being highly educated and being in employment were associated with better mental health among the unmarried respondents in the current study. The lower the educational level of the unmarried woman, the more emotional and psychological complaints she is likely to have. Unemployed and poorly educated participants were likely to have more psychological problems than employed and highly educated women. Other independent variables were significant under some circumstances, including family composition, place of living and the age of the participants.

The analysis of the interviews indicated that there were multiple reasons for remaining single in the Palestinian society that included sociocultural, psychological, financial, familial, and personal factors. On the other hand, most of the respondents approved that marriage is better than singlehood despite its difficulties and excessive responsibilities. The majority of the respondents were harassed, restricted in living and movement, were censured by their families and society in general, which augmented their feeling of estrangement and alienation in their society. The respondents of the current study varied in their feelings and self-perception as a reaction to remaining unmarried. Some were proud, satisfied, and assertive about themselves, while the others had feelings of sadness, inferiority, worry, oversensitivity, loneliness, insecurity, pessimism or uncertainty about their future and their families. Somatization, withdrawal, interpersonal difficulties, aggression, and escape mechanisms were common reactions and behaviours that were reported by the respondents. However, the feelings and reactions of the unmarried women to remaining unmarried were related to the manner in which they were treated by society and their families, and their own attitudes about remaining single.

In terms of how they compared themselves to other women, there were no consistent findings as some respondents believed they were more fortunate or less fortunate than other women in their communities. Being educated, employed, independent, assertive and getting one's family's support and understanding had positive influence on the self-perception of the respondents in the current study. Despite the negative feelings that were reported by many respondents, very few had ever consulted a mental health professional or sought counseling. Special consideration should be given to the emotional needs and psychological problems of unmarried Palestinian women. This is a challenging area for mental health professionals and family health care providers. Implications were discussed in relation to mental health practice, social systems and social organizations, and further research with emphasis on gender in health care was recommended.

This was the first study in Palestinian society that explored self-perception and the mental health state of the unmarried women. In addition, the present study could be the first study of its kind in Arab countries as far as the literature shows, which investigated "remaining unmarried after age 25" among women and focused on the state of their mental health.