

**Sociological inquiry into the lives of
Never-Married Women: A Study of Sikkim**

A Thesis Submitted
To
Sikkim University



In the Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By
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DECLARATION

I, **Naina Thatal**, hereby declare that the research work embodied in the thesis entitled
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Sikkim**” submitted to Sikkim University for the Award of the degree of **Doctor of
Philosophy**, is my original work. Any content or any part of this thesis has not been
submitted to any other institution for any academic purposes.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Naina Thatal'.

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis entitled “**Sociological inquiry into the lives of Never-Married Women: A Study of Sikkim**” submitted to Sikkim University for the partial fulfilment of the degree of **Doctor of Philosophy** in the **Department of Sociology**, embodies the result of bonafide research work carried out by **Mrs. Naina Thatal** under my guidance and supervision. No part of the thesis has been submitted for any Degree, Diploma, Association and fellowship.

All assistance and help received during the course of investigation have been duly acknowledge by her. We recommend that the thesis be placed before the entertainers for evaluation.

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*This thesis is dedicated to my
'Mother'*

For her endless love, support and encouragement...

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ASMR	Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response
BDO	Block Development Officer's
BPL	Below Poverty Line
COI	Certificate of Identification
CORO	Committee of Resource Organization
CSIS	Centre for Strategic and International Studies
ENSS	Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan
FGD	Focus Group discussion
HDI	Human Development Index
ICDS	Integrated Child Development Services
IGNOAPS	Indira Gandhi National Old Age Pension Scheme
IT	Industrial Training
JICA	Japan International Cooperation Agency
JOY	Just Older Youth
MGNREGA	Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act
NEDFI	National Eastern Development Finance Corporation Limited
NFHS	National Family Health Survey

NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
PIL	Public Interest Litigation
PWDs	Public Works Department
RCI	Rehabilitation Council of India
SEC	Socio-Economic Census
SHDR	Sikkim Human Development Report
SHG	Self Help Group
SNFHS	Sikkim National Family Health Survey
SSEC	Sikkim Socio-Economic Census
SSC	Sikkim Subject Certificate
SSS	Spastic Society of Sikkim
SUWPS	Sikkim Unmarried Women Pension Scheme
SVSS	Sikkim Vikalang Sahayata Samiti
UN	United Nation
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
US	United States
WHO	World Health Organization

Summary

The following thesis “Sociological inquiry into the lives of Never-married Women: A study of Sikkim” attempts to unfold the lives of women who have opted for an alternative to marriage in the small state of Sikkim. The main objective behind this research is to study the socio-cultural milieu, factors behind its increase, to explore the lived experience, and their support mechanisms of never-married women in the state.

This thesis has been divided into six chapters. The **First chapter** introduces the research topic, the study contains the overview of Never-married women, conceptual and theoretical framework, thematic literature review in the Western context, South-East Asia, Indian context as well as in the context of Sikkim. It also includes rationale of the study, the research questions, objectives, research methods, techniques, and limitations of the study.

The **Second chapter** title, 'Socio-cultural background of Never-married women in Sikkim,' highlights the historical backdrop of the Monarchical setup and Post Merger era. The settlement of three ethnic communities in the state, such as Lepcha, Bhutia, and Nepali, majorly focusing on the historicity, family lineage, social norms, and structure of each community have been described assiduously. Shifting towards the general overview of women in Sikkim, focusing on socio-economic profile and legal property rights. The profile of the respondents has been divided into eight components as Age, Education, Occupation, Monthly income, social groups, Religion, Decision making and Head of the Household. The empirical observation showed that with the growing age the number of never-married women increased because the likelihood of marrying diminishes and the prospects to remain single increases. It is also found that

the respondents with higher level of education were never-married as profession becomes priority where marriage becomes optional for never-married women in Sikkim. Majority of the respondent felt that marriage is just optional and if given a chance then would choose career over marriage. This particular chapter reflects the social and cultural patterns never-married women in the Sikkimese society.

The **Third chapter** entitled, "Factors Associated with Singlehood in Sikkim- A Symbolic Interactionist Inquiry," discusses the overall factors contributing to the never-married women in Sikkim. The factors have been studied with the help of Herbert Blumer's Symbolic Interactionism which mainly talks about the three premises, in order to investigate the underlying causes. Further, the factors have been divided into primary and secondary factors. Primary factors deal with the significant part which is responsible for the generation of never-married in the state. Including age, education, occupation, religion, culture and health.

The age of the respondent plays a substantial part in deciding one's marriage. Another important factor that leads to never-married status among women is Education, because it is found that women who have pursued higher education hinder their marriage prospects and the focus on opting higher and made women more independent in-terms of financial and selective in choosing partner for marriage.

Occupation, religion, culture, and health which is discussed further in a detailed manner. Secondary factors focus on the psychological reasons behind never-married women. It entails responsibility, preference, fear, the groom's demand, less parental pressure, and bonds. This part of chapter is crucial as it opens up the layers of factors from both the macro and micro perspectives of singlehood in relation to Symbolic Interactionism.

The **Fourth chapter** entitled, "Lived experiences and Interpretative analysis of Never-married women in Sikkim," deals with the theoretical and in-depth interviews taken from 30 never-married women belonging to East and South districts of Sikkim. These two districts have the highest percentage of never-married women in the state. Therefore, 15 respondents from each district have been chosen for the in-depth study.

To augment phenomenological essence in the study, Paul Ricoeur's theory have been included to understand and explore the lived experience of the never-married women in Sikkim. Ricoeur's theory talks about the Hermeneutic phenomenology which helps to study lived experience through the use of language.

As Language is the main medium of understanding and executing the lived experience of an individual. Therefore, five salient themes have been identified from the study: i) Self and Independence, ii) Crossing Marriageable age, iii) Parent's Outlook and approach, iv) Challenges faced and, v) Acceptance. These themes have been arranged in such a manner which attempts to comprehend an individualistic life towards singlehood, then towards social groups like parents and societal challenges.

The **Fifth chapter**, "Support Mechanism of Never-married Women in Sikkim," highlights two sections of the study; the first half focuses on the Sources of support for never-married women in the Sikkimese society. This study attempts to identify various sources of support for never-married women in different societies; Western, Indian and Sikkimese societies. This chapter attempts to locate three sources of support mechanism found among the never-married women in Sikkim. The three sources are: Social, Economic and Emotional Support. In the second section, the perception of Sikkimese society on never-married women have been discussed and segregated into: Perception of Married men and women, young unmarried men and

women, Parents and Siblings. Their viewpoint on singlehood reflects the environment and lifestyle provided to these never-married women that live in Sikkimese society. The link between society and individual play a vital role in establishing the social relationship.

The last **Sixth chapter** is Conclusion, where all the summary of chapters, findings, and analysis have been given comprehensively. Some of the actual results have been mentioned herewith. This thesis is the study of never-married women living in the Himalayas of Sikkim. It focuses on the broad area of the social, cultural, and economic aspects of the research. The aim is to explore and articulate the increasing numbers of singlehood in the state and their consequences on the marital status of women in the Sikkimese society. The research produce in this area is limited and thus requires in-depth study from the lens of sociology; therefore, the holistic nature of inquiry demands the sociological understanding of never-married women in Sikkim. Sikkim is the dweller of three ethnic communities, namely: Lepcha, Bhutia, and Nepali communities.

In the case of theoretical framework, I have compiled two essential theories in the study: Paul Ricoeur's Phenomenological (Hermeneutics) and Herbert Blumer's Symbolic Interactionism. These two different theories have been beneficial in the present study. The reason is to mainly explore the lived experience of never-married women living in Sikkim. Their several years of single life and what they have faced in their day-to-day lives are essential in this research. Ricoeur's Hermeneutics investigates the experiences through language and cognition by conducting in-depth interviews. According to Ricoeur, "Language is crucial to our existence and experience of the world." A person becomes aware of their participation in the world by speaking about it. Language is fundamental to human existence because it is

neither a symbol nor a concept. Thus, lived experience and recognition of being in the world are expressed through language. Secondly, Symbolic Interactionism helps to understand the dual process of interaction, the link between individual and society. It is a micro-level theory that focuses on the interpretation of texts and later focuses on the interaction. The main idea of the research is to extract the lived experiences of never-married women and their relationship with society. It is qualitative research; his work has motivated working narratives and interpretation. The theory of interpretation is used to understand the journey of the lived experience of never-married women, which incorporates language, reflection, understanding, and the self. The field method used in the thesis is the mixed study, i.e., both qualitative and quantitative methods. Primary data has been collected through semi-structured interviews, which include both open-ended and closed-ended questions. Questionnaires, field notes, and interview schedules are opted to understand the singleness of familial/friends' relationships, education, employment, and lifestyle. Proportionate sampling has been used to select the sample size for the research. The sampling has been done by snowball method because the never-married women form a kind of network that makes it easy to trace these women. Out of 2,477 the total never-married female in South and East districts population, only 10 percent of the population has been studied, 250 respondents belonging to age 40 and above have been selected for the study.

This thesis narrates, discusses and analyses how the never-married women in Sikkim use their socio-cultural and ethnic lives to form a different social status in Sikkimese society. It's a complicated terrain in-term of aspirations, social expectation and individuality. The never-married women defy the structurally embedded notion of

marriage and accept the status of singlehood. This projects a positive attitude towards their singlehood status which reflects their supportive role of family and friends.

The various reasons behind women opting for never-married life such as political demarcation for marriage, education disabling one not to get married and negligence of parents on part of Sikkim have been extensively discussed in the study. On a similar note, the challenges and the perception of society towards never-married women have also been explored further.

This thesis contests the micro and limited frameworks that have been used to study the region, highlighting various reasons and factors contributing to the growth of the never-married group in the state of Sikkim. The thesis narrates, discusses and analyses an in-depth study of how Never-married women in Sikkim, forms a nexus, constructs social relationships, and mark an identity in the state, using a symbolic approach. The diversity of societal outcomes among never-married group reveals the complexities of singlehood and the symbiotic relationship between never-married women and the state.

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Background

Humans have always considered marriage and motherhood as the utmost priorities in the making of a woman. Across the world and in almost all cultures, they happen to be the most ubiquitous norms for women. Marriage, defined as a union between a man and woman, in a social structure, signifies the beginning of family life and is considered to be a factor that brings to a person a sense of belongingness. Marriage and family are two cornerstones, after which society expects the married couple to reproduce and grow their family.

Suitable potential marriage partners are largely defined by cultural expectations. In Indian society, married couples practice the virilocal system where before a woman's marriage, she lives by her father's edict and after marriage transitions to live with her husband's. The foundations of Indian marriage lie in a deep-rooted patriarchal system which assigns the woman the duties of a homemaker and the man, the duties of the bread-earner. This system and her place in it, regards her as inferior and her husband as the superior one in the marriage. The males in the household are frequently given authority and decision-making responsibilities (Geetha, 2000). According to Karl Marx, authority is kept by the masculine group, who then utilize it to control women and families. This power often manifests itself in the form of authority and ideas, resulting in what Gramsci refers to as "cultural hegemony" (Gramsci, 1971). In ancient marriage, especially among the Hindus, marriage meant for progeny and carrying out necessary responsibilities, known as *dharma* so that the four primary purposes of human existence could be achieved.

Women's freedom and decision-making powers have been restricted by society's long and deeply-ingrained sexism. Her role is specific: where she limits herself to only domestic and reproductive labour; a conspicuous exhibition of patriarchy and power supremacy that plays a major role in Indian society's strong marriage prescriptions for women. The tasks of child-rearing and the housework, which are assigned to women, help to sustain women's subjugation (Arker, 1992). In a highly-orthodox society like the Indian society, there are many areas of state machinery that forces a woman to reveal her marital status. In most cases, that exposes a deep-seated hyper-patriarchy, a woman's *gotra* identity has to change after marriage, meaning that marriage serves as a reminder that an unmarried woman is forced to social, religious and occupational distinctions. Feminists like Vena Das, Margaret Mead succinctly put their points forward about how marriage should not be understood in physical and social terms alone, like reproduction, moral and ethical rules but must instead be seen as the unification of both body and mind. Therefore, marriage should not be a mandatory affair nor a parameter for respect. As a whole, it plays a major role in determining the growth rate of population through its linkage to marital fertility (Goswami, 2012). A woman's identity cannot be separated from her marital status, for as a woman's age increases, her marriage is considered "late marriage" and her chances of never-marrying increases.

On the one hand, theorists' view never-married women as deviant, against nature i.e., the gender-traitors standing against procreation and adding to the imbalance in sex ratio and health-related problems (Gordon, 1994). The absence of marriage leads to disregard of social norms (Cockrum & White, 1985). However, on the other side, it also signifies greater acceptance of premarital sex, individualism, less domestic violence and divorce, decision-making powers, higher education and

career enhancement. As people slowly shifted their focus from marriage, they became more independent of each other and remained single longer (Cherlin, 1990). In light of this backdrop, both the pros and cons of singlehood makes a never-married group a unique social status which has found its way into this contemporary era of single lives.

The research done on these subjects lays the framework for a more in-depth look into the lives of Sikkim's never-married women through a sociological lens. It defines changing societal roles of women which previously called for mothers to define her womanhood into Sikkimese society. This often leaves women staying single beyond the normative age of marriage choosing an alternative to the present status of singlehood. A certain section of women chooses not to comply with society's expectations from a woman that seeks to bracket her as 'wife', 'daughter-in-law', and 'mother'. "*When are you planning to get married?*" is a question that most women need to tackle within their lives over and over, in fact used as a rhetoric to subtly enforce this institution on women.

This question serves as a constant reminder of a woman's ageing and her depleting ovaries, the end of her child-bearing years. For a decade, the stereotype associated with marriage and women has been a topic of debate. Thus, the insignificant population of women who have found an alternative to marriage have chosen singlehood. This does not mean that all women who don't marry embrace singlehood happily, some have little choice due to familial obligation and financial constraints. There are a variety of reasons why women do not marry, based on individual circumstances and choices. Another factor which is essential for marriage is timing and age because if this is not met by societal standards, then consequently, some proportion remains unmarried or marriage is delayed (Goswami, 2012). As a result of

this social transformation, the category of “never-married women” is becoming more defined.

The present study focuses mainly on women who have never been married in their lives, also called never-married women. The term ‘never-married’ is extracted from the Census of India. The status of never-married does not fall under the categories of divorced, separated, widow, and single mother. The number of never-married women has been growing in Sikkim, which is a small state situated in the tiny hilly terrain, sharing an international border with China in the north, Nepal in the west, parts of Nepal and Bhutan in the east, and in the south with Bengal. (see below).

Map no.1.1: Map of Sikkim in India surrounded by International Borders. (Not to scale)



Sources: <http://aldertoursntravels.com/> Bhutia, Sonam. (2020).

Sikkim is exceptional in terms of its geography and population, with around 6,10,577 inhabitants and is the least populous state in India. The geographical area is 7,096 sq. km. It lies in the Eastern Himalaya, with the world's third-highest peak Mt. Kanchenjunga is located on its border with Nepal.

Traditionally, Sikkim was a kingdom and later became the 22nd state of the Indian Union on 26th April 1975. After the merger, the state located in the Northeast region with other seven states popularly known as 'seven sisters. In 2002, it became the eighth state along with other northeast states. Therefore, it becomes evitable to study never-married women belonging to Northeast states. The percentage of never-married women belonging to North-East states of age group 40 years and above are as follows: Mizoram (5.09), Nagaland (5.02), Manipur (4.38), Meghalaya (3.56), Assam (2.74), Arunachal Pradesh (2.69) and Tripura (1.61) (Census,2011).Although there is a growing percentage of never-married women in North-East states of India, the never-married women in Sikkim are different because of its diverse ethnic communities (Lepcha, the Bhutia, and the Nepali communities), religion and most importantly the social structure. According to the 2011 Census of India, the population of never-married women belonging to the age group 40 and above in Sikkim constitutes (5.6 percent) much higher than the national average i.e. (1.52 percent). In India, only 0.38 percent increase from 2001 (1.14 percent) to 2011 (1.52 percent).

The traditional taboo attached with singlehood stigmatizes women as 'incomplete' and 'lonely' and sometimes even bars them from auspicious events like marriage and festivals (Gupta, 2017). These dominant marriage practices among 'mainstream India' have also been reasons why women prefer to tie the knot with strangers than get stereotyped. Therefore, only a handful of the population has opted for never-married

status with an impact on the marriage patterns in Indian society specially on the emerging late marriage practices among educated women and the increased choice of career over marriage.

However, the number of never-married women in Sikkim has increased¹ drastically within forty years (Census 1971-2011). Sikkimese women who have crossed the ‘marriageable age’ have chosen a never-married life. Historically, early marriage was rampant among people of Sikkim resulting in increased drop-out rates² as women did not complete their education and opted for marriage for better livelihood. The National Commission for Women in Sikkim reports, that young females were deprived of the opportunity to obtain higher education as it involved moving out of the villages, districts, and the state. This pattern brought forth low education and limited job opportunities, while late marriages were a rare phenomenon. Over the years, the changing socio-cultural lives of women and the reasons behind this change became major concerns of this study. The gradual shift in the attitudes of women towards marriage and the growing percentage of never-married women in Sikkim raise various questions like: what are the factors leading to such an increase, why are women choosing to remain single, what is the symbolic meaning attached to being never-married and what are their lived experiences and their support mechanisms, and so on. These are a few of the numerous questions which have initiated the present research study. It becomes relevant to look into the changing socio-economic realities impacted by wider structural transformations. Therefore, the present study is an

¹As per the Census of India, between the years 1971 to 2011 the percentage of never-married women belonging to age groups 40 and above increased from 2.04% to 5.6%.

²In 1979-80 and 1991-92, the subtle increase of 4.5 percent in girls ‘enrolment in Primary level compared to Pre-Primary level was found due to high drop-outs of girls’ student compared to their male counterpart due to various reasons like traditional values, assumption of domestic and child care activities from an early age, segregation from male, lack of income and poverty.

attempt to understand the never-married woman's in-depth experience of single life, the factors behind her not marrying and the perception of Sikkimese society.

1.2 Overview of Never-Married Women

Contextualizing the issues of never-married, Western scholars have studied women's never-married status in various socio-cultural contexts. Simpson (1988) discussed it from a psychological perspective where the 'never-married' group reflects traumatic childhoods resulting from negative experiences with parents, and exhibits an avoidant or anxious attachment style. Some of the theories and research works on the sociology of emotions suggest that if single women are socially perceived as lonely then they are likely to perceive themselves as lonely (McCarthy, 1989).

People's expectations and desires for social relations are affected by social norms and cultural prescriptions. Burnley and Kurth (1989) stresses on the social relationship of singles and how it is important in their life. The need for friendships and familial relationships is higher for singles.

In some societies, the sociological force which influences mate selection is backed by socio-economic status such as men tend to marry "down" according to socio-economic status, while women tend to marry "up" by these same standards. Men are chosen by women based on their economic stability whereas women are chosen on their physical appearance (Waehler, 1991).

Brien's (1991) choice-based analysis emphasized the balances of pros and cons i.e., between staying single and getting married. Single people value independence, loneliness, privacy and freedom differently from married people. The older never-married males show three defense mechanisms that keep them isolated from others: avoidance, isolation, and distortion. On the contrary, older never-married

women are happier and more fulfilled than their married counterparts. Schwenk (1992) found that among women aged 65 years or older, the never-married women are highly educated and have higher income and more wealth.

Green and Owens (2003) elaborately discuss class and ownership of landholdings, which were not given to single middle-class women of Britain. Here, the ideological underpinning notion was patriarchy which distinctively dichotomized men and women's domains in terms of public and private spheres respectively, men as the breadwinner and women as the care-giver and nurturer of the family. This dichotomized gendered ideology shaped the creation of a class distinction among women by de-legitimising their social acceptance in the public domain, and more particularly, impacted on the acceptance of single, widowed women.

In contrast to the above views, in some parts of the United States and Europe, 'never-married' was often seen as a respectable alternative to marriage for women, in particular, when women were willing to devote their lives to the service of others (Chambers-Schiller, 1984). An increase in job and educational opportunities for women and the removal of the stigma for sex outside marriage are some of the reasons for increasing proportion of singles in contemporary society (Sheridan & Salaff, 1984). The rise in the number of singles is a phenomenon which can be seen as a direct response to dissatisfaction with traditional marriage. The decline of the economic and ideological bases for traditional marriage implies that men and women no longer have to marry for sexual and emotional needs, and women no longer have to marry to get financial support (Edwards & Hoover, 1974).

The changes in the societal outlook towards women's never-married status provide women with greater freedom and independence in their choices, which in turn

also acts as a major contributing factor towards the shift in attitudes about the desirability and necessity of marriage itself (Campbell, 2003).

Across 192 countries, the percentage of single people of age 30 years had increased from 15 percent in 1970 to 24 percent in the 1990s. The increase in percentage was greater for developed countries (World Fertility Report, 2003).

In the past, the never-married group were considered deviant or not fit for normal adult roles. The biggest problem faced by the never-married group was that they constituted an ill-defined minority group that exhibited a conspicuous deviant pattern of functioning in terms of the dominant value system and the structural designs of American society. According to Waehler (1991), the choices of marriage partners for men and women are very unequal: there is a tendency for men to marry less educated and socially privileged women while women select men who are higher on the social economic ladder.

1.3 Spinster, Single and Never-Married Women

The definition of 'single' given by the Oxford English Dictionary (2013), "People who are unmarried or not involved in a stable sexual relationship." Therefore, single refers to both men and women who may or may not be in a relationship, and are not married as this group includes widow, divorced, separated, or never-married (Byrne, 2000; Ibrahim & Hassan, 2009). The word "never-married singles" refers to a person who is not married and has crossed the marriageable age.

The term 'spinster' originated in the 1900s and referred to the low task job of spinning cloth, a duty reserved for never-married women who worked to earn their living (Mustard, 2000). This term had a negative connotation due to the patriarchal dominance in society (Chambers-Schiller, 1984). Later, the word 'spinster' was

basically used to identify women who were not married, unwed mothers, middle aged and helpless (Stolk, 1981). The term was collectively used to separate and label many diverse women based on their marital status alone (Mustard 2000). The never-married women were stereotyped and their independence was controlled by society. The never-married women over the age of 30 were viewed as unacceptable, disgraceful, and distressed. It was thought that never-married women over 30 were barren, unfulfilled, and deficient in personal and social adjustment, possibly to the point of pathology (Stolk 1981; Cargan 1986).

In early England, the formal documents identified women through marital status who had either spinster or wife, widow, daughter or servant of somebody (Weiner, 1976). In order to distinguish between the term 'spinster' and 'single', Macvarish (2006) explains that 'spinster' had a negative connotation such as 'dried up', 'bitter', 'ugly' and 'eccentric'. The term itself was stigmatising because society viewed the permanent singleness in a denigrated form; not chosen by man, rejected for marriage and even a burden for the parents. Single women hesitate to state their status of singleness as it is uncertain. On the other hand, the term 'single woman' is more acceptable in society than 'spinster' because it is inclusive of various social categories such as non-married or waiting to be married, divorcee, widow and separated.

Predominantly, the term 'single women' does not disregard a woman based on her marital status. Few authors³ have also used the term 'spinster' instead of 'single' in order to understand the social stigma faced by such women, to portray the voices of women struggling with their unmarried status and to reveal the intrinsic perceptions of society. Similarly, other researchers (Reynar, 1986; Brien, 1991; Simon, 1991; Li and

³Wiener, 1976; Holmes, 1998; Mustard, 2000; Green and Owen, 2003)

Newcomer,1996; Froide, 2007; Sharp & Ganong, 2011) have used the term ‘never-married’ to define heterosexual people who have not married so far and would never marry also in the future. The different usages of the terms: ‘single’, ‘never-married’ and ‘spinster’ gives analogous meanings and holds status quo for women as it becomes essential to comprehend the milieu of this social category and have a holistic idea of singleness.

In the present times, both sexes are free to choose a single lifestyle without any hesitation and these choices are perceived as normal in society. Therefore, marriage is not the ultimate goal for a woman in order to have a happy life. This is very different from the past, when women were neglected and taken as surplus population if not married. It was a huge decision for women to remain unmarried lifelong. Single women have been accepted in present-day society but still, even today, many single women often feel neglected and ignored.

A never-married woman can definitely lead a happy life and marriage is no longer marked as the first honourable status for women. Consequently, there is a decreasing social pressure for marriage among women in this century.

During the early 20th century, never-married women were not allowed to own property and were required to transfer their income to male relatives; they were also forced to work to fulfill family obligations such as being caretakers and housekeepers, that is how the term “old maid” originated (Mustard 2000). Never-married women have been stereotyped as “deserted, losers, pitiful, dry, deficient, sexually available to men, promiscuous, and deviant” (Stolk, 1981; Watkins, 1984; Cargan, 1986). According to Cargan (1986), single women were seen as either unable to find a partner or disconnected from society. According to Simon (1987), a study conducted

on 50 women, regarded them as “deviants,” or “outcasts”. In remaining single, they deviated from a powerful cultural norm and 94-95 percent of their age cohort conformed to that norm. Deviation from social norms can often bring various types of negative stereotypes, one of which for singles is being sexual deviant. Cargan (1986) in his work mentions that single women have more sexual partners than married women. When women are sexually active in ways that society views as negative, they are referred to as “sluts.” The “slut” designation is just as negatively viewed by society as the “spinster” designation.

Never-married women, once they cross the marriageable age, are perceived as problematic and lacking in the fields of intimacy and motherhood (Mustard 2000; Hamilton et al., 2006). Singles are stigmatised branded as ‘lonesome’ and treated as invisible beings lacking social approbation from society. Some evidence suggests that singleness is increasingly being viewed as normal, though the never-married still continue to be marginalized. There is increasing acceptance towards never-married women yet society sees them as more subordinate than never-married men (Keith, 1986).

1.4 Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Research work on the never-married is a new field/subject of enquiry; it lacks conceptual clarification and formulation from the disciplinarian conceptualisation of sociology. Illustratively, for instance, never-married is a normative and expected social role in youth and early adulthood (Campbell, 2003). In the definition of singlehood, other terms are also being used synonymously to identify the singlehood status of women, the literature review made a note that scholars like Wiener, 1976; Trimberger, 2005; Fincher, 2014 have used terms like ‘spinster’, ‘single’ and

‘leftover’ to describe women who has crossed the marriageable age and have not been married throughout.

However, such usages of synonymous terminologies are often laden with stigmatised negative connotations without much clarification. Therefore, the conceptual definition of singlehood in this research is mainly concerned with women who are ‘never-married’ and not engaged/committed to any long-term relationship and do not have children (born out of wedlock/adoption). This definition does not include the social category of single mothers, divorcees, separated women and widows. The age range of women from 18-39 years old are also excluded from the purview of this definition; though by definition they come under the singlehood status yet their status is of temporal nature, for which reason they are defined sociologically as ‘single women’. Henceforth, for the present research work, the term ‘never-married’ has been employed to represent those women who are within the age framework of 40 and above. The definition is borrowed from the 2001 Census of India but conceptualised from a sociological standpoint to suit the purpose of the research.

In this present research, the lives of the never-married singles and their experiences differ, from one individual to another. Their lived experiences are captured through personal narratives. Their imagination and memories occur in the formation of singlehood which becomes essential in the present research. The life stories and accounts of singlehood experiences have been validated as an approach to understand both the experiences of individuals, and of groups, who share a common phenomenon of singlehood. The narratives derived from the in-depth study creates meaning as life unfolds and as new circumstances present themselves. Thus, the narrative is told and retold at a point in time: hence a narrative always reflects the temporal, physical, social and emotional context of the narrator. The main idea of the

research is to identify how individuals are perceiving the situations that they are facing, and how they are making sense of their personal and social world (Smith & Osborn, 2015).

Lived experience has been an important concept for the academician in Social Science research. It has helped the scholars to dig into the greater depth of the participants in the study. “The term lived experience is used to describe first-hand accounts in the research” (Hoerger, 2016). The word ‘experience’ has been derived from German language *Erleben* meaning to grasp when something is alive.

Paul Ricoeur provides a link between phenomenology and hermeneutics. In his work, he focused on textual interpretations as the primary aim of hermeneutics and developed a theory of interpretation in which he took into account language, reflection, understanding, and the self (Ricoeur, 1976; 1984). He combined phenomenology with a critical hermeneutic philosophy, making it possible to come to a realisation from a text and reach a new understanding through critical interpretation (Ricoeur, 1976).

According to Ricoeur, the phenomenological assumptions are that language is not merely a system, but that it articulates lived experiences. Therefore, new recognition of being-in-the-world can be achieved. Furthermore, Ricoeur emphasizes that language is crucial to our existence and experiences of the world. He states that a person becomes aware of his or her participation in the world by talking about it (ibid).

In addition, language is central, in the sense that it is neither a sign nor a concept, but an expression of impressions which include experiences of how we are affected and thereby moved in a situation. This subjectivity is central to the characteristic of

Ricoeur's thinking. Thus, the lived experience and recognition of being in the world are expressed through language.

Thus, the present research explores the background of singlehood in Sikkim shared by the storytellers, before giving an overview of Paul Ricoeur's interpretative phenomenological approach and research process used to understand the lived experience of being a never-married woman in Sikkimese society.

Symbolic Interactionism

The three premises of Symbolic Interactionism are crucial for understanding women's singlehood and how society perceives these never-married women. The meaning of singlehood differs from one individual to another. It has various social understandings as per one's experiences and situation.

Firstly, "human beings act toward things on the basis of meanings that things have for them", these things be a physical object, other human beings, or social groups/categories, institutions, ideologies, or even the actions of others towards them (Blumer, 1969). In this premise the consciousness of the individual about how he/she perceives and interprets the objects in the surrounding is a key element. In other words, how he/she gives meaning, judges and makes decisions is the primacy of Blumer's first premise of interactionism.

In case of symbols, meanings also depend on a degree of consensual responses between two or more people. However, in practice, the meanings of things are highly variable and depend on processes of interpretation and negotiation of the interactants. The focus here is on meaning, which is defined in terms of action and its consequences (reflecting the influence of pragmatism).

Secondly, “the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one’s fellows”, so as to say that meanings are created and redefined in a social setting through interaction with others and not inherited (ibid).

Finally, the third premise argues that “these meanings of things are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters” (ibid).

Blumer’s three premises of symbolic interaction has been used for understanding the lived experiences of never-married women of social realities and their social relationships in their daily lives. These premises mainly deal with the microscopic side of society; nonetheless, it is our everyday lives, the everyday worlds through interaction and communication, that we create order and meaning in our daily lives (Turner, 2001). For Blumer, meanings are intersubjective, perceived and constantly reinterpreted among individuals. Therefore, in order to understand the societal perception of singlehood in Sikkimese society and how never-married women create the meaning of their status and understand the social reality, it depends in part on the content of the messages and situations she encounters and interprets. These interpretations occur in the context of past messages the individual has received from the society (Farley & Flota, 2012).

In order to study the lived experiences of never-married women belonging to age 40 and above, it is essential to explore their past experiences and shared moments of their life affecting decisions to remain single lifelong. The aim of the study was also not to generalise but to focus on the perspective of women with reference to their daily experiences of being single. Nonetheless, it is the interpretation of these never-

married women with different sets of past experiences that frequently interpret the same message or situation differently.

However, to have an exhaustive comprehension of the lived experiences of the never-married women, Ricoeur's phenomenology is important to incorporate, in the present study.

These two aspects of interactionist perspective are important, as how these never-married women perceive and realised their individual self is very much important in understanding their lived experiences at the same time, because of their perception of this individual self and how they present themselves in the life world by managing their impression which is helpful in the study.

1.5 Review of Literature

Singlehood has developed as a new phenomenon and an alternative to marriage (Stein, 1975; Spreitzer and Riley, 1974; Forsyth and Johnson, 1995). The increase in the number of single individuals has gained attention from thinkers and social scientists. Therefore, through this review of literature, an attempt is being made to discuss the origin, concepts and the meaning of the term never-married across the globe. It becomes pertinent to understand singlehood in a thematic way at the Western, South Asian, national, and regional level.

1.5.1 Western Studies on Never-Married Women

In the Western European countries, there is a delayed marriage pattern, 10-20 percent of women remained single (Hanjnal 1965; Therborn 2004). In medieval Europe, the proportion of women contributing to one-third of adult women was single. The concept of late marriages in the northern part of Europe where the age of husband and

wife is similar as they would delay their marriage to save up money for their separate household (Bennett & Froide, 1999).

As per an U.N Report 2010, the percentages of women belonging to the particular age group 45-49 years from 8 continents who have never-married are as follows: (14.1) percent in Australia and New Zealand, (13.4) percent in Latin America and the Caribbean (10.8) percent in Europe and North America, (6.1) percent in Sub-Saharan Africa, (4.8) percent in Northern Africa and Western Asia, 3.7 percent in Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand), (2.5) percent in Eastern and South-Eastern Asia, and lastly (1.1) percent in Central and Southern Asia. In all these eight regions, the percentage of women who have never married has increased in the two decades between 1990 and 2010.

The biggest increase occurred in Australia and New Zealand, a remarkable increase of 9.7 percentage points, from just 4.4 percent in 1990 to 14.1 percent in 2010. Whereas, only 0.2 percent in Central and Southern Asia (DePaulo, 2019). Thus, the percentage of singles has been increasing across regions.

In US, the unmarried individuals of age 30 and above have been increasing at a faster rate, this growth of the singles has been termed as 'single boom' which includes late marriage age and 'retreat from marriage' for many (Ahuvia & Adelman, 1992; Lichter et al., 1995; Manning & Smock, 1995; Frazier et al., 1996; US Census Bureau, 2006). There are various reasons behind the late age of marriage such as level of education, economic opportunities for women, the rise in popularity, availability, and acceptability of birth control, changing sexual norms, and a strong ideology of individualism (Ahuvia & Adelman 1992; Frazier et al., 1996; Hamilton et al., 2006).

In some parts of the United States and Europe, singlehood was often seen as a respectable alternative to marriage for women, in particular when women were willing to devote their lives to the service of others (Chambers-Schiller, 1984) women. Later in the 19th Century, a section among the upper and middle-class single women in colonial America became associated with a 'cult of single blessedness'. The cult of 'single blessedness' was a movement among educated single women to bring dignity in their lives and to their non-married situations. This legacy of single blessedness emphasized on singlehood as a choice for women in the middle and upper classes (Adams, 1976).

Studies have found that people who are committed to their career and ambitions will find marriage secondary and will not marry before the age of 25. Thus, marriage timing is affected by career and the more time one requires to settle, the more the marriage is delayed (Lichter 1990; Frazier et al., 1996; Hamilton and Gordon 2006). In fact, in comparison to men, women have higher chances of delaying marriage, especially while pursuing graduation (Frazier et al., 1996; Hamilton and Gordon 2006). The growth in the number of singles is also linked to the increased participation of women in the workforce (Simon 1987; Lichter et al., 1995).

In marriage markets, the working woman has more chances of marrying a man of high position and leading a good life but marriage markets do not give assurance to those unmarried women with low status. Although entering the workforce may increase the likelihood of marrying a man with high status, it may actually decrease the overall likelihood of marriage, primarily because educated women are finding it more difficult to find mates with equal educational attainment (Berg-Cross et al., 2004).

Career and socio-economic status play a vital part in establishing one's identity and position in society. Women with high socio-economic statuses and secure jobs have better positions in society whereas the ones who lack both, may adopt spinsterhood, as a pre-defined role (Stolk, 1981). There are various reasons for women delaying marriage but the most significant reasons among them are education and career opportunities.

With the rise in singles, the concept of cohabitation has also increased leading to never-married and unwed mothers (Manning and Smock, 1995). Cohabitation refers to the act of sharing a household by an unmarried couple (Macionis, 2006). Researchers (Rindfuss, 1990; Manning and Smock, 1995) have shown that young unmarried women are choosing to live with a heterosexual partner in a relationship resembling marriage before they marry. According to the US Census report of 2006, there are subtle increases in cohabitation rates along with increases in the average age at first marriage, for instance; women belonging to age group 30-34 years have opted for cohabitation. This may be due to more social acceptance of marriage and non-marriage, and a shift from viewing cohabitation as a youthful vacation from commitment to seeing it as a valid life choice (Toulemon, 1997). It has become an option for people who don't choose marriage but rather go for cohabitation, leading to rise in never-married women of age 30 and above (Manning and Smock 1995; Toulemon, 1997). Manning and Smock (1995) compare cohabitation rates with that of marriage and show that couples are choosing to remain in committed relationships without the formal union of marriage.

Tanfer (1987) opines that the rise in cohabitation in the United States, may be a suitable alternative to marriage for women who choose this lifestyle. Because marriage creates obligations and expectations that bind brides, grooms, and their

extended families together, women may choose cohabitation over marriage to simplify their lives and leave their options open (Watkins 1984; Toulemon, 1997).

Simon (1987) study highlights why older single women had declined marriage proposals, usually because of their fear of becoming subordinates to their husbands. Rubinstein (1987) shows that cultural traditions, family orientations, personalities and personal ambitions, sexual preferences, and even demographic factors affect all elderly persons, regardless of marital status. Schwenk (1992) found that never-married women aged 65 years or older are more highly educated and have high incomes and more wealth. Baker (1968) observed that never-married women have higher education levels than married women. Similarly, Spreitzer and Riley (1974) found that higher education levels among single females whereas, men in the higher occupational levels do not remain single, yet females in the higher levels of occupation are more likely to remain single.

One of the greatest needs of never-married women is that they need support in later life. Although nearly all of the women had accepted increasing dependence on others in their current lives, it is unlikely that family and friends could be relied upon for help in the event that more care giving was needed in the future (Brien, 1991). The two important needs of an individual, such as intimacy and sense of belonging, which play an important role in one's life and the lack of such romantic relationships for people can result in social stigmatisation and marginalisation in the society (Watt, 2015). The changes in the societal outlook towards women's single status provide women with greater freedom and independence in their choices, which in turn also acts as a major contributing factor towards the shift in attitudes about the desirability and necessity of marriage itself (Campbell, 2003).

Peter Stein (1981) identifies four categories of singlehood: Voluntary temporary singles refer to the category of never-married, widowed or divorced. These categories of singles are not married, but are not actively looking for marriage either. They may be more involved in careers or getting an education or just wanting a casual relationship with a partner without commitment. Voluntary stable singles are those singles who intentionally decide not to marry or remarry. Involuntary temporary singles are a category of singles who desire to get married and are actively looking for a marriage partner. This includes divorced people, never-married and single parents who have never been married. Involuntary stable singles refer to those singles that do want to marry, but have accepted that it probably won't happen for them. It includes older divorced, widowed, or never-married people who wanted to marry but have not found a person and have accepted singlehood as a probable permanent situation.

Although individuals can move between and among these categories over their lifetime, whether singlehood is perceived as a choice or circumstance, or is seen as temporary or permanent, can influence one's satisfaction with being single, and one's overall well-being (Simon,1987). Stein (1976) talks about the push and pull factors- pushing away from marriage and pulling toward singlehood. For individuals who feel that marriage restricts self-realization and limits involvement with other relationships and singlehood gives greater freedom of choice and autonomy, permanent singlehood is often seen as a choice of status. Simon (1987) conducted interviews on never-married women who live in America. His study deals with spinster stereotypes and marginalization in society. The main idea of his work is to portray the spirit of empowered and bold character of the women living in the circle of larger marital society.

1.5.2 Never-Married Women in South-East Asia

The South-East and East Asian countries show rising rates of singlehood among women (Xenos, 1990; Jones, 2007; Podhisita and Xenos, 2015). Age factor is an essential tool for determining the percentage of single women and their fertility rate. Never-married women belonging to the age bracket of 44-49 years are an important group; this happens to be the end of their potential child-bearing period. Some reasons behind the increasing trend to remain unmarried are high economic stability, because of which both the prevalence and timing of marriage gets affected, shortage of potential partners over an extended period will raise the age of marriage and lastly, parents will have no control over marriage decisions. In South-East Asia, there has been an increase in the percentage of single women between 1970 and 1990, countries such as Taiwan (2 percent to 11 percent), Thailand (8 percent to 14 percent), Peninsular Malaysia (6 percent to 15 percent), Myanmar (9 percent to 19 percent) and lastly, Philippines (13 per cent) were amongst the highest in the region).

Tsuya (1994) in his study, '*Changing attitudes toward marriage and family in Japan*', mentioned that women, after a certain growing age remain, permanently single if they do not marry before the end of their reproductive years. The study conducted on Japanese women revealed that Japanese women are more ambivalent than men about marriage and are more disenchanted by the idea of marriage. This trend can also be seen in countries like Thailand, Myanmar, and Singapore where 15 percent of women have remained single lifelong. Some studies also claim that the dearth of marriageable women and high rates of crimes (rape) committed by young unmarried men have greater impact in the gender imbalance in Asian countries (Hudson and Boer, 2002).

A study conducted in the US reveals that married people behave better than unmarried people as a result of spousal monitoring that helps in self-regulation (Umberson, 1992

mentioned in Lim and Raymo, 2016). There are various health benefits like the rights and responsibilities supported by normative legal structures, economic growth, and social support provided by spouses (Cherlin, 2004; Waite, 1995; Landis, 1988).

1.5.3 Never-Married Women: Understanding them in the Indian context

The changing trend in marriage patterns in Indian society and particularly the emerging practices of late marriage among educated women or the increased choice of career over marriage, can be some of the reasons for singleness in Indian society. Campbell (2003) explains that with increased age, the likelihood of marrying diminishes, and the meaning of singlehood often changes as it is seen as a more permanent state.

A research study conducted on never-married women in Kerala, has divided the singles into two groups; spinsters and singletons. The women belonging to the age group of 35-50 are young singletons and the age group 65-80 are aged spinsters. The comparative analysis of generation differentials has focused on areas of adjustment, stress level, challenges and support systems they seek from society. The differences have been found in terms of education, occupation and income (Devassy, 2008).

The highly educated, employed and with better income are termed as spinsters whereas, singletons are young singles who are fewer in number and are in the process of attaining a better life. These singletons are only 4.9 percent and staying alone, mostly in hostels and rented homes. The study also revealed that there is a significant difference between spinsters and singletons with respect to their financial problems. 32 percent of the spinsters have high financial problems as against 12.4 percent of the singletons. Singletons have a high friendship support system level because employment leads them to a high level of friendship-relationships. Among the

singletons, 50.7 percent have high social participation and while only 26.2 percent spinsters have high social participation.

According to Prakash (1991) singlehood is of two types: either voluntary or forced (mentioned in Devassy, 2008). The former refers to women who are single by choice and the latter refers to women who remain single due to financial strain, incapacity to provide a dowry, family responsibility or not finding a suitable mate. Dowry plays a vital role in terms of economic security and social status of the Indian family. The percentage of dowry deaths in India is 1.4 deaths per 1,00,000 women– this is the highest followed by Pakistan, Bangladesh and Iran (Indian National Crime Bureau Data, 2001).

Past literatures (Merchant 1935; Kapadia 1955; Desai 1945; Tandon 1959; Krishnamurthy 1970) have shown that the attitudes of educated working women have considerably changed especially with regard to their own status and with regard to marriage and family. The greater acceptability of premarital sex and higher rate of cohabitation indicate that marriage is seen as less necessary than it once was. But not much interest is shown by the Indian youngsters to these relationships because they also sometimes lead to obligations similar to marriage. It is inevitable in urban areas, especially in metropolitan cities where many youngsters conform to this new lifestyle. There is a recent trend among women to choose not to marry but to have a child and raise it themselves.

The young women of today are rebelling against tradition; they do not want to remain in it but to break out of it. Marriage situation is no exception. The values of the younger generation have been shaped by their inheritance of freedom, largely unavailable to earlier generations, freedom for women to work and control their own

reproduction, freedom to define one's own style of life (Wilkinson and Geoff, 1995). With the changing socio-cultural conditions, women have started attaining education and entering salaried jobs. In the modern era, most of the urban as well as rural singles are engaged with work. The attitudes of educated women, particularly that of educated working women, have considerably changed, especially with regard to their own status, marriage and the family.

Reasons for singlehood may be financial inability to raise dowry, looking after the family, physical appearance and career inspiration (Jethani, 1994). Single women were viewed as a social taboo and society blames their lifestyle and their attitude towards marriage behind their single status. The major drawback of remaining never-married is the much-needed emotional support in old age i.e., after crossing the age of 40-50 years. In short, the lifestyle of singlehood is not socially recognised but the rate of single women is increasing substantially. With the advent of new trends like living together or living-relationship, unwed mothers, separation and divorce have become a common phenomenon among people in Indian society (Spanier & Glick, 1980).

In urban India, single women have emerged as a distinct social category. There are a huge number of successful unmarried women who enjoy high status in the fields of profession, services and social work. In India, the working women population is 22.1 percent (ILO, 1991-2011). This group of women is not dependent on men and is financially independent. The sharing of equal duty to household chores, child-rearing, and decision-making are fulfilled by both the husband and wife in the family. Women are no longer seen as 'marriage material' or trophy wife but the working and career-oriented are now the decision-makers of the house. These changes can be due to advancements in the education of women (ibid).

In the late 19th century, women gave more importance to careers than marriage. Ever since, career-oriented women are valued in present society because they earn well, are knowledgeable, are not dependent on anyone and are wealthy enough to take care of family and self. These women do not seek parental supervision and are mostly decision-makers. They are not tied to traditional style of home-making but rather choose to become aspirants and have freedom in their thoughts and rational understanding of life and believe that satisfaction from life is gained through singlehood rather than married life. When women choose to remain single, social stigma and confinement related with spinsterhood decreases, changing singlehood, as an option in contrast to marriage (Chambers, 1984).

The negative connotation to 'old maid' has been replaced by the image of the 'Urban Single', the woman who does not need a man to fulfil her dreams and aspirations in life. The forced single is no more a reason for not marrying but 'by choice' is popular among the educated town women. This population of singles are not against marriage nor do they have hatred towards men, but the situation and fate has compelled these women for non-marriage. Some also face singleness due to the heavy amount of dowry demanded by the groom's family in marriage and not being able to fulfil it (Mishra, 1992).

The attitudes of highly educated women in marriage have changed with time because of their growth in career and status (Desai, 1945; Krishnamurthy, 1970). The acceptance towards sex before marriage and increase in cohabitation shows that marriage is not mandatory as it was in the olden days. In the Indian metropolitan cities, the emerging trends of single mothers, unwed mothers and even voluntary childless couples are to be seen.

Earlier, marriage was based upon the selection of mates which fit a certain criterion, for instance, women choose men based on their economic stability whereas, women were chosen on their physical appearance. The sociological forces which influence mate selection are socio-economic status such as men tend to marry “down” according to socio-economic status, while women tend to marry “up” on these same standards (Waehler, 1991). This unequal choice of marriage for both men and women lead to problems of finding a mate. Men tend to marry less educated and socially privileged women whereas women select men who are higher on the social-economic ladder. The factors essential for marriage are appropriate time and age because if this is not met then consequently, some sections remain unmarried or marriage is delayed (Goswami, 2012). The population who does not get married either by choice or circumstances remains single for long term or lifetime (Devassy, 2016). In such a case, marriage is not the priority, rather living without a life partner becomes inevitable. Social life is surrounded by peer groups rather than husband/wife and children. For single people, the non-romantic relationship is important such as relatives, friends, and neighbours (ed. Denmark and Pauldi, 2008). The independent single is more into an advanced career, live-in relationship and non-kin relations (Rubinstein, Alexander, Goodman, & Luborsky, 2011). The ‘childless couples⁴’ have been recently introduced in the country. Married couples are voluntarily or involuntarily choosing to be ‘childless⁵’ or childfree in the urban cities of India (Bhambani & Inbanathan, 2018).

Cherlin (2004) explains that marriage itself is becoming deinstitutionalised due to the increase in cohabitation, parenthood outside marriage, same-sex marriage rights and a

⁴J.Misra, 2013; R. Bhattacharya, 2014; N. Gupta, 2017.

⁵See Tanturri and Mencarini (2008), and Gupta, N (2017, May 16).

large number of heterosexuals who never marry. In rural India, the percentage of single women belonging to the age range 25-29 has increased to 68 percent and in urban areas, the number constitutes to about 12.3 million (2001 and 2011). Overall, the single women in rural areas constitute around 44.4 million whereas, in urban areas 27 million (Census, 2011). These figures show that women have been opting for single life, both in rural and urban areas. However, the figures show a simultaneous increase in rural areas than in urban areas. The decline of the economic and ideological bases for traditional marriage is that men and women no longer have to marry for sexual and emotional needs and women do not have to marry to get financial support (Edwards & Eleanor, 1974).

Marriage reflects the cultural expectations from women; as it maintains the hegemony over all other forms of commitment and relationships. Marriage is the organizing assumption of society, and particularly of women's lives. So, any woman who rejects this state, voluntarily or otherwise, is marked as an outlier.

1.5.4 Never-Married Women in North-East India

The rise of never-married as a lifestyle is an unfolding phenomenon in response to the growing dissatisfaction with traditional marriage. The changes in the societal outlook toward women's never-married status provide women with greater freedom and independence in their choices, which in turn also acts as a major contributing factor towards the shift in attitudes about the desirability and necessity of marriage itself (Campbell, 2003).

The never-married women belonging to North-east India have shown an increase in the percentage as compared to the national average. The figures Tripura (1.61), Arunachal Pradesh (2.69), Assam (2.74), Meghalaya (3.56), Manipur (4.38),

Nagaland (5.02), and Mizoram (5.09) give the percentage of never-married women of the particular age group 40-80 years (Census, 2011). Among these states, Mizoram and Nagaland have the highest number of 'never-married' female population in the north-east as compared to the other states of the regions (Kar, 2002). Though not many, studies have been conducted an inquiry into the issues and concerns of the 'never-married' women in these seven states (Lalneihzovi, 2009; Barooah, 1993; Dakuah, 2015; Kar, 2002),

Similarly, in Assam, a study based on never-married women in the age group of 30-34 years in Guwahati city, shows that they face many social challenges. Almost 42.5 percent of women choose to remain single and two reasons identified for remaining single were one's choice or own decision and compelling circumstances (Dakuah, 2015).

Similar studies in Assamese society divided single women into three categories such as widows, divorcees and unmarried. Unmarried women living in urban areas of Guwahati are mostly working, salaried women. Urban growth and development have thus led to the emergence of single women as a distinctive segment in contemporary Assamese Hindu society (Barooah, 1993).

1.5.5 Never-Married Women in Sikkim

As per the 2001 Census, women constitute almost 47 percent of the total population and the sex ratio is much lower than the national average. It has a history of low sex ratio i.e., 863 in 1971 to 875 in 2001. In 2011, around 889 female sex ratios per thousand male shows that there is subtle increase and yet it is a major concern. Historically, women were neglected in many areas and their lives were limited to the private sphere and no laws for women were constituted. The women in Sikkim have

been opting for single life as an alternative to marriage. The percentage of never-married women belonging to age range of 40 and above in the state as per district-wise distribution in Sikkim: East district has the highest number of never-married women of age 40 and above i.e., 2.2 percent as compared to other three districts (North, West and South). 442 never-married women of the age group 40-44 reside in the East district. In contrast, the lowest percentage of never-married women have been found in the North district of Sikkim with only 0.2 percent respectively and the lowest population of females (3932) have been found in the north zone of the state.

Among the age group of (60-64) never-married women are mostly retired and non-working groups. In the field-study, almost 70 percent of female respondents residing in Gangtok have claimed that established careers and less societal pressure to get married have been the significant reasons why women see marriage as an option and not the main goal in life.

Similarly, in the South district, the percentage of never-married women comprises 1.5 percent which is the second highest among the four districts in the state. In the age group of 40-69 years, there is a growing number of never-married population and from age 70 and above the population has decreased drastically.

In case of other two districts such as North and West Sikkim, the percentage of never-married women is considerably low as compared to East and South districts. The percentage of never-married women in West Sikkim is 1.3 percent whereas in the North it is only 0.2 percent (Census, 2011).

As compared to other three districts in the state, the case of North Sikkim is peculiar, because it differs in-terms of culture, tradition and customs. The Customary law plays a major part in the societal setup (Subba, 2014). The economic activities are carried

out by women based on their married counterparts. Almost 80 percent of women work as labourers and in agriculture with their husbands which is their main source of income. The male dominated society does not favour women to be elected as head of the political system, yet women have been greatly involved in other activities like carpet weaving, and collecting fruits and vegetables (Ghatak, 2008). Similarly, in the mid-1990s, the state government introduced various policies, schemes and national assistance programmes for empowering women in the state. These policies and programmes include: Mahila Samridhhi Yojana (1993), Pension for Widows, Unmarried women, Old-age and Disabled (1995), National Family Benefit Scheme (1995), Small Family Scheme (1997), Balika Samridhhi Yojana (1997) (Subba, 2014). In 2016, a direct online marketing called Mahila-E-Haat was introduced by the state government for women entrepreneurs/SHGs/NGOs (Women and Child Development Division, retrieved on 15th April, 2020).

1.6 Rationale of the Study

In India, there have been studies on never-married status of women with familial constraints and circumstances, failure in successful relationship, education, dowry, societal outcaste as a sign of bad omen, easy availability on the basis of status, age, social position is some of the reasons behind their single status (Jethani, 1994; Singh, 2000; Kapoor, 2005). Other studies (Krishna kumari, 1987; Nirmal, 1994; Neshla, 1994) have focused on how never-married women are disrespected and segregated in the society, yet some have studied it as part of the changing lifestyles of urban India.

However, as discussed in India, sociological study of the never-married women is not given emphasis to, as an important subject matter for sociological analysis. This is being justified by their nominal representation in the census head-counting; for instance, according to the 2001 Census, the never-married females

within the age range of 40 and above are represented as only 1.14 percent of the total female population in the specified age group. Whereas in the 2011 Census, there was a slight increase with 1.52 percent belonging to the same age range. Though very miniscule, the national average indicates a gradual increase in the number of women who are coming out of the wedlock challenging the traditional religious ethos; as in Hinduism, where marriage is the most significant and inescapable rite of passage in an individual's life.

The case of North-Eastern states of India is very different, as the percentage of never married females is way higher than the national average in all the eight states of the region, as per the 2011 Census. The percentage of never-married female above the age of 40 are, in ascending order-Tripura 1.61, Arunachal Pradesh 2.69, Assam 2.74, Meghalaya 3.56, Manipur 4.38, Nagaland 5.02, Mizoram 5.09, with Sikkim the highest in all the eight states with 5.26 percent. Though, not many, yet few studies have been conducted inquiring into the issues and concerns of the 'never-married' women in these seven states (Lalnehzovi, 2009; Barooah, 1993; Dakuah, 2015; Kar, 2002), barring the state of Sikkim. In the last four decades, the number of never-married females in Sikkim has increased with a 157.84 percent growth rate, as in 1971 it was 2.04 percent while in 2011 it rose to 5.26 percent. In fact, the number of the never-married women in the state is highest in the country; figuratively, Sikkim's percentage is 245.57 percent higher than the national average of 2011 Census. This has posed a serious question to be academically pondered upon, to be investigated and enquired, not just sociologically but also from other academic disciplines of social sciences.

The study needed at least two known factors, firstly, the very obvious question of what social consequences might escalate in a sparsely populated state like Sikkim,

if such a trend continues. Secondly, the not so obvious one, what are the causal factors and social conditionings which led to such drastic change in the marriage practices; as previously, in Sikkimese society marriage took place quite early among women particularly in rural areas across the state and communities. A survey of married women in 1989 reveals that early marriage was a menace that raised maternal health issues, the survey found that almost 39 percent of them got married before they attained 17 years of age and another 36 percent by the time, they attained 20 years. Marriage for women took place between the age of 14-20 years and males 18-25 years (Drall, 2013). Though, scholars have argued that the incremental shift in age pattern for marriage,⁶ primarily due to empowerment of women in terms of education, career choice, and the right to choose both the times as well as the groom (Kapoor, 1970). Yet, these conditioning factors are discussed in relation to other states of India, which to an extent have both culturally and socially contextual differences.

The study of the socio-cultural background of these groups of women will help to understand their ethnic groups, social class, age, education, occupation, family background and religion. These will help to analyse the factors behind increasing singlehood in the state and how it impacts the social and cultural patterns of the Sikkimese society. The societal perception on never-married will help to understand the viewpoints of society, what position these women have in the Sikkimese society and how they are considered by the rest of the population will be discussed further in the research. As such single women who are not married for many years is a questionable issue, why they choose single life, how they are perceived in society and

⁶According to 1989 survey, 39 percent got married before attaining 17 years and 36 percent before they turned 20 years of age. As per Sikkim District Level Household and Facility Survey 2007-08 and 2012-13, the mean age at marriage constituted 24.9 to 25.1

what makes these never-married groups different from the rest of the population will also be discussed in the research.

1.7 Objectives of the Study

- To study the socio-cultural and economic backgrounds of the never-married women.
- To comprehend and analyse the factors that contributed in determining the decision for these women to opt out of wedlock.
- To have an explorative enquiry into the lived experiences of the never-married women.
- To understand the perception of others toward the never-married women.
- To study the sources of social support mechanisms with the onset of old-age.

1.8 Research Questions

The present study focuses on the following research questions:

- What are the socio-cultural backgrounds of never-married women in Sikkim?
- What are the factors behind women opting for singlehood in Sikkim?
- What are the lived experiences of never-married women in Sikkim?
- What are the perceptions of Sikkimese society towards never-married women?
- How never-married women seek social support with the onset of old age?

1.9 Research Method

The study employed both qualitative and quantitative methods. Primary and secondary data has been used for collecting information. Primary data has been collected through semi-structured interviews which include both open-ended and closed-ended questions. Questionnaires, field notes, and interview-schedule are opted to understand the singleness in relation to familial/friends' relationship, education,

employment and lifestyle. Proportionate sampling has been used for selecting the sample size for the research because a certain population has been used for the analysis of the study.

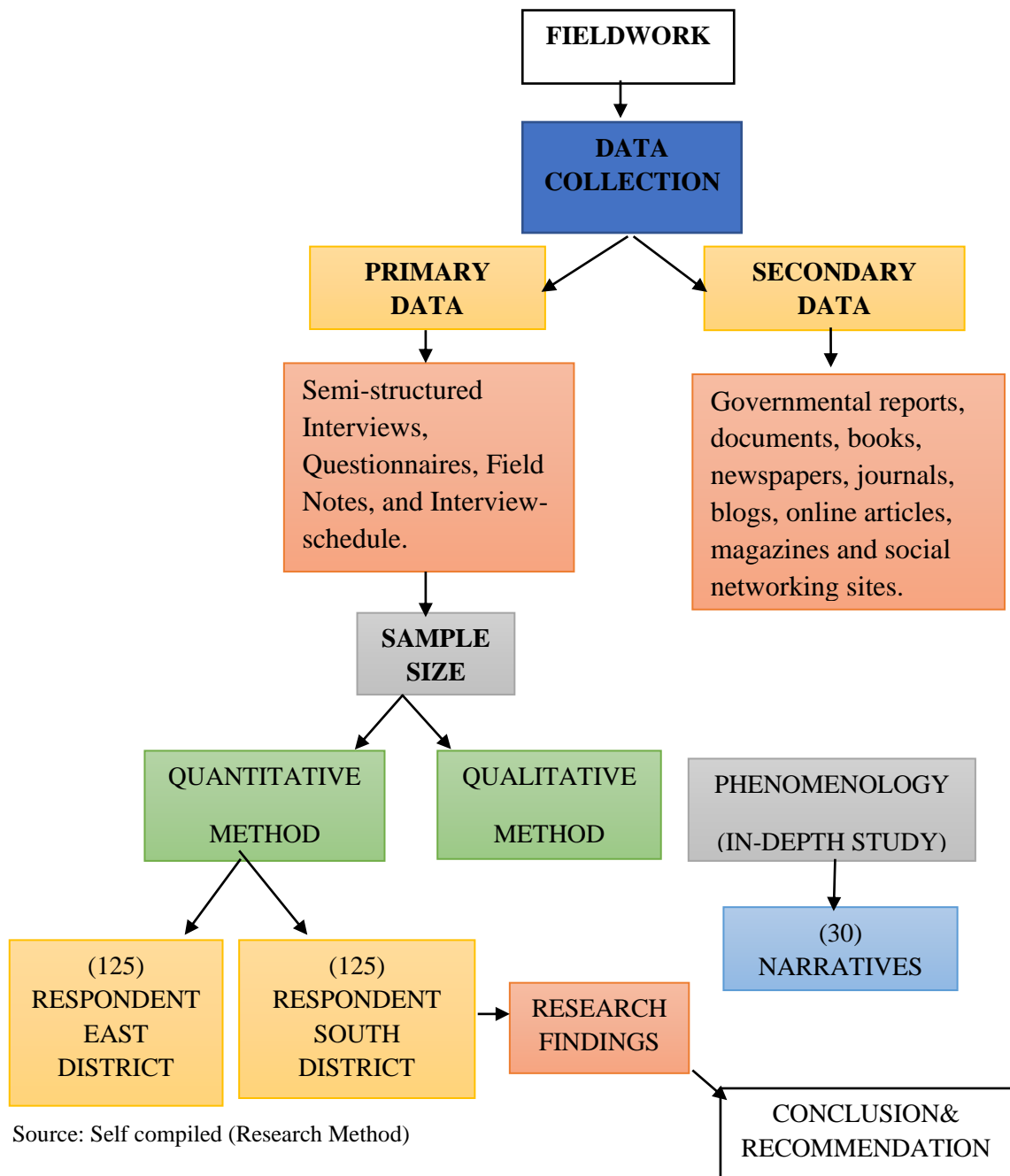
The sampling has been done by snowball method because the never-married women form a kind of network which makes it easy to trace these women. Before starting the fieldwork in the selected field areas, a pilot survey was carried out to 20 never-married women residing in East Sikkim, which helped to find the lacunae in the Questionnaire and Interview. Consequently, necessary changes were incorporated in the original questionnaire and Interview questions for better feedback, in-depth analysis and further questions in the list. This helped to formulate further questions in the fieldwork in both the districts of Sikkim.

The participants were carefully chosen by using criterion sampling to acquire the widest possible variation of respondents among women experiencing lifelong never-married singlehood. Out of 2,477, the total number of never-married females in South and East districts population, only 10 percent i.e., (247.7) with round figure 250 has been selected for the sample size. From which 30 respondents from the East and South districts have been selected for an in-depth interview. This was intended to extract well-rounded details from an individual's account and gain more intrinsic insight of the personal lives of never-married women i.e., their past experiences, reasons behind and challenges they face. Women aged 40 and above were selected for the research study because they have passed the traditional marriageable age and are living a single life.

In addition, some never-married men, Officers from the Welfare Department of the Government of Sikkim and academicians and members of civil society were

interviewed in order to understand the perception and social status of never-married women. Secondary data has been collected from governmental reports, documents, books, newspapers, journals, blogs, online articles, magazines and social network sites. This study is part of a wider study on never-married women that focuses solely on the factors that contributed to an increase in the number of these women, such as socio-cultural background, single experiences, perception and support mechanism. This research aims to bring academic attention to this group of women. Moreover, the research focuses on the lived experiences which has helped to extract detailed information from the respondents to help understand how society perceives these never-married women in Sikkim.

Fig.1.1 Flowchart of Research Methodology



Source: Self compiled (Research Method)

Study Area

Sikkim’s scenario is different than the other societies and communities because of its sex ratio, spatial population, socio-cultural and economic status. The two districts of Sikkim have been taken into consideration: East and South districts. District-wise distribution of never-married women as per Census report 2011, shows that North District constitutes (0.2) percent of the total female population (66,446), followed by

South district (1.50) percent, West district (1.30) percent and East District with highest concentration of (2.20) percent. The study has been carried out mainly into two districts of Sikkim focusing on sub-divisions i.e., Namchi (South) and Gangtok (East) as it has the highest number of never-married females i.e., 1,000 and 1,477 as compared to other two districts (145 in North) and (875 in West). Gangtok, being the capital of the state, has the highest number of working females in the town, the population and literacy rate is in highest position (283,583) and (83.85) percent, respectively, at the district level. East has the third highest (954 sq. km.) in area and South district is the least (750 sq. km.) in area but in term of population and literacy rate is positioned the second highest with (146,850) and (81.42) per cent in the district level. Both the urban and rural areas have been taken into consideration for research. Due to the unavailability of research on the never-married women of Sikkim, the accurate population on the specific areas of sub-divisions remains unreliable and inadequate. The detailed map has been illustrated in (Image.2) and the specific areas have been marked with red dots.

Map no.5.1: Map of Sikkim with four districts and boundaries (Not to scale)



Source: <https://www.mapsofindia.com/maps/sikkim/sikkim-district.htm>

Note: Fieldwork was collected from two districts marked with red dots i.e., shown in the map. (South and East districts)

The study focused on never-married women from a variety of backgrounds, including employed, unemployed, casual workers, and retirees in order to understand variables that lead to singlehood. The study includes women belonging to rural and urban areas. Those living in rural areas with varied economic activities viz. agriculture, labourers, small industries and in urban areas working in most of the governmental offices, private firms, NGOs, colleges/ universities have been taken into consideration.

Table 1.1: List of Places interviewed in East and South districts of Sikkim

East District		South District	
Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
Singtam	Khamdong	Jorethang	Saley Gaon
Gangtok	Rumtek	Namchi Bazar	Sadam
Ranipool	Lower Sichey	-	Kamrang

Source: Self compiled

1.10 Limitation of the Study

1. Lack of previous studies in the research area was also one of the limitations of the research. Literature review is an important part of any research, because it helps to identify the scope of works that have been done so far in the research area. Literature review findings are used as the foundation for the researcher to build her work upon and achieve her research objectives.
2. Only two districts of Sikkim (East and South district) in the research. The other two districts, such as North and West districts should have been included for the sample area to achieve different ethnic composition which would have helped draw an even clearer picture of the study.
3. Rapport-building consumed time because the respondents did not talk freely about the issue i.e., singlehood, uncomfortable to disseminate information or converse about their choice. This study is the first-of-its-kind in the state of

Sikkim, therefore, people were curious and asked questions like: “what is there to study?” and some respondents also got furious and shouted, “why don’t you leave me alone?” However, there was a certain proportion of the never-married group who did not hesitate to give their interviews. While talking to an older never-married group of women, especially belonging to age 60-80 years, they were a bit reluctant and lacked clarity in speech due to their medical condition and some also suffered from severe menopausal symptoms which affected their behaviour and attitude.

4. Fear of personal disclosure because the young never-married women belonging to a particular age group 40-50 years also feared to disclose their details like love affair and illness because of the fear of getting judged and character-assassinated that could hinderances for finding a suitable mate. Few women refused to respond because they did not want to share their reasons for living single.

Apart from all these limitations, this research has been carried out extensively. Further research is recommended with broader samples of this population, including additional characteristics such as health background, and importantly, including other categories of Single such as divorcees, unwed mothers, and widows which is also increasing in the state. Moreover, the samples selected in this study do not represent the entire population.

Chapter 2

Socio-Cultural Background of Never-Married Women in Sikkim

2.1 Introduction:

Sikkim is a small Himalayan state situated in the Northeast of India. It possesses a multi-cultural society with different communities who live together. It is the home to three distinct ethnic communities, namely, Lepcha, Bhutia, and Nepali. The Bhutias are also called Denzongpas/Lhopas, the Lepchas are also called Rongs/Monpas, and the Nepalis are also called Paharias (Gurung, 2011).

Sikkim was ruled by the first monarch, Phuntsok Namgyal in 1642 under the Namgyal dynasty for about 332 years (Risley, 1995). In the year 1881, John Claude White was appointed as Sikkim's first political officer under British administration. This was operationalized mainly for an economic purpose—to develop trade with Tibet through Sikkim by opening a trade link between Calcutta and China, and further into Central Asia (Gurung, 2011 mentioned in Thatal, 2020).

Post-Independence, a treaty called the 'India-Sikkim Peace Treaty' was signed between Sikkim and India in 1950, which opened the gateway to gain special status of protectorate under the Indian Union in 1970. Gradually, this special status abolished monarchy and led to the establishment of the democratic system of government. Thus, Sikkim became the 22nd state of the Indian Union on 16th May 1975 (Basnet, 1984). After its merger with the Indian Union, Sikkim became a sovereign state of India and was granted a special status under Article 371F of India's Constitution, which provided safeguards to protect and preserve the State's unique ethnic character and traditional laws (Datta, 1991). Article 371F guarantees local autonomy in governance and laws restricting people of non-Sikkimese origin from

settling there and conducting business with special provisions related to central taxation (Sikkim HDR, 2014).

During this transition period from monarchy to democracy, rapid changes took place in the state of Sikkim, as migration was high from the various neighbouring states of India (West Bengal, Haryana, Rajasthan, and many more) and international borders of Nepal and Bhutan (Lama, 2001). These changing scenarios impacted the Sikkimese society in both positive and negative ways. Demographic changes occurred due to a large influx of Nepali communities⁷, and other⁸ communities that entered the state (Vandenhelsken, 2009). The state was granted the language and tribal recognition⁹, more formal schools and governmental institutions were established (Sinha, 1975).

2.2 Brief Overview of Bhutia, Lepcha and Nepali community in Sikkim

Sikkim is home to three distinct ethnic communities, namely, Lepcha, Bhutia, and Nepali communities. These communities share different lifestyles, food, language, religion, and culture in wide variation. They do not have similar origins but live under one identity called 'Sikkimese.' The brief overview of these three ethnic communities have been mentioned below:

2.2.1. Lepcha Community

The Lepchas are considered as the original inhabitants of Sikkim. They have their own dialect, i.e., Lepcha script. They are called 'Rong' in the Lepcha language, meaning 'ravine-folk' and are also known as the 'dweller of the valley'. They refer to Sikkim as 'Nye-ma-el,' meaning heaven (Risley, 1995).

⁷In the 19th Century, due to profit-making motives, the British Government encouraged the Nepalese population in Sikkim, which resulted in huge migration from bordering countries like India, Nepal, Bhutan, and Tibet (Chettri, 2013).

⁸As per Socio-Economic Census 2006, 'Other' indicates migrated people in the state, Bihari, Marwari, Tibetan.

⁹ In 2003, Limboo and Tamang were recognized as Scheduled Tribe.

According to the Census of India (2011), the population of Lepcha is 42,909, which constitutes about one-fourth of the whole population, which shows they are the least populous in the state. They are considered the simple people, peace-making, hardworking, and laborious mountain region people. Their physical appearance is distinct from other ethnic communities in Sikkim. They have a distinct lifestyle, and food habits are also very unique. They mostly prefer rice, maize, and millets and are widely known to be excellent in archery.

Traditionally, Lepchas followed 'Bon'¹⁰ religion, practice Shamanism, and worship Mount. Kanchendzonga (Joshi, 2005). They highly worship Mt. Kanchendzonga because they believe that human's spirit is born from a place known as 'Rumlyang', and it is believed that after death the soul returns to it (Ghosal,1990). The Lepchas are divided into several patrilineal clans known as *Ptso*, at present, the main functions of the clans are to regulate the marriage and prevent the incest by exogamy (Lepcha and Aden, 2016).

The clan's lineage is inherited patrilineal i.e. both son and daughter inherit the clan's name of their father whereas, only the clan of women remains the same even after marriage. The offspring belongs to the father's lineage in Sikkim but in other areas like Kalimpong (A district of in the neighbouring state of West Bengal, which also has inhabitants of Lepcha community), the lineage is inherited from both the sides (patrilineal and matrilineal).

Polyandry has been mostly common among the traditional social practices of the Lepcha in Sikkim so as to keep the property undivided, to limit the growing potential

¹⁰It means worshippers of trees, natural objects, and ancestral spirit. The concept of Bongthing or medicine man believed to be the son of gods.

candidate for the household property and fragmentation of joint labour. In such cases, a wife of two brothers can get the higher economic benefit than the wife of a single husband who only has paternal property (Ghosal, 1990).

At present, polyandrous marriage can rarely be found in the state due to the influence of modernisation, cultural assimilation and ethnicization in the traditional tribal system. The social practices of the Lepcha community have slowly been molded.

2.2.2. Bhutia Community

The term Bhutia is derived from the word *Bhote* or *Bhot*, from Tibet. In the 7th Century, a Sanskrit manuscript mentioned another name for Tibet as *Bhote*. *Bhot*, or simply Bhutia, are Tibetans who migrated to the southern part of the Himalayas in India. Despite ethnic origins, Bhutia communities are found in states like Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh and even West Bengal. (Lall, 1981 mentioned in Swami, 2006).

The Bhutia of Sikkim have similarities to the Tibetans in-terms of physical appearance, culture and religion. In the 12th century, people migrated from the 'Kham' province of eastern Tibet to Sikkim for trade and settlement. The Bhutias are also called Denzongpasor Lhopas, Lho, who have migrated from neighbouring countries like Burma, Tibet, and have settled in Sikkim (Bhattacharya, 1994). The total Bhutia population in Sikkim is approximately 69,598 (Census, 2011). They are a Tribal community and follow clan exogamy, absence of caste categorization.

Bhutia community has created a unique culture and social pattern. In terms of religion, Buddhism is predominantly the main religion among the Bhutia community. Buddhism has made Sikkim a place of mythology and Lamaism (Datta, 1991). They follow Tibetan Mahayana Buddhism, known as 'Vajrayana'. This sect of religion has

the largest number of followers in the state. The Bhutia community in Sikkim have distinct social and cultural attributes which makes them 'Sikkimese Bhutia' (Swami, 2006).

With regards to social structure, there is an ingrained patriarchal family system, but the mother also plays an equal role in serving the needs of family members. The job assigned for a female is no less than a man, such as grazing the animals in fields, ploughing, making of *chang* (local beer), butter and *churpi* from yak. However, women are kept aside while decision making in the family and local matters in the village. Women play a main role in domesticity and production of economy in Bhutia society (Lama, 2000). In the Northern part of Sikkim, the two popular places called Lachen and Lachung are populated with Lachen pa and Lachung pa. Both the places are self-governed by a system called *Dzumsa* which works as a functioning body specifically in the North district of Sikkim. It is an age-old system which abstains from democratic rule and focuses on customary laws. The villagers form a meeting under the council's guidance and assign various duties to the members of *Dzumsa*. This law is enforced for taking major decisions for the people of North viz. property inheritance, divorce, crimes, child's custody and much more (Thapa and Sachdeva, 2017).

At the community level, the common practice for marriage is clan exogamy and endogamy. The dominance of the father's lineage in the society has encouraged people to marry in the same community in order to continue lineage and stop entry of other communities and settle in North Sikkim (Bhasin & Bhasin, 2000).

The forms of marriage such as polyandrous, polygamous and monogamous were common among the Bhutia community. Traditionally, the numerous sons born in

Bhutia families with limited resources opted for fraternal polyandry. Fraternal polyandry was practiced to preserve land and labour in the family which produced a greater number of unmarried females in the community (Bhasin, 1989). The practice of polyandry was very common because they believe that it binds the family and property together, thus preventing the break-up of the family. Bhutias preferred to live in a joint family. But eventually, with the spread of education, this practice is no longer functional among the young modern Bhutia (Bhadra, 1992).

2.2.3. Nepali Community:

‘Nepali’ is an umbrella term which includes both Aryan and non-Aryan races. Under Aryan, the following categories are included: Bahun (Brahmin), Chettri (Kshatriya), Kami (Blacksmith), Damai (Tailor), Sarki and Majhi, and Non-Aryans include Mongoloid (Matwali) groups like the Limboo, Subba, Manger, Gurung, Rai, Khagatey, and Tamang (Chettri, 2013).

During the 19th Century, the British Government brought the Nepali population to Sikkim. Their main motive was to increase the workforce and secondly, for revenue generation, which was purely for profit-making (Vandenhelsken, 2009). This leads to an increase in the Nepali population in the state of Sikkim.

According to the Population Census of India 2011, the total Nepali population (Limboo, Tamang) is 5,40,851 which is 62.61 percent, whereas Bhutia population shows 69,598 (11.39%) and Lepcha population shows 42,909 (7.02%), the Nepali population outnumbered Bhutia and Lepcha population in the state.

The Nepali language constituted 0.28 percent of India's total population in 2001 (Census, 2001). Some are Buddhist practitioners while the majority of them are

Hindus. High work participation, occupational, and dominance of the Hindu religion among the Nepali community helped them flourish.

2.3 General overview of women in Sikkim

Women occupy a special and important position in the socio-cultural space of Sikkim. Socio-cultural profile, economic contribution and political participation, health status, and property rights of women vary across communities.

2.3.1. Socio-economic profile-

Socio-economic status is the social and economic combination of a person's position in society. It consists of the educational attainment, occupation and income of an individual. An individual's background plays an important role in the development of her attitudes and the level of adaptation, social positions and allied roles. Dhamala (1985) analysed the socio-economic role of women in Sikkim and found that authority and socio-cultural autonomy varies from community to community.

As per 2011 Census, the total female population in Sikkim is 2,87,507 out of which, 2,14,202 belong to rural areas and 73,305 to urban areas. The maximum population lives in the rural areas whereas only few in urban areas. The sex ratio of females is 889 per 1000 males, which, compared to the national average (i.e., 940 females per 1000 males), is low in the state (Census, 2011).

In the case of education in Sikkim, it has empowered women by providing information and confidence, in higher education entering any field or profession, thereby inculcating the values of concern for social transformation and establishment of gender justice. In two decadal years (1981 to 2001) census of India, there has been an increase in the literacy rates i.e., from 34.05 percent to 69.68 percent in the two

decadal years. The female literacy rate in 1981 shows 22.20 percent to 61.46 percent in 2001, i.e., almost three times within a span of twenty years.

In the case of rural areas, the female literacy rate has risen from 18.24 percent in 1981 to 62.97 percent in 2011. The situation of female literacy rate has increased drastically. The female literacy rate in the urban area has improved substantially from 45.42 percent in 1981 to 76.63 percent in 2011. The overall literacy rate in the urban areas has risen from 54.86 percent in 1981 to 88.71 percent in 2011. The female literacy rate in the urban area has improved substantially from 45.42 percent in 1981 to 76.63 percent in 2011.

In 1979, 38 male and only 1 female candidate had been selected for the award degree and diploma courses/scholarship. The seat reserved for girls in the state was only one (Sikkim Express, 6th March, 1979).

In case of occupation, 76 percent women workers in Sikkim are engaged in agriculture and allied activities. Among the main workers 71.74 percent are cultivators, 7.37 percent are agricultural laborers, 1.58 percent are engaged in livestock, fishing, forestry, hunting, plantation, orchard and allied activities. So, women are the main participants in agriculture and allied production and they attend all secondary and cumbersome tasks that require more patience, time and devotion (NCW Report, 2006).

As far as upper-class women are concerned, they are mostly engaged in those activities that can be performed within the household compound e.g., cleaning and sorting of grains, large-scale food processing, cooking etc. for their household. In the case of lower-class women, they participate extensively in the fieldwork as a member

of the family or wage laborer contributing substantially in the farm management decision. The work burden among women at different socio-economic levels (ibid).

Women in Sikkim have also opted for unconventional occupations like taxi drivers and conductors in Government and local transport (SNT). More than 20 percent sell vegetables in the market, and work as equal to men in all the fields of activities. This shows no restrictions in terms of choice of jobs, amount of pay, and independence (Subba, 2014).

Livelihood opportunities in the state's rural areas such as agricultural cultivation, manufacture of local products, rearing livestock, petty shops, and small business are the main source of income. There are also other sources such as Self-Help Group (SHG), (MGNREGA), and North East Development Fund Initiative (NEDFI), which provide microloans at a minimal rate for entrepreneurship among people in the North-Eastern region of India.

As per the Sikkim Human Development Report 2014, there is a 30 percent reservation for women in state government, which has been increased to 50 percent. This shows that the workforce participation rate of women in the state is in favor of uplifting the economic status of women.

2.3.2. Legal (Property) rights

The laws of Sikkim were derived from Tibetan manuscript (Banerjee, 2005). The law was imposed on land, property, and citizenship of Sikkim. The dominance of the monarchical system on land has given rise to Kazi and Thikadars in Sikkim who leased out the land to the tenants for agricultural production (Chakrabarti, 2010).

The land in Sikkim belonging to Bhutia-Lepcha was prohibited from being put on sale or being transferred to any other person. This order on land was issued on 2nd January, 1897 by the first political officer, J. C. White and later further issued by C.A. Bell, Superintendent of Sikkim through “the Revenue Order No. 1 of 1917 (Sharma, 2011).

In case of tribal women, there is absence of legal inheritance of property rights. She can neither inherit property in the natal family nor in the conjugal family, because men are still perceived as natural inheritors of the property. In some cases, they acquire property as a gift from parents under the will of her father or other relatives. In most families, if daughters remain unmarried, then only can they get small portion of property as a gift from their parents¹¹ (Unpublished Dissertation Rai, 2016).

“The important issue regarding property inheritance rights was confronted with judgment made in the High Court of Sikkim in Padma Kumari Ganesan v. State of Sikkim in 1991”. The democratic system of government also became a failure with the significant events that took place in Sikkim. This case can reflect how women have to suffer from the traditional customs and practices or else old laws became the cardinal principle in the context of women’s justice. The administrations of justice, for instance Married Women’s Regulation act, 1962, are still shadowed with rules and regulations. This case also highlights how women have to suffer the traditional ways of thinking that are rooted in the patriarchal system, and male-dominant households and society. This judgment challenged the whole scenario of women’s PIL of Sikkim.

¹¹In 1961, the registration of documents relating to transfer of immovable properties was started in Sikkim and the government came up with the Notification No. 105/ L.R. Dated Gangtok on 25th February 1961 by D. Dahdul, Chief Secretary, Government of Sikkim.

This law was passed under the provision of Revenue Order of 1917, states that-
“*Nepalese who are marrying Bhutia-Lepcha girls or non-Sikkimese marrying-Sikkimese women are acquiring immovable properties of Bhutia-Lepcha cannot be alienated in favour of a non-Bhutia-Lepcha and that Non-Sikkimese are not entitled to acquire any immovable properties in Sikkim*”.

Although the judgment was not in favour of gender justification, it was a historic event that gave space to challenge the existing system of society and to women fighting for their rights (ibid).

If Bhutia or Lepcha women marry outside their community, they shall forfeit their rights to such property. However, Under the Sikkim Succession Act, 2008 the unmarried daughters have the right to inheritance to an equal share in the father's property along with the sons and wife (Gurung, 2011). Similarly, in the case of divorced women, the Act says: 'An abandoned or divorced woman having liability to take care of the children and has no source of income, shall have the right to a share in equal proportion along with other heirs to the property as per the law provided that where woman has deserted her husband with or without children and has remarried shall forfeit her right to her share in the husband's property' (ibid).

On the death of a Sikkimese woman who appears to be married to a non-Sikkimese, her immovable property cannot be transferred to her husband or children but instead to her Sikkimese male relatives. This Act has not been repealed till the present democratic system of government in Sikkim. Such old laws have remained as the key to the administration system.

In this context, the Sikkim government recently introduced property inheritance rights to all women except those who are married to non-Sikkimese. The exclusion of property inheritance laws to those women who marry non-Sikkimese poses both as a curtailment of opportunities to Sikkimese women and also as prevention of national and global integration of women.

2.4 Status of Women in Lepcha, Bhutia and Nepali marriage-

Sociologically, marriage is defined as the major institution of society. It is a socially sanctioned union between a man and women fulfilled by cultural rituals and ceremonies (Ritzer, 2011). It is also a social construct; cultural norms and expectations determine what a marriage is and who can marry. It is the creation of human lives in a particular social order. It is governed by biological, mental, and spiritual fulfillment (Becker, 1974).

While marriage as an institution is universal, its forms are varied. The norms and values governing marriage and its practices (and some of its aspects such as age at marriage, duration of the marriage, and its termination) on childbearing practices and fertility behaviour.

Marriage in Sikkim has multi-dimensional aspects with varied cultures and traditions. Tibetan influence has been observed in most of the Namgyal province's culture. During the merger, many women from districts of West Bengal (Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Kurseong) migrated to Sikkim. They married Sikkimese men to get all the state benefits like permanent job state, land, and settlement. As per Order¹² issued by Chogyal, Sikkim Subject of 1961 allowed women to avail a Certificate of Identification (COI) and get all the benefits of the state if married to a Sikkimese man.

It stated-

A woman of foreign nationality who is married to a Sikkim subject after the commencement of this Regulation shall ordinarily be eligible to be registered as a Sikkim subject, on making application therefore to the

¹²As amended vide Notification No. S/277/61 dated the 16d1 January 1962, Notification No. S/252/65 dated the 26d1 July 1965, and Notification No. 790/H dated the 3rd December 1970).

Government of the Chogyal in the manner provided by rules under this Regulation, and after announcing her former nationality and on taking oath of allegiance...

2.4.1 Lepcha Marriage customs-

Marriage among the Lepcha community is not only the union between two sexes but between two clans. These nature lovers follow the significant rule in terms of marriage, i.e., Clan. The Clan has been the considerable base for selecting a spouse for marriage, and if couples belong to the same clan, then the marriage is forfeited. Lepchas claim that ritual is that the strength, steadiness and peace in the relationship of the couple are compared with those of Teesta and Rangeet rivers and mountains and hills (Lepcha, 2017).

The priest called *Peeboo/Bekboo*, or a *Boonthing/Mun* performs the rites and ritual in the marriage. The bride and the bridegroom are seated on a high pedestal which represents two mountain peaks of the Himalayas. The *Bongthing* blesses the couple and sprinkles millet *chee* (a beverage made from fermented rice, millet/beer) on them. The bride price is given to the father as labour, like working in the field, helping for one or two years unless the groom can pay the bride's father's amount. The marriage tie is loosely constructed because it can be dissolved by the man or the woman in childlessness (Subba, 2008).

Bride price is the 'credit' where the groom needs to repay even by selling his labour in his in-law's house, the custom of bride price in the form of sacrificing animals and agricultural produce. Traditionally, the practice of inheriting property among the tribal women if married to one's community called *pewa'* giving daughters

gifts and assets including livestock, utensils, ornaments, land (if rich) and other goods' (Eckman;1996 mentioned in Bhutia, 2017).

The Lepcha tribe practice polyandry and do not marry blood relations. If found incest, then the man and woman are strictly shunned from the village. It is believed that the father transmits bone to his offspring, while the mother provides blood and flesh. Early marriage was also prevalent among the Lepcha community (ibid).

Females in the Lepcha society are generally respected, honoured and recognized. Their position is high in Lepcha society this can be found from the existence of separate *Moo*¹³. They are not dependent to get *Moo* from the males because females have their own *Moo*. Females are no way inferior but maintain their equality and parity with the male members in the Lepcha society. A female not only respects inheriting her mother's *Moo*, she feels proud of transmitting it to her daughter. The mother lives with her daughter, and hence the girl child is welcomed in the society. Buddhist Lepchas are still following this restriction, but the Christians have, to some extent, liberalized the rules of *Moo* in marriage. The high percentage of exogamous marriage and the presence of unmarried boys and girls are two factors responsible for loosening the role of *Moo* in present Lepcha society (Roy, 2010).

2.4.2. Bhutia Marriage customs-

Among the Bhutias, marriage by negotiation and marriage by service is the approved type of mate selection, although marriage by service is no longer practiced. Marriage by tradition is monogamous, although the Lachen pa and Lachung pa in North Sikkim practices fraternal polyandry. The concept of junior levirate and junior sororate also

¹³The clan or *Moo* is an integral part of the Lepcha society. It is an extensive form of lineage consisting of blood relations. The male *Moo* differs from that of Female *moo*, and each *Moo* is related to that of their ancestors. This Lepcha *Moo* cannot be changed even after marriage and it's inherited from the birth of an individual.

exists among the Bhutias. Incidences of child marriages, female infanticide, and dowry system have not been reported amongst them (Bhutia, 2015).

A widow belonging to the Bhutia-Lepcha community could inherit her deceased husband's property only for her life. Upon her death, the property would regress to the male members of her dead husband. During her lifetime, she cannot sell, transfer, or mortgage her deceased husband (Lama, 1994 mentioned in Bhutia, 2015).

The marriage between the Bhutia and Lepcha community started only after the Bhutia community's migration in Sikkim. In 1912, the practice of polyandry was abolished, which was highly popular among the Bhutia community. Bhutia community follows the patriarchal system. Polyandry was highly practised among the Bhutia of Lachen and Lachung. Sharing of one common wife with the brother's husbands and the children is named after the eldest one among the husband. The status of women in Bhutia marriage remains. Bhutia sons and daughters are valued for different reasons. Among the Bhutias, sons are valued for their role in the continuation of family and clan; protection and security of the family and provision of old age security to the parents. On the other hand, daughters are valued for the emotional support they provide, for taking lifelong care of the parents and for giving companionship to their mother and helping with domestic work (unpublished Dissertation Bhutia, 2015).

2.4.3. Nepali Marriage custom-

Caste plays an important role in Nepali marriage. The same caste is preferred and if the bride or the groom belongs to higher or lower caste then inter-caste marriage is usually avoided among Nepali Hindu marriage customs and elopement takes place. The Nepali women are allowed to marry a man if he belongs to the same caste and

only the gotra (clan) has to be different. Nepali community is more influenced by Hindu religion.

The system of *daijo* is a significant part in Nepali marriage. The giving of gifts in marriage to daughters by the parents is known as *daijo*. After marriage, the bride adopts the groom's gotra or clan leaving her own gotra. This means women no longer belong to their parent's home and after marriage belong to the husband's family and clan. With regards to the idea of marriage our ancestors said that, "*Keti Manchey ko Jaat Hudaina*", meaning women are born without caste. After marriage her caste and gotra changes as per her husband's. The dominance of patriarchy is common in Nepali society. If a girl is born in a high or low caste, then after marriage her caste changes and she adopt her husband's caste until her death. She is obliged to follow all the rituals, rites of her husband's gotra. Women are considered inferior as compared to men. Other instances can be found in the custom in Nepali marriage;

The ritual of washing feet of the bride in marriage is called "*Ghora Dhune*", translated as washing of feet of the bride and groom in the wedding by the bride's family. This patriarchal system of washing feet has been an ancient custom. It is an important part in the wedding where the bride's family performs it (Chettri, 2019).

Another instance of a patriarchal ritual is at the end of a wedding ceremony. The bride is made to bow down to the groom by placing her forehead on the groom's feet as he is highly honoured. This system in Nepali marriage customs has favoured males because of their high position in society. Males are regarded as the protector, guardian and heir of the family. For the husband, the wife has to put *sindoor* or vermillion on mid-forehead. This is an important symbol to differentiate a married woman from a non-married woman in society.

In Hindu culture, Sindoor or Vermillion symbolises a husband's long life and prosperity. However, this is not the case for Newari women. In the Newar community the girls marry a fruit called Bel. These marriage ceremonies are practiced by both Buddhist and Hindu Newars. In this particular ritual, a young Newari girl at the age of 7 to 10 years becomes a bride and the fruit becomes the groom (Pradhan, 2018). The most important reason for marrying the girl with the Bel fruit is that once she is married to Lord Kumar, she will remain pure and chaste and she would not be considered a widow even after the death of her husband as she is already married to the Lord who is still believed to be alive (Shrestha, 2011). The most important reason is to protect her from widowhood. The girl is in an eternal marriage with a god, so, the death of her mortal human spouse cannot deprive her of her married status and make her a widow. It also enforces widow remarriage in the Newar community making the women free from the Hindu traditional viewpoint of the one life marriage system (Shrestha,2006). The dominance of Hindu male in marriage proves to be patriarchal in Hindu Nepali society. The bride stays at the in-law's house and adopts the culture and religion of her husband.

2.5 Profile of the respondents:

The profile of the respondents has been divided into eight components: Age, Education, Occupation, Monthly income, social groups, Religion, Decision making and Head of the Household. An analysis of this background will help to understand the factors behind singlehood and how it impacts the social and cultural patterns of the Sikkimese society.

According to the district-wise distribution of the never-married women in Sikkim (Census report, 2011) North District has 0.2 percent of never married women followed by South District with 1.50, West with 1.30 and East with 2.20 has the

highest number. The study has been carried out in two districts of Sikkim, East and South, and is focused on the sub-divisions i.e., Namchi (South) and Gangtok (East) as they have the highest number of never-married females i.e., 1,000 and 1,477 as compared to other districts. Gangtok being the capital of the state has the highest number of working females in the town, both the urban and rural areas have been taken into consideration. The total sample size of the respondent is 250.

The social background and the economic position of a person is taken as variables to study the social behaviour, attitude, prejudices of a person, as it governs nature, forms perception of the social world and construction of social reality.

2.5.1. Age of the respondents

It is one of the important variables in the research as it helps to define the characteristics of the individual. Studying the age will also enable us to understand the different age groups of the never-married women and their perception and experience towards singlehood as these experiences vary across age. The age of the respondent will help to understand the group range in which the never-married women belong. The following age group has been given below.

Table 2.1 Age of the Respondents

Age group	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
40-49	66	26.4%
50-59	55	22%
60-69	48	19.2%
70-79	44	17.6%
80 and above	37	14.8%
Total	250	100.00%

Source: Fieldwork 21st June 2017- 1st September 2018.

The above table 2.1 shows age-wise distribution of 250 respondents. The table shows that the respondents belong to different ages from 40 and above. The respondents in the age range 40-49 years are 26.4 percent which are more in numbers, these particular never-married women have just stepped into single life and are already working. This early never-married has just started to experience singlehood whereas, the oldest singles belonging to age 80 and above are less in numbers i.e., only 14.8 percent and have fully experienced single life.

The respondents in their mid-50's is the second highest number i.e., 22 percent which signifies that woman in this age mostly prefer to remain single, they are more active and have been single throughout as it is also the permanent stage of singlehood. The findings reveal a decrease in percentage with increase in the age. This is not astonishing, because with the increased age the likelihood of marrying diminishes, and some tend to marry even at the age of 50-55. The number of never-married women belonging to age 80 and above shows 14.8 percent which is the least compared to other age groups.

Similar observations have been made in the work of Schwenk (1992) where women belonging to age 65 and above were found adamant to live their life in their own way. Another study, by Desai, (1945) also found that the unmarried population has risen up to 40 percent. He focused on never-married women aged 45-49 years and found that in the year 1901, 60 percent were not married and later in the year 1931, this percentage had reduced to almost 16 percent i.e., half the percentage of never-married women.

2.5.2. Educational Status of respondents

Education is a significant tool which provides power to an individual through knowledge, skills, and discipline in life. Consequently, it improves their socio-economic and cultural status. It is one of the important indicators of development in society. After the merger with the Indian Union in 1975, there has been steady growth in the education system in Sikkim. Between the years 1981-1991, decline in school dropout rates especially in lower grades and gender gap in school enrollment. The state excelled in the area of higher education by establishing Central Universities, Technical Institution, Management, Tourism, Tea and Professional Institution for the quality of human resources, local economy and bright future of its pupils (Human Development Report, 2008).

Sikkim is ranked fourth among all states of India on the Composite Educational Development Index for 2012–13. Female literacy rates have increased from 22 per cent in 1981 to 76 per cent in 2011 surpassing the national female literacy rate of 66 per cent (Human Development Report, 2014).

According to the Human Development Index (HDI) of Sikkim, the average literacy rate in 2011 is 83.85 percent. As compared to male literacy rate which is 88.47 percent, the female literacy is less i.e., 78.50 percentages which shows that women are still lacking behind in terms of basic education in the state.

The educational qualification determines the highest level of education attainment the person has received.

Table 2.2 Education of the Respondent

Education Level	Frequency (F)	Percentage (%)
Illiterate	17	7.2%
Primary	40	6.08%
Secondary	48	18%
Higher Secondary	44	16.8%
Graduation	41	16.4%
Post-Graduation	35	14%
Professional	25	10%
Total	250	100.00%

Source: Fieldwork 21st June 2017- 1st September 2018.

The above Table 2.2 indicates the educational level of the never-married women which shows that majority of them in the study have studied till class 10 i.e., 20 percent and only 6.5 percent of the respondents do not know how to read and write. About 12 percent were enrolled for higher education such as Masters and MPhil Degree whereas only 10 percent have opted for professional courses like Diploma courses, Management courses, Law Degree, MBBS, Nursing, etc. About 16.4 percent were graduates and 16.8 percent had passed Higher Secondary education which shows that most of them have tried to obtain a good education. The educational qualifications of these women show that women in Sikkim have received at least primary education and only few are illiterate whereas the majority have gone to school in search of a better life.

2.5.3. Occupational pattern of the respondents

The occupation is also an important indicator in research as it will help to understand the type of job of an individual and identify the main source of income. The primary occupation of people in Sikkim is agriculture as most of the people are settled in rural areas. According to the recent Report on Fifth Annual Employment-Unemployment Survey (2015-16) under Ministry of Labour and Employment, Sikkim ranks second in

the unemployed state with 18.1 percent next to Tripura. This indicates that the people in the state require more job opportunities for their sustenance and still half of the population is striving for employment. Looking at the gender perspective, women in Sikkim are free to work in public and private domains, but the female work participation rate is less than the male counterparts. Across the country, females' unemployment rate is 8.7 percent and for male is 4 percent i.e., female unemployment rate is higher than males. The work participation rate is an important indicator to know the working population of the state.

Table 2.3 District-Wise Work Participation Rate

District	Workers		
	Male	Female	Total
State	47.00	24.71	36.32
North	46.02	34.78	40.61
East	48.79	24.62	37.37
South	48.33	30.92	39.88
West	42.20	15.40	29.19

Source: State Socio-Economic Census, 2006

The provision of 30 per cent reservation for women in posts and services in the state government and public sector undertakings has benefitted the educated women of Sikkim. Women's participation in the workforce is more than 50 per cent. The percentage of women in panchayats, which increased from 36 per cent in 2005 to 42 per cent in 2010–11, has gone up to 52 percent after the 2012 elections.

The following table indicates the types of employment and the percentage of never-married women employed.

Table 2.4 Occupation of the Respondent

Occupation level	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Government services	50	20%
Private Services	37	14.80%
Business	36	14.40%
Unemployed	30	12%
Retired employees	52	20.80%
Others*	45	18%
Total	250	100%

Source: Fieldwork 21st June 2017- 1st September 2018.

*Others include casual Labour, skilled Labour, farming.

The above Table 2.4 shows that the occupation of the respondent is divided into government, private, business, unemployed, retired, unemployed sections and others¹⁴.

The never-married women work in government services such as Welfare Department, Tourism Department, Land and Revenue sections, Education department, Forest Department, Banks, Panchayat, Colleges and Schools which comprise 20 percent. Similarly, 14.8 percent of never-married women have been working in private sectors which include Print Media (Sikkim Express, Sikkim Himali and Sikkim Reporter, Private Bank, Private Schools, Firms, Coaching Centre and NGOs. Almost 14.4 percent of the women have been seen running businesses like Parlours, Grocery shops, Garment shops, Dairy farming, Home-stays, Canteens, Restaurant and Hotels. Never-married women who have been retired voluntarily from service constitute 20.8 percent, of which few are pension holders. And the Other section have been clubbed into services like MGNREGA, Farming, Self-Help Group (SHGs) and Monastery services are 18 percent which shows that women still work as casual labour and

¹⁴Others include people working as casual labour, skilled labour, farmers. Sikkimese women who are not employed in any of the public and private spheres have also been included in this group.

perform other religious duties. Almost 12 percent of women are unemployed¹⁵ and this group of never-married women has been relying on their family and is too old to give services in any field.

2.5.4. Monthly Income of the Respondent

The Monthly income is one of the important indicators which helps to calculate an economic status of an individual and also of those belonging to higher income and lower income. It is also a prime requirement to analyse the economic well-being of those who have never married which reflects their overall security and freedom in the society. There is always an issue with the income discrimination and wage distribution among the female and male group in society.

For better understanding of employment, never-married women are classified into different groups on the basis of their type of occupation.

Table 2.5 Monthly Incomes of the Respondent

Monthly income	Frequency (F)	Percentage (%)
Nil (no income)	17	6.8%
Below 10,000	40	16%
10,000-20000	45	18%
20,000-30,000	43	17.2%
30,000-40,000	37	14.8%
40,000-50,000	35	14%
Above 50,000	33	13.2%
Total	250	100%

Source: Fieldwork 21st June 2017- 1st September 2018.

Table 2.5 indicates monthly income of never-married women which ranges from Rs. 0 to 50,000 and above. The monthly income is simply to identify how much an

¹⁵Unemployment refers to the period of time that a worker recollects to have worked without referring to the income earned or productive nature of employment (HDR, 2008, 57).

individual earns and their economic well-being. Only 16 percent of never-married women have been earning less than Rs.10000 monthly, whereas women with no income is 6.8 percent as they rely on their family income for sustenance. The average monthly income earned by 17.2 percent of never-married women in the study is Rs.20,000-30,000.

Around 14.8 percent of never-married women have been earning Rs.30,000-40,000 per month. Whereas, slight difference can be observed from the pay scale of Rs.40,000-50,000 income which constitutes 14 percent respectively. There are also women who have been earning Rs. 50,000 and above constitute 13.2 percent of the total respondent. In Sikkim, as per the 7th Pay Commission, the monthly income of the people has increased and it has reflected in their standard of living.

2.5.5. Community-wise Distribution of the Respondents

Community is mainly a collection of individuals belonging to similar groups or has similar characteristics. It exhibits some degree of social cohesion and is more than a simple collection or aggregate of individuals. Social cohesion can be formed through shared interests, values, representations, ethnic or social background, and kinship ties, among other factors. It is basically sharing a common sense of unity and identity. In Sikkim, sharing of norms, culture and identity of a particular group is a common phenomenon. The three oldest ethnic communities in Sikkim are Lepcha, Bhutia and Nepalis. Presently, the Nepali/Gorkhas are the largest group comprising 70% of the total Population. Bhutia covers 14% of the population and it comprises Sikkim's Bhutia and Bhutia from Bhutan and Tibet. The Lepchas claims to be the original inhabitants which comprise of 7% of the population (Census, 2011).

Table 2.6 Community-Wise Distribution of the Respondent

Social Group	Frequency (F)	Percentage (%)
Bhutia	30	12%
Lepcha	29	11.6%
Tamang	17	6.8%
Bahun	21	5.6%
Chettri	23	9.2%
Subba	19	7.6%
Mangar	16	6.4%
Sherpa	16	6.4%
Newars	11	4.4%
Rai	15	6%
Gurung	15	6%
Damai	20	8%
Kami	18	7.2%
Total	250	100%

Source: Fieldwork 21st June 2017- 1st September 2018.

The above Table 2.6 gives an account of the never-married women according to their social groups with a sample size of 250. About 12 percent of never-married women belong to the Bhutia community, whereas 11.6 percent of never-married women belong to the Lepcha community. The majority of never-married women belong to Nepali community (Bahun, Chettri, Mangar, Newar, Rai, Gurung, Damai and Kami) in the study sample but do not represent the highest in the state. According to Census 2011, the population of Sikkim comprises 6,10,577 among which the population of Nepali community is 62.61 percent i.e., 5,40,851.

In the present study there is not much difference in percentages between Bhutia and Lepcha community. Most of the Bhutia and Lepcha women are not under compulsion to marry once the daughter reaches marriageable age; the community itself believes in flexibility of marriage and the influence of Buddhism in the community has given women an upper hand to opt for single life. The reasons behind the growth of never-

married women in the Lepcha and Bhutia community was due to lack of eligible men in the community. This group of never-married women desired a groom who could match with the same level i.e., highly educated, working, independent and descent. However, it was difficult for these women to meet men who fulfilled all the qualities of an ideal man for marriage. Majority of Bhutia women also experienced low fertility which hindered their marriage probability in the society. It was reported that some women experienced early menopause which barred child-bearing qualities and with increased age, it was challenging to fulfil the criteria for marriage.

On the other hand, it is also important to note that never-married women belonging to the Bahun community majorly follow Hindu religion which is 5.6 percent. The distribution of community in the particular research is very important as the Sikkimese population comprises various castes and sub-caste. It will also help to understand the group formation of the caste and how it influences one another. As Nepali community comprises of various castes such as Bahun, Chettri, Kami, Damai, Subba, Newar, Mangar there are almost 60 percent of total never-married women belonging to Nepali community, which is extremely higher than Bhutia, and Lepcha which means that women in Nepali community women have been opting for single life and choosing to remain without life partner. Among the other castes, the lowest percentage of never-married women have been found among the Newar community i.e., 4.4 percent because of their unique ritual called *Beli Byaa or ihi*. This custom has been an old traditional system of marrying a young Newari girl before attaining puberty with a fruit called *Bel* (wood apple). This ancient custom is highly significant in the community due to two reasons: Firstly, after the death of her husband she is never labelled as a widow and secondly, it is mandatory for women that before her death she is never called 'an unmarried' woman. The social stigma attached to the

social status of widow and unmarried is highly found among the Newar community which signifies marriage as priority and thus creating difficulty for women to remain unwed for lifelong.

Community is mainly a collection of individuals belonging to similar groups or has similar characteristics. It exhibits some degree of social cohesion and is more than a simple collection or aggregate of individuals. Social cohesion can be formed through shared interests, values, representations, ethnic or social background, and kinship ties, among other factors. It is basically sharing a common sense of unity and identity. In Sikkim, sharing of norms, culture and identity of a particular group is a common phenomenon. The three oldest ethnic communities in Sikkim are Lepcha, Bhutia and Nepalis. Das (1983) argues that the age-old historical evidence showed that the mobility and expansion of population with their existing culture resulted in presence of a mixed society dominantly of Bhutia, Lepcha and Nepali/Gorkha in Sikkim with their custom, culture and religion. Presently, the Nepali/Gorkhas are the largest group comprising 70% of the total Population. Bhutia covers 14% of the population and it comprises Sikkim's Bhutia and Bhutia from Bhutan and Tibet. The Lepchas claim to be the original inhabitants which comprise 7% of the population (Census, 2011). Similarly, there is also a group of traders and businessmen who are dominantly Hindi-speaking which constitutes a visible presence within the greater Sikkimese identity.

2.5.6. Religion of the Respondents

Religion is universal in nature and an important institution in human society. Religion plays a vital role in the functioning of society. It has both a positive and negative effect on people. According to Karl Marx, "Religion is the opium of the masses" which means that religion has certain practical functions in society that were similar to the function of opium in a sick or injured person. It reduced people's immediate

suffering and provided them with pleasant illusions which gave them the strength to carry on. However, Marx also saw religion as harmful, preventing people from seeing the class structure and oppression around them, religion can prevent the necessary revolution. According to Durkheim (1954), "A religion is a unified system of belief and practices relative to sacred things that are things set apart and forbidden." In Sikkim, there is dominance of Buddhism, due to the establishment of Guru Padmasambhava, the first spiritual leader who introduced Buddhism in Sikkim. The three predominant communities viz. The Sikkimese of Bhutia and Lepchas followed Buddhism and Sikkimese of Nepalis ethnicity are Hindus, whereas few Christian followers have also been found.

As per the recent Census 2011, Hindu religion is majority in Sikkim state. Hinduism constitutes 57.76% of Sikkim population. Buddhist plays an important role in the electoral of Sikkim state, forming a significant 27.39% of total population.

Religious teaching could affect fertility, autonomy of women, their decision making, and access to economic resources and so on. For example, in India, several studies, by applying multivariate techniques on secondary data, have found that Muslim population has a strong, independent and positive effect on fertility (Bhat et al., 1990; Dreze et al., 2001; Chattopadhyay et al., 2004; Kulkarni et al., 2005). Coming to the age of marriage, in India, it has been found that historically Hindus and Muslims have had lower ages of marriage as compared to Christians. Keeping in view these causations, religion has been considered as a proxy variable for culture. Again, in almost all parts of India marriages are caste endogamous. In the caste hierarchy, those who belong to the upper end have a tendency to marry off their daughters early, sometimes even before they reach their puberty.

Table 2.7 Religion of Respondent

Religion	Frequency	Percentage
Hinduism	90	36%
Buddhism	61	24.4%
Christianity	40	16%
Animism	36	14.4%
Other	23	9.2%
Total	200	100%

Source: Fieldwork 21st June 2017- 1st September 2018.

Others include: Followers of Brahma Kumari, Kabir Pant.

Table 2.7 shows the religion of the never-married women of Sikkim. There are four religions followed in Sikkim such as Hindu, Christians, Buddhist, Animist and others. Sikkim has been the abode of Buddhism since Guru Padmasambhava, the spiritual leader who had come from Tibet, to spread Buddhism in the state. However, Hinduism gained popularity in the state due to the migration in 1975 when Sikkim became the union territory of the Indian Government. Before 1975, Sikkim was a country which had experienced only Buddhism and Animism¹⁶.

The present study shows that 36 percent of never-married women belong to Hindu religion, 24.4 percent belong to Buddhism, 16 percent of never-married women belong to Christian religion, and 14.4 percent belong to Animism and lastly 9.2 percent to other religion.

According to religious doctrines– “Humans are not considered worthy if there is no union between a man and women”, “the sex outside marriage is sinful” and “the life of women who commits such act goes to hell”. Celibacy and Monasticism is highly forbidden as marriage helps one lead to spiritual life. However, if such is the case of

¹⁶Animism is one of the religions where the deity is the nature and people worship ancestors, nature such as Kanchendzonga is also worshipped in Sikkim as it is believed as the creator of the Lepcha community. Mun is the traditional religion of the Lepcha people.

teaching then where can we locate single women? Do religious texts control the choices of women and their life? What is the role of religion in this contemporary society of women? If religion is the ultimatum in one's life, then what challenges will single women face in the coming future?

Recently, note that few women have converted their religion and adopted Brahma Kumari and Kabir Pant which was recently introduced in Sikkim.

2.5.7 Decision-Making of the Respondents

Decision-making is an important task in one's life. It not only enables an individual to choose as per their choice but gives oneself the power to decide and develop leadership qualities. It is also a composite of access, capabilities and actions that shape whether women have influence over the polity or decisions about their private life. It has a major influence and affects the lives of the female population. While discussing decision-making and the values, it is important to view the different levels in which women are free to voice. There has been a major increase of women in political and economic sectors. But one cannot ignore the discrimination faced by women in major institutions of the country. The increasing demand of women is also a need for the society to bridge the gap of gender discrimination. Women in positions of power may not champion gender equality: women and their interests are diverse. Men continue to dominate some sectors and the most powerful positions in society. There are also cases where women are more likely to lead 'soft' ministries, such as health, education or women/children's welfare, and still only rarely get finance, home, security or foreign affairs portfolios (Krook & O'Brien, 2012). Women's political power differs between regions and countries and, within countries, between sectors and socio-economic groups.

It is also important to note whether women have been making decisions on their own or forcefully. In a country like India, women have been decision-makers in the political and social field. However, there are still females who have been forcefully making decisions that can be either under society’s pressure or family pressure.

Most of the Indian family is subjected to decide the groom of the bride which is purely on the basis of ‘eligibility’ which means that the age of women has to be youthful and younger than the man. On the contrary, the age of the groom does not make any difference even if he is much older than the bride. He has full power to make the innumerable choices for selecting the bride based on his preferences; the limitation occurs if the woman is older than the man. However, in some cases even if the women are much older than the husband's it is acceptable in the family, bearing children and health issues is not the problem for some.

Women in Sikkim do not face such an age gap in marriage because of the old age Sikkimese tradition; marriage is purely ‘choice-based’. Eloping is also an important marriage process in our society.

Table 2.8 Role in Decision–Making

Roles in decision making	Frequency (F)	Percentage (%)
Rejecting groom by choice	39	15.6%
Unmarried decision willingly	43	17.2%
Inherit property	35	14%
child adoption legally	18	7.2%
Main Earning Member	31	12.4%
Eldest Member in the family	20	8%
Career decision	39	15.6%
Living solely	25	10%
Total	250	100%

Source: Fieldwork 21st June 2017- 1st September 2018.

The above table 2.8 shows percentage of never-married women in decision-making. The decision-making has been divided into seven categories viz. rejecting the groom, remaining unmarried by choice, inheriting property, child adopting, sole responsibility of family, career decision, living without parents.

Almost 15.6 percent have rejected a groom for marriage due to various reasons, some found it older than their age, low economic status, preference for same caste and religion. On the other hand, 14 percent of respondents have taken sole responsibility for their family and siblings. And only 10 percent have decided to live far from family members and relatives. In Sikkim adoption has remained an alternative choice for never-married women, almost 7.2 percent of never-married women have adopted a child specially belonging to deprived children in their society. 12.4 percent are the main earning members in the family. Women in the most senior positions are more likely to have actual decision-making power.

Women residing in urban areas experience fewer chances of getting married as compared to their rural counterparts. However, among certain tribes, pre-puberty marriages are culturally uncommon. Even though things are changing, caste still plays a role in determining the timing of marriages and hence included in the model as another proxy for culture. The kinship ties of never-married women are much wider and strong in both urban and rural areas.

2.6 Summary

To sum up the analysis and discussion on the socio-cultural background of the respondents the following findings are observed.

About 30 percent openings have been reserved for females in governmental and public sector undertakings. In Sikkim majority of the population lives in rural

areas and most of them practice farming and rear livestock and do petty businesses. The small funding and financial needs of the people are met by the loan companies like: JICA, NEDFI and many more. Sikkimese women meet their needs either by working in their own land or by selling vegetables or doing small-scale business. Not many women are dependent on their male counterparts and are the decision maker in the house. As per the Survey conducted in 2015 by the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Sikkim got 40 points for safest place for women among other states in India based on the legal restrictions on women's working hours in factories, retail, IT industry, criminal justice system affecting working women (Seth, 2016). This report does give us the idea that women in Sikkim are almost free from societal restrictions and encourage women to work for jobs in various sectors. Similarly, this chapter focuses on the detailed study of women in Sikkim who are not married lifelong and are independent in-terms of decision-making and career advancement. The tools employed for in-depth interviews were questionnaire, interview schedule for data collection. The East district of Sikkim is popular for the working population in governmental and semi-government sectors.

Therefore, the research study conducted on both of these districts help in understanding the social and cultural profile of the never-married female respondents. The age of women is a crucial factor as it determines their suitability for marriage which signifies their youth and ability to breed / procreate. And if she crosses the 'marriageable age' then there is a possibility of entering the world of singlehood. The majority of never-married females are of the (40-49) age group which signifies that woman in Sikkim have remained single in this particular age group, whereas the percentage decreases with the growing of age and likelihood of marrying diminishes

as only 9 percent belonging to age group (80 and above) have remained lifelong singles.

This particular age group is very important as the early menopause starts with various health issues which is a major concern for this group. With the onset of menopause, women's bodies start to experience changes and psychological stress occurs. The mean age at menopause is 51, but some women in their 30s and others in their 60s, it is not certain as it depends on the body of an individual where most of the women also experience at age 40-58 years. For most of the women menopause is simply as 'a change of life' from one stage of their life to another (Kale, 2013).

Another important factor which also needs attention is education. In Sikkim; the literacy rate among females is 76 percent in 2011 which is less than males i.e., 88.47 percent (Human Development Report, 2014). Similarly, 22 percent of never-married women have completed Graduation, and only 13 percent have received a post-graduation degree. It is not astonishing to know that women have attained primary education, which helps them with the basics (ability to read and write). These never-married women in Sikkim have sustained themselves through education and only 4 percent are illiterate. When it comes to occupation, most of the Sikkimese women work in governmental departments, private firms, own business; some are retired employees and farmers, casual labourers etc. There are no gender differences when it comes to work as women have indulged themselves in all kinds of jobs such as: Welfare Department, Tourism Department, Land and Revenue sections, and Education department, Forest Department, Banks, Panchayat, Colleges and Schools comprising 25 percent. Almost 21 percent of never-married women have been working in private sectors which include Print Media (Sikkim Express, Sikkim Himali and Sikkim Reporter), Private Bank, Private Schools, Firms, Coaching Centre. The

majority of women can be seen selling vegetables in the market, Grocery shop, Garment shop, Dairy farming. Some even own Home-stays, Canteens, Restaurants and Hotels. There is no limitation for jobs and no boundary for the men and women in-terms of earning and sustaining livelihood in Sikkim. The monthly income of these never-married women ranges from Rs. 5000 to 50,000 per month. However, 6 percent of never-married women have no income and are totally dependent on their parents and siblings.

Chapter 3

Factors Associated with Singlehood in Sikkim- A Symbolic

Interactionist Inquiry

3.1 Introduction

Our everyday life creates certain meanings and symbols. These meanings and symbols are recreated to have a better understanding and interaction with society. Our social world is constructed through the mundane acts of everyday social interaction. As Blumer (2004) points out, "Symbolic Interactionism is not just a medium by which societal factors are expressed, but instead the very basis from which a society emerges". The societal factors and growth of the never-married population in Sikkim have been studied with the help of Symbolic Interactionism. Symbolic Interactionism is significant in this study because it helps to understand the nature and overall dimension of never-married women in Sikkim. This theory clearly shows the dual process of interaction, i.e., the link between the individual and society. Thus, it becomes easier to understand the mechanism and the function of society which impacts the lives of never-married women as a whole.

With this backdrop, the factors behind the growing population of never-married women in Sikkim have been divided into two components: primary and secondary factors. Primary factors deal with the major part which is responsible for the generation of never-married in the state. It basically highlights the socio-cultural profiles such as; age of the respondent, which plays a significant part in deciding one's marriage. Some women in the study have crossed the marriageable age, which limits their chances of getting married. Similarly, education also plays a vital role because it is also found that women who pursue higher education hinder their

marriage prospects. The study has explored other factors such as occupation, religion, culture and health which is discussed further in detailed manner.

Secondary factors focus on psychological reasons behind never-married women. It entails responsibility, preference, fear, groom's demand, less parental pressure, and bonds. These factors cannot be seen by an individual but can be felt in the latent form. Mostly related to the emotional state of mind which a person deals with daily life and impacts one's attitude and attributes towards society.

Therefore, it is imperative to understand and evaluate both the factors, i.e., primary and secondary using Symbolic Interactionism.

3.2 Symbolic Interactionism

It's a micro-level theory coined by Herbert George Blumer in the year 1969, a follower of pragmatist philosopher George Herbert Mead and Charles Horton Cooley. He has used an interpretivist perspective while examining social life. Blumer was a social constructionist and was influenced by notable thinkers such as George Herbert Mead, John Dewey, W.I. Thomas, Robert E. Park, William James, Charles Horton Cooley, Florian Znaniecki, James Mark Baldwin, Robert Redfield, Louis Wirth (Redmond, 2015).

Symbolic Interaction is a framework that helps to understand how society is preserved and created through repeated interactions between individuals. The interpretation process that occurs between interactions helps to create and recreate meaning. It is the shared understanding and interpretations of meaning that affect the interaction between individuals. Individuals act on the premise of a shared understanding of meaning within their social context. Thus, interaction and behaviour are framed

through the shared meaning that objects and concepts have attached to them. From this view, people live in both natural and symbolic environments.

The emergence of symbolic interactionism was a response to the mainstream perspectives on society that dominated sociology at the time (such as Talcott Parsons's structural functionalism). These dominant, positivist approaches tend to examine society from the 'top down', focusing on the impact of macro-level institutions and social structures and how they impose on and constrain individuals (Carter & Fuller, 2015). However, symbolic interactionism was developed to understand society from a 'bottom up' perspective where micro-level study was given more emphasis in-order to understand the function of society. The individual played an important role because it used language and symbols in their communication with others.

According to Blumer, social institutions exist only if an individual interacts; society is not a structure but rather a continuing process where agency and action is emphasized (Collins, 1994).

Human culture creates symbols. These symbols can be everything. It is a relation among individuals within a society. Symbols allow us to remember and reminisce, to evaluate and plan, to coordinate, to communicate abstract thoughts, to think about the future, and to consider alternatives and outcomes. In this present study, a symbol to identify singleness can be observed when there is a search for eligible bride and groom for marriage of the particular individual. The time of waiting for marriage, crossing of marriageable age eventually leading to acceptance to the present status of singleness are the cycle of life stages of never-married women (Ramdas, 2012).

For Blumer, meanings are intersubjective and perceived, and constantly reinterpreted among individuals. There are no meanings inherent in the people or objects which an actor confronts – actors rather place meanings upon such entities which are perceived as unique (ibid).

3.3 Blumer's Three Premises

Blumer has formed three premises of symbolic interactionism such as:

The first premise is that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them.

The first premise refers to everything that human beings encounter in the world i.e., physical objects, actions and concepts. Essentially, individuals behave towards objects and others based on the personal meanings that the individual has already given to these items. Blumer was trying to put emphasis on the meaning behind individual behaviors, specifically speaking, psychological and sociological explanations for those actions and behaviors.

The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows.

Blumer examined that people interact with each other by interpreting or defining each other's actions instead of merely reacting to each other's actions. Their "response" is not made directly to the actions of one another but instead it is based on the meaning which they attach to such actions. Thus, human interaction is mediated by the use of symbols and signification, by interpretation, or by ascertaining the meaning of one another's actions. Meaning is either taken for granted and pushed aside as an unimportant element which need not to be investigated, or it is regarded as

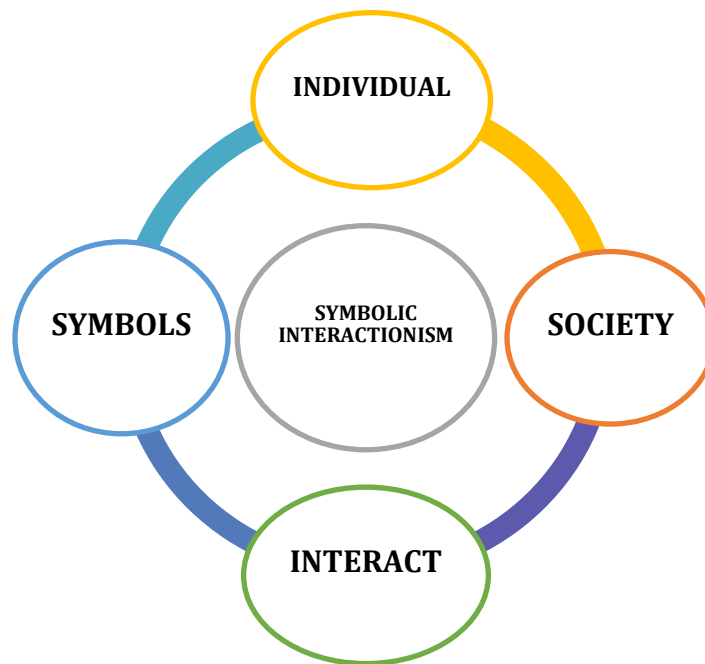
a mere neutral link or one of the causal chains between the causes or factors responsible for human behavior and this behavior as the product of such factors.

The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters (Blumer,1969).

Symbolic interactionists describe thinking as an inner conversation. Mead called this inner dialogue 'minding', which is the delay in one's thought process that happens when one thinks about what they will do next. These meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he or she encounters. We naturally talk to ourselves in order to sort out the meaning of a difficult situation. But first, we need language. Before we can think, we must be able to interact symbolically. The emphasis on symbols, negotiated meaning, and social construction of society brought attention to the roles people play. Role-taking is a key mechanism that permits people to see another person's perspective to understand what an action might mean to another person. Role-taking is a part of our lives at an early age, for instance, playing house and pretending to be someone else. There is an improvisational quality to roles; however, actors often take on a script that they follow. Because of the uncertainty of roles in social contexts, the burden of role-making is on the person in the situation. In this sense, we are proactive participants in our environment. These premises are significant in the present study of never-married women because it helps to understand their meaning of singlehood, self-indication, and perception of society.

Blumer's three premises revolve around these areas: individual, symbol, society and interaction. The crux of symbolic interactionism has been portrayed in the given below (Figure 3.1).

Fig.3.1 Shows the Cycle of Symbolic Interactionism:



Source: Author's self-compilation

3.4 Symbolic Interactionism and Singlehood

Individual and collective actions of any nature or complexity reflect the meanings that people assign to things, as these meanings emerge in and are transformed within the context of human group life. Blumer incorporated these assumptions into his vision of social life as an ongoing stream of situations handled by people through self-indication and definition.

Symbolic interaction functions into two thoughts; firstly, we consider, interpret, and adapt to other people's acts, and secondly, our symbolic interactions connect us to the society, connect the society to us, and reflect the society in which we are acting. For

instance, women who are not married in Indian rural society are considered to be unfit and not eligible in the marriage market. The society sees never-married women as an odd one in the group of married women and in religious ceremonies she is considered to bring bad omen (Jethani, 1994). In contrast, the never-married women living in Sikkim have escaped such negative assessments regarding singlehood. In the present research, the respondents working and earning an attractive salary are considered independent, pillars of family support and free from worldly suffering. There is more dominance of women in the family especially if the male members are not working; they are considered to be the decision-maker in the house and mostly honoured for her sacrifices in raising younger siblings. The Sikkimese society is closely knit in-terms of familial bond, early demise of parents and the need to educate younger siblings or to look after children of widowed siblings have also been identified as contributory factors for women to remain single lifelong.

Regardless, of any reasons their unmarried status is circumstantial or voluntary, these women are segregated for defying the conventions of society (Gandhi, et al., 2016). However, in contemporary society, women are less dependent on a man for living because she is the sole earner and independent (Jethani, 1994). The primary aim for women is happiness and fulfilment. As women have been exposed to varied working culture, they become self-sustaining which leads to greater involvement in the family and career, limiting her is to delay marriage or never-marry (Jones & Ramdas, 2004). In Kerala, study conducted on never-married women reasons for remaining single were factored into choice and chance. As per singles freedom and independence, witnessing unhappy married life of others, not meeting the ideal person, failed love affair, and social service were categorized in choice. On the other hand, finances, no one to take care of, horoscope problems, physical appearance, disliking sex life and

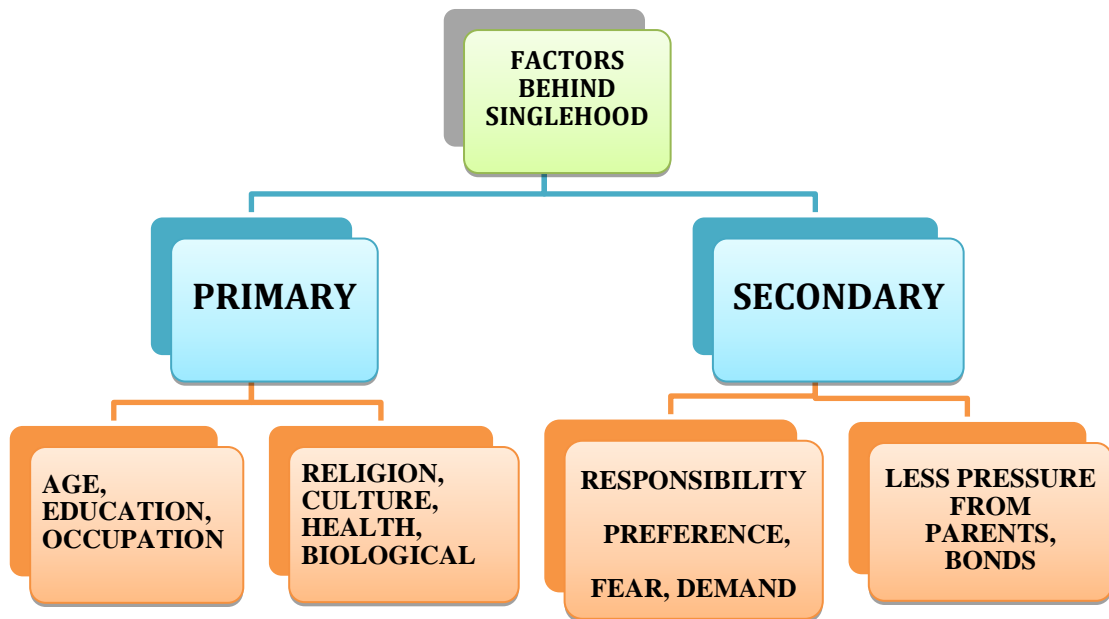
opposite sex etc., were a matter of chance (Devassy, 2008). These are some of the inter-connected reasons for singlehood. The crux of the study mentioned that if women opt for singlehood by choice, then she is satisfied with her present status and if she is forced to stay single by circumstances then it becomes a burden. In another qualitative study on never-married women identified personal choice, circumstance of times (social and historical conditions), social structures or norms around dating and immediate family responsibilities as the additional factors that contribute to women remaining single for life (Hamilton, Gordon & Whelan Berry, et al., 2006).

In context of Sikkim, factors have been segregated into primary and secondary as per their nature of impact on the lives of the women. Primary factors help to classify the broad reasons behind singlehood. These include age, education, occupation, religion, culture and health. Secondly, Secondary factors help to understand the main reasons behind remaining single like psycho-social reasons such as: responsibility, preference, fear, demand for groom, less pressure from parents and bonds.

3.5 Factors behind Never-Married Women in Sikkim

The factors contributing to never-married women in Sikkim have been divided into primary and secondary factors. Under the Primary section, eight components such as age, education, occupation, religion, culture, health and biological changes have been mentioned. Secondary factors are more psychological reasons which triggered women to remain never-married which includes; responsibility, preference, fear, demand for working groom, non-interference from parents and strong familial bonds (Refer Fig.3.2).

Fig. 3.2 Flowchart of Factors Behind Singlehood



Source: Author's self -compiled

3.5.1 Primary Factor

3.5.1. i) Age

Age is a crucial element in human life. It is also an important aspect for deciding marriage and starting a family. Economic Times (2020) reports that, “The age in marriage is an important factor that can improve maternal and child health outcomes”. It is an important factor for both the sexes; the criteria for choosing one’s mate for marriage. Traditionally, the idea for selecting a groom and bride was that, for men women should be younger and for women, men should be older. However, when it comes to marriage all the other factors also come into play.

It also acts as an important tool for restricting the choice of marriage for couples. In Indian society, women and men have different aspects for choosing partners in marriage. The difference of age among the spouses affects heavily in the formation of relationships. Thus, age in marriage determines the physical and mental support

between husband and wife. The following stages after being married begins with the adjustment, support and children (Glick & Landau, 1950). The 'right time' for giving birth to a child and raising without getting old depends upon the parents. Another factor is the stability of relationships in marriage which depends upon the age of couples. If wives were younger than their husbands then it is more stable, yet age differences were not viewed as leading to more or less marital dissolution (Heaton, 2002 mentioned in Wheeler, 2010). With the increased age between the couples, there is lack of family planning and risk of fertility and health problems among women.

In the West, the media compared never-married women of age 25 with that of 'Christmas cake' because after the women cross the age 25, she becomes 'unwanted' in the marriage market likewise; Christmas cake becomes a leftover which is no longer in use after Christmas eve. (Brinton, 1993; Tokuhiko, 2010). Thus, women who do not get married after a certain age are regarded as 'unwanted', 'leftover' (To, 2013; Fincher, 2014) and discarded from the marriage market. The old never-married women were found to be lacking in terms of adjustment and compromising with their ideals for marriage and family life (Berend, 2000). Singleness is an 'undecided destiny,' i.e., none of the women thought that they would be single in their late years (Klinenberg, 2013).

In India, as per Hindu mythology, Manusmriti (the first Indian doctrine) mentions that "perfect marriage is that where the age of the bride is one third the age of the groom". The age differences between the couples for marriage were such that, a 30-year man should marry a girl of 12 years old and a man of 24 should marry a girl of 8 years (Das, Gautam, Das and Tripathy, 2011). This traditional system of choosing mate on these age criteria is not functional now and the law do not permit and there is legal punishment i.e., Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2006. The age factor plays an

important role for both the sexes and women have greater needs to fulfil than a man because after the certain age women attains puberty, she needs to be under the husband and her chastity is decided by her in-laws. For women, age is the symbol of youth, fertility and adulthood because her marriage is decided on these criteria and if she lacks then it becomes difficult to find the suitable partner for marriage (Gupta, 2017).

Finding a suitable mate not only delays one's marriage but being selective in choosing a mate for oneself leads to late singlehood. Singlehood and selectiveness are categories linked with one another and form different identities. Selectiveness is a highly undecided notion located within and established by a variety of contradictory discursive contexts. The negative consequences can occur in being too selective i.e., self-destruction, isolation and loneliness, the ultimate social punishments (Lahad, 2012).

In the case of Sikkim, early marriage was prevalent in the state resulting in dropouts among children (HDR, 2014). There has been practice of elopement in the Himalayas (Lama, 1994). The impact of such early marriage adversely affected the health, education and economic status of the young people and ultimately ended in dissolution of marriage. However, from the year 1990, there has been gradual shift in the age of marriage among women due to various reasons such as 'Small Family Schemes' introduced by the government of Sikkim in the year 1997, for controlling early marriage and providing incentives to girls of age 13 (Socio-economic Census, 2006). In terms of ethnic community, the lowest proportion of marriage is found among the Lepcha community which shows 37.24 percent than the rest of the population.

Nonetheless, 22 percent of women belonging to age 20-24 marry before reaching the legal minimum age of 18 years. On average, women are slightly more than four years younger than the men they marry (Fact Sheet, Sikkim National Family Health Survey, 1998). In the present scenario, women have been seen delaying their marriage due to a number of reasons; these reasons vary as per the individual and its societal setup.

The respondents belonging to the age 40-49 years are 29 percent. This particular group of never-married women have just stepped into single life and are at the initial stage to experience singlehood, whereas the oldest singles belonging to 80 and above are less in number i.e., only 11 percent have lived fully and are experiencing single life.

In Sikkim, there is a belief among Buddhist families that women who are not married throughout her life and attain old age are considered to be pure with regard to her chastity because such women are free from worldly burden and pain (Interview, 21.03.2019). This idea of chastity and purity of aged never-married women can be traced from the time when Bhutia-Lepcha women opted for celibacy (*Anee*) nuns in monasteries in Sikkim (Bhattacharya in Lama, 1994).

The crossing of marriageable age and living without a man for lifelong have been an alternative choice for single women. Herbert Blumer (1969) identifies that individual may act singly; they may act collectively, and they may act on behalf of the representation or group of others. Here, in the present study this is very much relevant because women in their early 40s are still waiting to get married and those who have crossed their 50s are ready to be single lifelong. This age factor influences the decision to remain single or marry.

The respondents in the age group of 50 and above are 25 percent as compared to other age ranges, which means that the majority of women in this age mostly prefer to remain single. It is also the permanent stage of singlehood. With the onset of menopause, women's bodies start to experience changes leading to physical and psychological stress. The never married women belonging to age 60-69 years are very sensitive in nature as it is one of the signs of old age and are prone to serious health issues like arthritis, hearing loss, cataracts, refractive errors and many more. This is very much relevant to Blumer's understanding of symbol, he quotes as, "we become somewhat conditioned to associate a particular meaning to a given sign by exposure to the sign and what it represents", experiencing menopause and becoming sensitive in nature is a sign which signifies and derives meaning i.e., never-married women is becoming old, and thus represents the phase of age 60-69 years an old age. A respondent aged 48 said,

"I had once been invited to my friend's daughter's birthday party, where she introduced me to her in-laws and one of her uncle asked me, where does my husband work? and how many kids I have? I was silent for a moment, and embarrassed at the same time, and my friend's mother answered on my behalf that I was yet to find one... Maybe I looked old or maybe it is normal for people to assume that women of my age are already married..."

Here, in the present narrative the respondent encountered an 'awkward situation'. When women cross the age of 40 and above people have preconceived notions that at this age they are already married and have children. They don't inquire about their marital status but straight away throw questions like-how is your child and how is your husband...? because once the individual crosses the marriageable age

then he/she is expected by the society to start a familial life i.e., husband and children. This sometimes is awkward and uncomfortable for these women. According to Blumer, individuals act based on the meanings that objects have for them. These meanings emerge from interaction with other individuals and with society. The meanings are continually created and recreated through interpreting processes during interaction with others.

The central principle of the interactionist perspective is that the meaning we derive from and attribute to the world around us is a social construction produced by everyday social interaction. Similarly, another interview highlights how society also has a role to play in the formation of such meaning for its individuals.

According to the father of Respondent-

“My daughter has reached the age 45 and it is hard to find a suitable man for her, she is really independent and doing well in her career, but I wish to see her get married! I am just worried that after we die, there will be no one to take care of her, since childhood she has been very selective in-terms of her friends, school, career and people around...”

Respondent’s father expressed his concern about his daughter’s late marriage in spite of her flourishing career, being self-sufficient and looking after herself. The daughters in Sikkim are perceived to be an asset and are highly respected. It is ironic that parents do not force their daughters to get married but once they reach marriageable age, they desire to see their daughter get a groom. Parents do not wish to see their daughters live their whole life alone without a companion.

The fear of living alone in old age and no generation to carry forward the family's inheritance creates a major hurdle. A respondent age 55 said,

“Getting old and living with my family is a bliss but sometimes I feel lonely when I want to share my inner feelings and thoughts...I find that no one is around, everyone is busy with their own life. I think a friend doesn't fulfil that emptiness nor do any siblings that can fill that void... At my young age I didn't want to think about marriage and now when I actually want it, then it seems impossible ...”

The respondent regrets her present state as it becomes difficult due to the loneliness that creeps in with passing years. The place of a companion cannot be filled with that of a friend, sibling, relative. She recalls during her young age, marriage was not important and taken for 'granted' and it was believed that it will happen one day and it does not need too much attention but now, it seems significant when she is unable to find a man for marriage. This delay in marriage has become one of the reasons resulting in singlehood.

This is very much applicable in Blumer's theory. Meaning is either taken for granted and then pushed aside as unimportant or it is regarded as a mere neutral link between the factors responsible for human behaviour and this behaviour as the product of such factors. Similarly, these women have the perception that due to their own negligence and ignorance in-terms of marriage has left them single.

Blumer talks about the exchange of ideas and concepts in his work where an individual and society works hand-to-hand for creating new meaning and recreating thoughts and formation of society. Likewise, it is a two-way process behind women

not getting married; firstly, if there is reluctance towards marriage from women's side and secondly, if the parents leave the decision of marriage on children.

“Being an elder member in the family, I felt shy and a bit awkward to tell my family that even I wanted to get married...they see me as an ideal, I have lived my whole life for my sisters and brothers, but no one even asked me what I wanted! even my parents didn't think about it... I could not openly talk about my feelings to them...I just left it on my destiny...”

(Respondent, Age 62)

Blumer explains that human beings interacting with one another have to take account of what each other is doing or is about to do and are forced to direct their own conduct or handle their situation in terms of what they consider. Here, the never-married woman who is in her 60s shares that she was not comfortable expressing her views on marriage or having a male friend with her parents, because the society has levied latent responsibility which comes along with the position of being the eldest daughter in the family. The viewpoint of society is very much significant for the never-married. She has been viewed as the responsible and an example for the younger siblings in the family. In the process of setting an example the eldest daughter's need has been ignored and sometimes not taken as primary. Similar cases have been observed in Chinese, American and Japanese societies where the eldest daughter in the family either delays marriage or even remains single lifelong (Ferguson, 2000). The role of the elder sibling is seen as second guardian after parents where sacrificing is a common phenomenon for the younger ones. Therefore, the need of the first born is ignored and taken for granted. The position of the daughter can be determined by the

responsibility given at a certain age hence leading one to choose between her marriage and natal family.

3.5.1. ii) Education

The educational level of the never-married women shows that the majority have been educated till Secondary level i.e. 20 percent. In the case of Higher Secondary education, it is 19.5 percent which shows that most of the respondents have tried to acquire a good education. About 15.5 percent of never-married women were also graduates. Only 12 percent have taken higher studies such as Master's and MPhil Degree whereas only 8.5 percent have opted for professional courses like Diploma courses, Management courses, Law Degree, MBBS, Nursing, etc. There were also 6.5 percent of the respondents who do not know how to read and write.

The educational qualification of these women shows that women in Sikkim have received at least primary education and only few are illiterate whereas majority have gone to school. Education has made women too smart to settle for a union that burdens them disproportionately as caregiver for children, housekeeper, marital companion, good daughter in-law, etc.

In Southeast Asia, the main reason for late marriage is the impact of education and changing patterns of labour force participation because with education, the age increases and eventually an individual crosses the marriageable age and is likely to remain single or have late marriage. Apart from education and work, there are other factors which are responsible for late marriage such as rising divorce rate, urbanization and work pressures among the working people and changes in perception of sexuality, marriage squeeze and lastly, less desire for children (Jones, 1990).

Historically, patriarchal society has been deeply rooted in old Sikkimese society where gender-based disparity has been observed (Thapa, 2009). Only the privileged could acquire higher education i.e., either from abroad or from Kalimpong and Darjeeling which was popular during the colonial regime. The royal Namgyal family and elite Kazi (landlords) could avail this opportunity but it was far-fetched for the common people to pursue education so most of the household preferred to send their male child in monasteries to learn Buddhism. Monasticism gained popularity among the Sikkimese society which included teachings of Buddha, life values and meditation and few also learnt skilled arts like Thangkas (paintings).

In lieu of spreading education and making it accessible to the people of Sikkim, the Britishers and the Chogyal (king) had established few institutions like Palzor Namgyal Girls' school established under Christian Missionary by the king Palzor Namgyal. However, a very few numbers of girls attended schools and huge numbers of dropouts were observed.

In the late 19th century, Christian missionaries also became interested in spreading modern education in Sikkim. But the then Maharaja Tashi Namgyal did not favour Christian missionaries which enabled Scottish missionaries to function. In Sikkim total 21 schools were set up including 6 government schools, 13 missionary schools and 2 schools under landlords (HDR, 2006).

With due course of time, with the introduction of higher education and professional courses, the degrees received from the institution has not only changed the outlook of people but has helped in advancement of their career. Employment and better wage enhance the living standards in society and better opportunities in life. Among the never-married women, education plays a major role especially for the middle-class

family as they have high aspirations and competence leading to better opportunities in life.

“I feel proud of my education and career, women of my age do not get such opportunities, either they are living with their children being dependent on small needs, which makes me feel sad... I have pursued what I really wanted in life and am satisfied... In my community, women are mostly married and dependent on their husband...”

(Respondent, Age 55)

In the study, the number of educated never-married women are 40 percent, these are working in the government sector. These respondents have received higher education and have good salaried jobs. On the contrary, 6.5 percent of women did not even attend school due to family responsibility and unmet challenges. Women have been working in small sectors as well as owning their own business.

Similar studies by Gould (1982) also revealed that education was an important factor for remaining single, but employment played an important role here. Gould made a distinction between ‘likely’ and ‘unlikely’ groups, such that: ‘likely’ females had received a higher level of education than ‘unlikely’ females”. The reasons for non-marriage given by the ‘unlikely’ group were match problems, parent’s needs, dislike of marriage, low income, and others (Gould, 1982). However, the definite reason for remaining single cannot be limited to education only because the link between having higher education is linked to achieving a better career and comfortable life.

“My education has been an important part of life...which made me self-reliant... I did my graduation and immediately opted for M.Ed. which helped me pursue a teaching career... My passion for academics did not

stop here... I further continued my studies and finally opted for a PhD.

In the midst, I didn't realise that I had to get married and settle down

like everyone else..."

(Respondent, Age 40)

The need to dedicate time to pursue education and set career goals has been a reason for women not opting for marriage and remaining single in Sikkim. Similar research study in Vaughan, and Statham (1987) found that never-married women (and those who married late) during graduation tend to have greater career progress than those who marry.

Human beings become an acting organism. It refers to the idea that human beings must have a makeup that fits the nature of social interaction.

According to Blumer, there are three types of objects-physical, social, and abstract objects. Physical objects include (chairs, trees, or bicycles) social objects (students, priests, president, mother, friend) and abstract objects (moral principles, philosophical doctrines, or action of people). The meaning of everything has to be formed, learned, and transmitted through a process of indication- a process that is necessarily a social process. Career advancement increases the possibility of having better life opportunities. The increased employment prospects and the tendency to marry at a later age caused growth in the never-married population of women (Ferguson, 1995, 2000).

"I could not complete my education because I was weak in studies and my other four siblings became well educated and got into their job early.

Since childhood, my parents felt that they needed more attention than me due to their better performance in their academics. I indulged in

household chores and helped my mother in the ration shop. From the early dawn till late evening my day would be spent in kitchen and sometimes in farm... Our relative, neighbours and people around praised me for being a mature and sensible child and blessed me that I would get married in a good family (dherai aashirbad lagos...nani le ramro jwain pahos! However, I remained unmarried for a lifetime..."

(Respondent, Age 70)

As per Blumer's understanding, human group life on the level of symbolic interaction is a vast process in which people are forming, sustaining, and transforming the objects of their world as they come to give meaning to objects.

Human group life is a process in which objects are being created, affirmed, transformed, and cast aside. The life and action of people necessarily change in line with the changes taking place in their world of objects.

Career commitment is one measure of career involvement. Not being married tends to promote the establishment of a career, utilizing one's training and mobile within that career. Expecting that women who had remained never-married for greater periods of time in graduate school would be characterized by higher levels of educational and occupational achievement than women who had divorced after relatively longer periods of marriage in graduate school. Marriage before or during graduate school would have an impeding effect on women's educational progress in graduate school as well as their later occupational achievements.

"I have pursued graduation and done my M.A. in Nepali language, then opted for higher education. My mother wanted to see me as a teacher which I value a lot... she became my guide for all the achievements in

life... I have one brother and a younger sister they could not fulfill my mother's dreams, so it became my responsibility to do that made me a good daughter for my parent... I was afraid to share that I had a boyfriend with whom I wanted to get married, it was unacceptable for me to even think of a man in my young days as I became an ideal one for the family...

Later, with growing age when I actually thought of getting married then it was already late... ”

(Respondent, Age 54)

The respondent shares her reason for not getting married even though she is educated and accomplished. Her whole life was dedicated towards becoming an ideal figure in the family. There was no pressure for marriage from family, or her relatives. In Sikkim, it is observed that once women are educated and employed, marriage becomes a secondary choice. The decision to get married does not become necessary until she is pressured by society, the values, and principles in life change only if she sees her age group mates getting married or forming her 'own family'... Now expand this simple example to all the things around you—objects, family, friends, values, beliefs, etc.—the meaning for all of them came from your social interactions with other people. Once we acquire such meanings, we can then create additional meanings or combinations of meanings through the process of thought... but all thoughts start with meaning learned in our social interactions.

The meanings of things around you and of your culture are perceptibly affected by the people with whom we interact. The more diverse your social interactions, the more diversity in your interpretation of things. Such diversity affects your behaviour, sense of self, relationships, and world view (Mussolf, 2003).

3.5.1. iii) Occupation

Among the 250 respondents in the study, almost 33 percent were working in government sectors which also indicates that never-married women are self-sufficient when it comes to finances. Advanced career and living independently has been the economic support for these women, especially at an old age. Women who are not married tend to devote most of their time at the workplace, the priority and satisfaction gained from job rather than other activities. According to Blumberg (1984), the level of economic power is the main aspect to understand the status of women in the World's Societies where the economic power of women is high and are able to decode this power into relatively high status and can change the perception of men (Devassy, 2008). When power becomes knowledge, every bit of knowledge, it's discursive which is only a perception. Foucault (1969) in his 'Archaeology of knowledge' stresses more on the acceptance of the possibility of differences and one cannot force ideas on others. It is once self-interest and freedom to choose what the society wants. Here, in this study it becomes necessary to let women choose their alternative to marriage and live life on their own without society's obligation for husband and children. It is the nature of society to form the family for procreation but in the case of never-married women it does not exist, they have created their own knowledge and sustenance of life in the absence of a long-term partner. It is also very important for never-married women to keep the network of friends and family in-order to fill the gap of lifetime partners. They are never found staying unaccompanied as they are mostly surrounded by people who keep their life going. Out of 250 respondents, 40 percent revealed that they do not suffer from loneliness because most of the women live with family and relatives and only few were found living alone. In Sikkim, most of the houses are built close to each other which prevents isolation, they

form close knit relationships which helps them to communicate easily in difficult times. At the same time, 10 percent of the never-married population have less interaction with family and friends and neighbours, they do not want to be disturbed by anyone and also stay alone or with siblings.

Increase in industrialization and urbanization, gave a boost to the work opportunities for women and helped choose single life or delay marriage (Moran, 2004). Level of education, career opportunities, social transformation, democratization, and support for gender equality were some of the factors that aided them. These economic and political transformations in turn encourage changes in attitudes towards traditional belief and personal values (Rossel, 2012; Hamamura, 2012; Himawan, et al., 2017).

Singlehood was strongly associated with education, especially for women (Ward, 1979). The educated, career-oriented women were more likely than men to strive to go up the social ladder and thereby isolate themselves in society. The African-American women have difficulty in choosing their mates due to their higher education and higher achievements which does not fulfil the criteria and match the level of women for marriage (ibid).

A career is defined as a lifetime process of work-related activities that includes both objective and subjective parts (Hall, 2002). A study conducted on twenty-seven childless never-married women of age 30 and above in Lagos, Nigeria. The factors behind women opting for singlehood are economic empowerment, financial independence, personal mate selection preference, marital experience of other women, cultural beliefs and practices, family background factors, and higher education (Chizomam & Abanihe, 2014).

The pattern of higher singlehood rates among women of higher intelligence, education and occupation could be interpreted in several ways. On the basis of similar findings, other researchers have observed that there is greater pressure on higher status women as compared to men to avoid “marrying down”, causing the former to remain unmarried (Hollingshead, 1950).

“My friends thinks that I am over-qualified for marriage ... They tease me saying that, men are either under-qualified or I am highly qualified in-terms of marriage... They feel that finding a groom becomes difficult if a women is highly educated and well established in career...Somewhere, I agree to their assumptions because there is a long list of criteria that needs to be fulfilled for my groom, In these later years I have become more selective... and now it is impossible to marry a random guy for the sake of marriage...”

(Respondent, Age 49)

With the growing age, women tend to become more selective, and their choices become limited in terms of marriage. The demand in the marriage market becomes limited when women are older than the prospective groom. The preference and choices are two components which sometimes get overlooked or ignored once there is an urgent need for marriage of a man or woman.

A majority of young women are expected to work after completion of their education and the more highly educated a woman is, the more likely she is to be employed. Though women’s educational and occupational opportunities have significantly expanded, there has not been an increase in the number of women planning to sacrifice motherhood since the role of mother also is an exceedingly valued one.

Economic empowerment fueled by individualism and education are known to raise women's expectations and requirements for a desired partner. Kalmijn (1998) posits those high expectations about marriage, unable to find prospective partners, lack of acceptance and strategy for forming relationships would result in singlehood. Similarly, selectiveness is one of the prime factors for deciding marriage.

In this study, occupation/ career is one of the major factors behind delayed marriage and also for women opting for being single lifelong. Participation of women in economic activities is high in Sikkim. Apart from engaging in agricultural operations in rural areas, women are playing a major role in other economic activities. The State Government has approved 30 percent reservation for women of Sikkimese communities in posts and services to be filled by direct undertakings.

In early society, marriage played a significant part in one's life. Being 'settled' meant getting married and starting a family. The parent's responsibility towards children was to get a suitable groom for the daughter and have a family. Stress increases when unable to find a groom for the daughter and the unmarried daughter continues to live at parent's house. She is sometimes a burden for the family if unemployed. In the 1970s when girls at the tender age eloped with the aged man was considered 'normal'; even if the age gap was more than ten years. However, in the present time the situation has changed because if the daughter has established a career and is not married then she is called independent, responsible towards parents which seems positive for society.

In the case of a groom, the situation is also tough because the demand for a good husband comes with the package of a good job and high income for better security for

the daughter or equal economic level to match if the couples decide to get married. The question of choice and chance has been for the never-married women in Sikkim.

“In olden days, finding a job was easier than finding a man for marriage... I belong to a middle-class family where job and education was placed at a higher position than other requirements in life. I used to visualize that life would be complete if a woman had a government job and employed a husband. This imagination shackled when I actually struggled to find a mate for marriage because my preference was a man with a high position in a government job but most of them were either married or divorced... I waited for the right time and right man but eventually, my interest faded with age in marriage...”

(Respondent, Age 61)

Women usually find themselves in a difficult situation when they have to choose between their family’s responsibilities and career (Valentova, 2005; Claes, 1999). Here, the respondent waited for a man working in the government sector and single but soon she was disappointed to find that they are either married or divorced.

This disappointment in finding a suitable mate for marriage seems even more for working women in later age due to the limited choice of men of the same caste and religion.

The idea to search or wait for the desired groom leads women to either give up on marriage and opt for never-married life. In Sikkim, almost 30 percent of never-married women did not contemplate on living single at their young age. However, the limited choice of men of the same caste and religion makes them choose singlehood. There is no doubt that the percentage of never-married women have been increasing

and some embrace singlehood and some regret being single but men have also contributed in encouraging singlehood among women.

3.5.1. iv) Health

The well-being of a person reflects in the living standards of the family. Health is a state of complete well-being: physical, mental, and emotional. This definition emphasizes the importance of being more than disease-free, and recognizes that a healthy body depends upon a healthy environment and a stable mind. Sociologists have demonstrated that the spread of diseases is heavily influenced by the socioeconomic status of individuals, ethnic traditions or beliefs, and other cultural factors.

Taking care of family is a huge responsibility for both the daughter and son. If not married they are expected to take care of the parents and siblings. In the case of women, she is assigned with the duties and responsibilities of the house as the aged parents demand from the children. In the process of fulfilling the demand of parents and society, she does not find it significant to marry and start one's own family. Marriage becomes secondary and burdensome and parents and responsibility become priority.

“My family is my home, I cannot separate myself from it... my Apa is a diabetic patient so I need to look after him. My two younger sisters are studying, and I am the only one working, they need my support financially and mentally. I am afraid if I get married then my family will suffer...”

(Respondent, Age 44,)

In Sikkim, women usually live with the family rather than living separately. Some parents demand economic support if the children are working outside and living alone.

Once the daughter is married and starts living with the in-laws, dual responsibility begins. The marriage of women makes her distant from her own parents as the in-law's house is considered to be the primary and her birth home is secondary. Shifting from one family to another changes her living style and duties because the husband, children and in-laws are now her first family. It becomes mandatory for women to adapt to new cultures and the social life of their husband; this is difficult but not impossible.

Therefore, the never-married women prioritize their responsibilities of family over their personal needs. The respondent is in fear that after her marriage, she will have to leave her father and her sister and it will be difficult for them to manage their affairs.

Biological factor-

Apart from socio-demographic factors, biological factors also play an important role in women remaining single. Physical and sexual attributes define one's ability to choose mates in the marriage market, women who are attractive and young tend to attract men of higher status (Hakim). Throughout history women have been marked as the symbol of beauty and the likelihood of getting chosen for marriage at the earliest.

The physical attribute is significant for deciding the wedding of the couple; and in some cases, if the bride is not attractive or has some physical deformities then the family has to compensate by paying huge amount of dowry to the groom's family and if failed to pay the dowry amount then she is physically tortured by the in-laws or husband (Munshi, 2014). This method of selecting the bride has been continuing from

generation and proves that even today 'A women's body gets constructed throughout her life by patriarchy and capitalism' (Sabala & Gopal, 2010), which clearly identifies that physical attraction for marriage plays high importance in the society and if some lacks in these qualities, then rejected from the marriage market and remains single for lifelong.

Patrilocal marriage, cultural norms and parental control over the choice of wives for sons and the process of selection of brides marks the traditional form of marriage system which is still functional in present society (Dasgupta, Maitra & Mukherjee, 2008).

Menopause

In India, the traditional outlook towards menstruation is different because it was more of a taboo than simply a phase of life among women. It is regarded as impure and women were distant from the family members during the menstruation period. It has also been attached with impurity of women, especially in Manusmriti. The Taittiriya Samhit describes women's monthly period as an expression of impurity with tales stating prohibition on communication with women and avoiding physical contact or sharing food. However, the fertile stage attended by a girl was also rejoiced and welcomed as she was regarded as an adult who is eligible for marriage and child-birth. With the attainment of puberty, the long wait of the parents to find a groom for the daughter gets over.

The two major phases experienced by women are menstruation and menopause; starts with fertile lives and reaches its end. These two stages in women's lives have created a major turning point.

Menopause is also called, “The last milestone in a woman's life; she fears the most and is nervous to face” this line has been extracted from the book ‘Self-Care for Women’ (Sheth, 1999). This is also one of the reasons where women cannot decide for marriage as it becomes impossible to bear children. As marriage demands procreation and starting a family, though few have adopted a child or used costly artificial fertilization. Menstrual cycle ends by the age 45 to 55 i.e., late adulthood. However, some women still form wedlock after menopause.

The menopausal symptoms vary from one female to another. The pre-menopause and post menopause among women cause various bodily changes and psychological problems too. It becomes difficult to adapt to these phases. The reproductive organs start experiencing changes like shrinkage of the ovaries, fallopian tubes, external genitals and breasts. The uterus and body muscles start weakening. Menopause is not an illness or a disease, it is a normal physiological phenomenon of life. The reproductive age of women decreases with increased age. In developing countries, pregnancy and childbirth are the main reason behind death and disability for women of fertile age (World Bank, 2008 cited in Wang, 2010). The dominant views on fertility, ageing and female roles help shape women’s expectations of and attitudes towards menopause, and influence the social status accorded to women in middle age.

Singlehood also affects fertility levels among women. Tan (2011) focuses on the social relationships of never-married professional women belonging to age 38 to 52 in Bangkok, Jakarta and Manila. He used a comparative approach to analyse their family network, social support and social change in these South-East and Asian countries. The low fertility rate in these countries have resulted in a decline in population, increase in aging population, therefore, immigration became necessary for maintaining its balance. Therefore, the growing proportion of never-married women

who have crossed their childbearing years is considered as a social ill that needs to be improved and corrected by the policy makers and absence of government support for controlling the growing proportion of never-married women in these countries (ibid).

The reason some women delay marriage and some never marry is due to the fear of not being able to conceive. Marriage demands further heredity growth; offspring and the sexual need of both the husband and wife is shunned. The majority of women who have remained single are in their mid-50s and even if they want to marry then it becomes a drawback as menopause has already started and bearing children becomes impossible. The partner whom women seek is mostly care givers and supportive than fulfilling any physical needs. Women have been living single for the past many years and it becomes difficult to adjust to new roles and family lives. Though few women have been married in their late 50s and are coping well with the husband's family, there are grievances for not having a child.

3.5.1. v) Religion

Sikkim has a majority of Hindu population comprising 68 percent, Buddhist 27 percent and Christians with 3 percent and 2 percent consist of other religions of the total population (Census, 2011). It is known to be the house of nature worshippers and animists. It has a long history of spiritual worshippers and healing practices among the tribes. Buddhism has been one of the ancient religions borrowed from Tibetans and followed by the people of Sikkim. Due to the mass migration in the state, the increase in the population led to the highest number of Hindu populations followed by the Buddhist people.

As per the Socio-Economic Census 2006 reports, the population of Hindus in the state comprise 59.98 percent which is the highest in the state as compared to other two

religions i.e., Buddhism consists of 29.60 percent and Christians with 7.64 percent. People following Islam, Sikh and Zoroastrian shows 4.52 percent, 1.16 percent and 1.15 percent of the total population of the district.

The Bhutia people are the second largest community in the State. There is not much difference in percentage between Bhutia and Lepcha community. These two communities have been opting for singlehood due to low sex ratio. Most of the Bhutia and Lepcha women are not under compulsion to marry at a certain age, the community itself belief in flexibility of marriage and the influence of Buddhism in the community has given women an upper hand to opt for single life (Bhutia, 2017). It is also important to note that never-married women belonging to the Bahun community follow Hindu religion which is 10 percent. The distribution of community in the particular research is very important as the Sikkimese population comprises various castes and sub-caste. It will also help to understand the group formation of the caste and how it influences one another. As Nepali community comprise of various castes such as Bahun, Chettri, Kami, Damai, Subba, Newar, Mangar there are almost 40 percent of total never-married women belonging to Nepali community which is higher than Bhutia, Lepcha, Sherpa and Subba which means that women in Nepali community have been opting for single life and choose to remain without life partner (Interview analysis).

In the case of religion, Buddhism, Hinduism, Animism, Christianity and other religions are found in Sikkim. Religion acts as a dominant factor for marriage. The method and teachings of Buddha have place for unmarried women too and holds the idea that an individual can be happy with or without the social norms of 'being tied to a male' and 'the life without a man can also be lived gracefully'. The attainment of salvation and sacrificing the worldly pleasure are also one of the main teachings of

Buddhism; here 'Worldly Pleasure' can be anything which attaches one to its society and human relationship. However, the place for single women is also maintained high as the husband and children are also 'worldly pleasure'.

The inter-caste marriage in Sikkim is less preferred, as the indigenous tribes and community of Sikkim: Lepcha, Bhutia and Nepali people prefers to marry from its own community, some even claim that due to the fear of extinction of tribes, people generally choose the groom and bride from their own community. The custom of elopement is still practiced in rural as well as urban areas which help the couples to marry if they belong from different caste and community. The traditional marriage in Sikkim took place at quite an early age, when women got married at the tender age i.e., 12 or 13 and left schooling and took care of the household at an early age. The paradigm shift in Sikkimese marriage can be observed from the age of bride and groom. The traditional marriage took place at the tender age of (13-14 years) where elopement was in the rise, education was not the priority, early motherhood resulted in high delivery deaths and affected child's cognitive development (Lama, 2001) but eventually, with increase in education system, advanced career among women as well as men tend to delay marriage at late adulthood i.e. 30, 40 and even 50 age; some population has been opting for non-marriage or singlehood which resulted in growing trend of never-married groups. In Sikkim, the never-married women have also experienced caste discrimination in terms of selecting the mate.

"I had been in a relationship for about 10 years with a boy from a higher caste (Bahun community) and his father didn't approve of our relationship because I am from a low caste (SC community); many questioned our relationship and raised numerous questions regarding our caste... Though I was able to persuade my parents, he found it

tough. I assumed that this time, he would be able to resolve this issue, but it became impossible for us to continue our relationship because it did not end in marriage, So I gave up and never looked back... ”

(Respondent Age, 52)

The respondent has experienced caste discrimination during a love affair with a man of higher-caste. This past experience has impacted her thought so she finds it difficult to choose another man. As well, she has squandered her long-term energy which she invested in a man for nearly ten years. When a man and a woman commit to a relationship with the intention of marrying later, the amount of attachment and support dependency grows over time and when an unfavorable circumstance comes, it usually results in a break-up whether mutual or forced. As a result, occasionally both spouses ‘move on’ and marry different people, while others abandon the idea of marriage and prefer to remain single for the rest of their lives. This is also one of the explanations provided by Sikkim’s never-married women.

“I have been postponing marriage as there are no eligible single men in my community... ”

(Respondent Age, 49)

Sometimes, there is a lack of eligible men in one’s own community. As a result, women who seek to get married to an educated and career-oriented man from their own community are dissatisfied as there is limited choice and the chosen one’s are either in a love relationship or already married. Because of caste prejudice in marriage, women’s options become limited, and they eventually seek men from different communities which might result in long term success or failure.

“We practice Kabir pant religion and because Sikkim has a very small population, meeting a life partner of the same religion is unlikely ... I don't want to bring my community down and I am afraid that if I marry someone outside my religion then I'll be cast out of society...”

(Respondent Age, 54)

The respondent belongs to Kabir pant religion which restricts her chances of meeting and having an affair with other religion followers as it becomes mandatory that the followers of this particular community should abide by its rules and regulations. Any followers marrying an outsiders of Pant religion then it will disharmonize their peaceful environs. This is also one of the factors that leads never-married women to seek for a man of a different religion.

“I agree that women must leave their parents' homes and move in with their husbands, however only women experience major changes in-terms of household, religion and faith than men! While the son has fewer chances to adjust... So, I avoid marriage because this concept makes me sick...!”

(Respondent, Age 53)

Some respondents have also declined marriage because their feminists' beliefs prohibit them from compromising in marriage. Marriage has become a hardship in this patriarchal society since adjustment is demanded only from women rather than men. For some women, the concept of virilocal is unacceptable, which is also one of the reasons why women do not want to leave the house where they have spent the last thirty to forty years. Thus, leaving a woman to choose the never-married life over married life.

3.5.2. Secondary Factors

The Secondary factor helps to find out the psychological reasons for women remaining single of women for singlehood. Psychological reasons include responsibility of family members, less interference from parents, fear of commitment, preference of groom from the same caste and community, failure in love life, less cohesiveness within the family, seeking autonomy and physical appearance.

3.6.1. Responsibility

Responsibility is the duty to take care of something or someone which can be permanent or temporary (Cambridge Dictionary, 2009). In case of never-married women in Sikkim, the responsibility to take care of parents or siblings has affected their marriage decisions in life. The two factors contributing to women's singlehood are the structure and responsibilities of family. It is also found that as a child, one third of every never-married woman did not want to get married as their parents strongly encouraged them for higher education and work (Gordon, 1994).

“When I was young my mother looked after me and raised me on her own. We are like best friends and if I get married, then I won't be able to stay at my in-law's house or bring my husband to live with us. Our society forbids males from staying in their wives' homes after marriage. As a result, it is my responsibility to care for my mother in her old age. She is completely reliant on me and I will be selfish if I abandon her!”

(Respondent, Age 43)

Many respondents in the study have been taking care of their old, aged parents, disabled siblings or nephews or niece. Most of the spinsters avoided marriage in order to help their family financially (Interview analysis). The daughter who is financially

independent tends to be an economic support to their parents. Economic conditions regulate one's attitude and behaviour. They have been assigned no role in the process of decision-making. Economically independent women are a recent phenomenon.

It's been more than 8 years that I have been looking after my brother who is paralyzed completely. He is unable to move, eat, or speak, so I am his only support and in my absence my sister looks after him but she has school, so I cannot leave him alone.

(Respondent, Age 47)

Nevertheless, this role structured much of these women's social lives, not only prior to their parents' deaths, but thereafter. Some were devastated after their parental death; the responsibility was prime for the elder sibling in the house. The need to look after the disabled brother and younger college-going sister made the respondent feel pressed with her responsibilities making her hesitant towards marriage. If a woman disregards her responsibility, then she is not respected in society. The need to take care of family members is important.

Watkins (1984) found that spinsters are involved in household management, looking after the aged parents and siblings.

3.5.2. i) Less pressure of marriage from parents

In Sikkim, the parents belonging to the middle-class category have high aspirations from their daughters regarding their career and life. The educated girl child has responsibility towards parents. If the parents are aged then children take care of their needs. When asked whether they are being too demanding and do not consider men of lower educational level, all three participants agree that they have the right to choose because compatibility with a spouse is important in making their marriage successful.

However, they see compatibility in a man more in terms of being a good companion rather than economic provider (Ibrahim & Hassan, 2009).

However, the respondents belonging to age 40 and above have been living with their parents and taking care rather than staying single. The never-married women have been working independently and looking after their siblings, younger generation and relatives.

Women depended on their parents for social, economic and psychological needs. Women in this role generally viewed their relationship as morally obligatory and necessary.

Parents also teach children gender roles. Gender roles are an important part of the economic function of a family. In each family, there is a division of labor that consists of instrumental and expressive roles. Men tend to assume the instrumental roles in the family, which typically involve work outside of the family that provides financial support and establishes family status. Women tend to assume the expressive roles, which typically involve work inside of the family which provides emotional support and physical care for children (Crano & Aronoff 1978).

“My parents have always pushed me for my career and higher studies but in the case of marriage, they have never thought of it... For once I thought of having my own family but couldn't gain that courage to take that step further...”

(Respondent, Age 54)

3.5.2. ii) Fear

According to Zack (2003) the factors behind singlehood for both male and female are increased divorce rate, lack of desire to compromise and the “fear” of commitments. In Sikkim, the never-married women have avoided marriage because of constant fear of commitment, they are comfortable with the present status of being single and for some parent’s failed marriages has scarred them psychologically. In many instances, parents opt for separation rather than divorce, which leaves a negative impact on the psychology of the child. Some of them have also faced domestic violence which have led these women to develop a fear against marriage. In Sikkim almost 16.8 percent of women face physical violence, 1.6 percent faces sexual violence, 2.4 percent encountered physical and sexual violence and 20.9 percent faced physical and sexual violence of particular age group (15-49 years) in the state (NFHS-3, India 2005-06). Some remain unreported while only few are given in the data.

These cases are mostly found among married people. The Sikkimese society has experienced violence in every household, either between husband and wife, father and children, daughter-in-law. The reason behind this is mostly economic dependency, alcohol abuse, drug addicts, dignity of family and remaining silent about the torture. Almost 15 percent respondents in the study have experienced domestic abuse in the family which reflected their decision to get married as they are cautious in future they might have to deal with the same violence.

“My childhood has been pathetic because my mother left us when I was studying in school and my elder sister was in class 6, we were staying with our father but eventually, he was busy having an affair with many women around, they both became our childhood nightmares. So, whenever I think of marriage, my father’s ignorance towards

responsibilities, it just scares me and I don't want to repeat history... My only support is my sister now...”

(Respondent, Age 46)

The fear developed in childhood memories leaves a scar on the life of an adult. The respondent has experienced stressful time with her parents and has created an image of unhealthy marital relationship which is difficult to expunge. At a very young age, she learnt to take care of her younger sister and this guardian-like figure has avoided marriage which changed her personality and approach towards marriage. Thus, she stayed never-married and supported her sister.

3.5.2. ii) Preferences

In Sikkim, there is caste endogamy. The marriage not only takes place between two people but between two families and inter-caste marriage are not permissible. Dowry is not reported in the state, there is the system of bride price.

Among the Bhutia community, men want to get married to women of the same community but women demand husbands who are government servants or of the same status if the criteria do not get fulfilled then wait or remain single (Bhutia, 2015).

The choice of selecting a perfect groom who fulfills the required criteria in marriage is also a huge task. The process is lengthy for people opting for arranged marriage, but in case of elopement, the case is vice-versa. The decision to get married starts when the family thinks the groom and the bride agree to get married. This decision is left upon them and there is no pressure from family for marriage. There is also the demand for younger brides for their physical appeal and child bearing capacities.

In choosing a marriage partner, the first requisite is homogamy. However, within those limits, it is almost universally accepted that hypergamy, a situation in which the woman marries up, is more common and more acceptable than hypogamy, a situation in which a woman marries down. Both husband and wife are comfortable when the husband has higher status than the wife. The cultural preference for hypergamy results in a mating gradient: women prefer men who are of equal or higher status than themselves, and men prefer women who are of equal or lower status than themselves. The result is that two categories of people tend to be squeezed out of the marriage market: high status women and low status men.

The physical attributes are referred to in mating gradient, in-terms of height and weight. Mating gradient means that when men increase in status, they widen their pool eligible; when women rise in status, their pool of eligible men becomes narrower, leading to an exacerbation of the female marriage squeeze¹⁷.

3.5.2. iii) Marriage Squeeze

The marriage squeeze refers to the unequal demographic in which the number of potential brides does not approximately equal the number of potential grooms. The remaining proportion of unmarried groups will be squeezed out of the marriage market (Schoen, 1983). Thus, this category either marries late or never-marry. Similarly, Marriage squeeze has been found among the Bhutia community in Sikkim while interviewing the never-married women between age 45-50, almost 34 percent of respondent has said that,

¹⁷Retrieved from <https://family.jrank.org/pages/1136/Marriage-Squeeze-MatingGradient.html>

“It is difficult to find a potential groom in the Bhutia community for marriage because most of the men are either unemployed or are under-employed and only few men are left for marriage”

Therefore, some women are left unmarried as they are unable to find suitable mates in the state.

Similar case has been observed in China, where unmarried men belonging to age 15 to mid-30s who have limited prospects of employment are called *guang gun-er* or “bare branches”. This proportion of men is in high numbers and sex selection is prevalent. In the marriage market, women are less in numbers and able to “marry-up”, these women tend to identify traits of excess unmarried males and reject them. These men belong to the lowest socio-economic class, unemployed and under-employed, live and socialize with other bachelors of the same category. Thus, these leftover males are regarded as worthless and do not contribute much to society (Trivedi and Timmons, 2013).

However, these reasons are not the same for both sexes because patriarchy in society has not only encouraged women to live single lives, but it has also made it more difficult for men to find wives.

For instance, in the case of North India, a male dominated society where a derogatory term- ‘bare branches’ is considered a shame for men if unable to find a bride, and crossed the marriageable age (Mishra, 2018). The definition of being a perfect ‘man’ is one who marries a woman and becomes a good provider, a father, a husband and not questioned in society (Osella & Osella 2006). This also gives the idea that despite gender, marriage has built its root in the ground for both men and women and thus, it becomes difficult for establishing non-marriageable societies.

3.5.2. iv) Demand for Groom with lucrative Government Job

As per Labour Bureau, Govt. of India (2013-14), the unemployment rate per 1000 persons in Sikkim consist of 87 males whereas, in-case of females the number is 344 and the total number of 158 per 1000 persons found to remain unemployed in the state. As per 2017, Sikkim has 24.5 percent unemployment rate in the state.

It might be that men are mostly unemployed and women seek to marry the person with good financial status. Therefore, it becomes difficult to find a groom for marriage and the decision to choose becomes limited for women. As compared to men, women are well placed which leaves them the decision to not marry and stay single. The career and family effects heavily on the one's decision to marry. Therefore, it is the choice for both the genders to remain single.

The explanations include both structural and ideological changes related to (a) economic development, (b) educational and human development including women's education, labour force participation, and gender relations, (c) cultural factors including kinship system, religion, ethnicity, and caste system, and (d) public policies. Examining changes in these countries allows us to reflect on the relevance of several major theories about global family changes.

3.5.2. v) Social Bonds

Relationships of a woman within the natal family undergo change over time and more so as she grows up. As a girl is considered to be a sapling to be transplanted at the time of marriage (Bagchi, 1995). The natal home is treated as a temporary place where they learn to behave as women and are trained in the skills most necessary for her future roles as wife and mother. Hence, fathers are usually indulgent of their daughters, who they perceive will leave the natal home and then come back only

occasionally for rare visits. Within the Sikkimese home, girls usually share a close affectionate bond with their father, who love and spoil them, while mothers usually discipline their daughters and train them for their future roles in life.

Some never-married women do not have strong family connections and relationships to the next generation but develop bonds with their colleagues, peer groups and sometimes, family cousins.

However, the curiosity and judgmental attitude towards women not having a parent partner or spouse/ husband is a questionable issue. Gender disparity can be seen in marriage and remaining single. “Women’s status is seen as a strong predator of childcare”. This remains true for women in Sikkim who are unmarried because the kind of bonds developed with kin or family members makes it difficult for these women to start fresh with a man in marriage. Adapting and adjusting to new behavioral roles and environments seems difficult for women who have spent almost 30-40 years at home with their family. Therefore, almost 55 percent of respondents seem to avoid marriage because they are deeply attached with their family which makes it difficult to compromise with their new homes or in-laws. These are some of the reasons stated by the never-married women in Sikkim.

3.6. Summary

Symbols are probably the single most important quality that gives us our humanness; without symbols no other human creation is possible. We interact with each other, acquire information and ideas, share feelings and get to know each other because of our symbolic interactionism. Symbols allow us to consider, interpret and adapt to other people’s acts and they also connect us to society. The mind would not exist without society, symbols, and the self.

The influence in one's life has its consequences throughout its entire journey. Similarly, the never-married women in Sikkim have been opting this lifestyle not solely due to its choice but because of multiple factors that have affected its decision to remain single lifelong. The never-married women in Sikkim have not only increased in these years but likely to increase in coming years. The reasons behind this increase have been divided into two factors such as primary and secondary factors.

Primary factors comprise broader aspects: socio-demographic, cultural and economic causes (Age, Education, Occupation, Religion, Culture, Health, Biological). Age is an important factor for deciding on marriage because if a woman crosses the marriageable age of child-bearing then she either delays or never-marry. Another factor is education because Sikkimese women have been opting for higher studies and then her goals for life changes and continuing the study further changes her priority in life and ultimately ends in non-marriage. The factor which also affects her decision to marry is occupation because a steady job with high income makes once life comfortable and majority of women in Sikkim are working in government sectors and running business which makes one more independent and not be reliable to man for fulfilling her needs. Therefore, women have remained single and rejected the idea of marriage.

Secondary factors are those which affect psychologically to an individual which include responsibility, high preference, independence, less pressure from parents, high demand for government jobs and not suitable groom found. This particular factor has affected mentally to women for remaining single because the circumstances faced by the women in her family, and the positive attitude of Sikkimese parents towards their children has influenced the decision to unwed.

It can be concluded that there is no single reason or cause but instead multiple factors which work simultaneously behind singlehood in Sikkim. The delaying of marriage or not marrying has led to the tremendous growth in the never-married population in the state. This proportion of women has not been born out of stigma but rather acceptance in society is one of the major causes of its breeding. Unlike other states in India (Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, West Bengal) where single women have been increasing but faces discrimination and stigma in the dominant married world (Jha, 2016). In urban cities, working women face negative taunts or mockery from peer groups or colleagues for staying single and difficult to get room as paying guests, constant surveillance from the society makes her privacy invaded (Neshla, 1994). In the case of rural areas, single women become burdensome for the parents or the family. Sometimes, she is regarded as bad omen and barred from religious functions. However, in the present study, so far, such a situation has not been faced by the respondent. The problem only arises if she does not have a steady job or not be able to take care of herself and most importantly, the social support at the time of old age becomes a major concern for these never-married women.

Chapter 4

Lived Experiences and Interpretative Analysis of Never-Married

Women in Sikkim

4.1 Introduction

In order to understand the social environment of the individual, one of the most integral concepts in Social Science research is lived experiences. Lived experience is defined as an individual's ongoing process known "from within". It is conceived through theory, particularly the theoretical strand which related it to phenomenology (Depraz, Varela, & Vermersch, 2003; Francisco et al., 1991).

The term lived experience is used to describe the first-hand accounts in the research. The origin of the word 'experience' has been derived from German language *Erleben* which means to grasp when something is alive. Lived experience in German language *Erlebnis* fuses from two meanings; the closeness of experiencing through interpretation, reinterpretation, and communication into its last form i.e., the experienced (Gadamer, Weinsheimer & Marshall, 2004).

The lived experience of an individual or a group of people can be interpreted through the use of phenomenology. It is an important approach for understanding the phenomenon and extract the participants' accounts (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Creswell, 2007). Phenomenology occupies a prominent position in modern philosophy (Dowling, 2007). It is mainly used to explore and understand the very structure of human experience and consciousness. It is also used to "uncover and describe the structures, the internal meaning of structures, of the lived experiences" (Manen, 1997 mentioned in Mthembu, 2013).

As a philosophy, phenomenology is a particular way of approaching the world and apprehending lived experience (Ponty, 1962). The phenomenological research method questions, “What is this experience like?” and keeps a focus on the life world or human experience as it is being lived (Lavery, 2003). The prime goal of phenomenology, apart from documenting the participant’s lived experiences, is to question the *how* and *why* of their experiences and/or of any particular phenomenon they go through (Groenewald, 2004). The idea of phenomenology was first started in 20th century by the German philosopher Edmund Husserl. Edmund Husserl explains that the meaning of the lived experience may only be understood through face-to-face contacts between the researcher and the object of research. Such dealings include attentive listening, interaction and observation, in order to create a true representation of reality (Husserl, 1970 cited in PhD Thesis of Baird, 2012). He mainly developed the descriptive approach to create the essence of phenomenology through bracketing presuppositions, or *epoche*. This essence would emerge from the things themselves, “*zu den Sachselbst*” (Moran, 2000; Mapp, 2008). As a research method, Phenomenology is a process to re-examine what Husserl termed the ‘things themselves’.

Following Husserl’s and Heidegger’s ideas and concepts, Jean Paul Ricoeur emphasised that the meaning of lived experience can only be achieved through the process of analysis and interpretation which will develop new insight to the study in the field of social science (Ricoeur, 1976). He opined that narrative language, lived incidents and past experience will help to extract the lived experience of a person (Ricoeur, 1973).

4.2 The Origin of Ricoeur's Ideology and Phenomenology

Edmund Husserl's approach is to study the units of consciousness that the respective speaker presents himself as having—that he “gives voice to”—in expressing the proposition in question. Husserl labelled the units of consciousness as intentional acts and Brentano calls these intentional acts as intentionality. Husserl was influenced by Brentano, who made a distinction between psychological phenomena and physical phenomena. Brentano found that the psychological is different from the physical, as the former is characterized by what is known as intentionality.

Brentano and Husserl maintain that every mental phenomenon, or act of consciousness, is directed toward some object. They are about something that lies outside. While for Brentano, this is the feature of all psychological phenomena, Husserl replaces psychical phenomena with experiences or intentional experiences. Phenomenology is conceived as a transcendental idealism. It means that transcendental ego is the source of all meaning.

There are two types of phenomena; mental and physical. Mental phenomena constitute what occurs in the mind when we experience something. They also include the acts of consciousness, or its contents. On the other hand, physical phenomena include the objects of external perception starting with colours and shapes.

Eidetic reduction will help to recognize what essential components make a given phenomenon special (or unique). Phenomenological studies stress on how people perceive and talk about objects and events, rather than describing phenomena. This involves ‘bracketing’ one's preconceptions and allowing phenomena to speak for themselves. In 1906, Husserl created the method of *epoché* or ‘bracketing’, from his work on *Logical Investigations*. The phenomenological description is to be performed

from a first person's point of view, as to ensure that the respective item is described exactly as is experienced, or intended by the subject.

It primarily focuses on questioning *taken-for granted* assumptions and describing phenomena as they manifest themselves in an intentional manner in and through the consciousness of the experiencer (Moran, 2000). According to Husserl, the base of phenomenology is on pure logic, meaning, intuitive fulfilment and intentionality. One of the main themes of transcendental phenomenology is intersubjectivity. Intersubjective experience plays a fundamental role in our constitution of both ourselves as objectively existing subjects, other experiencing subjects, and the objective spatio-temporal world.

Another phenomenologist named Martin Heidegger has taken the phenomenological tradition into its new direction and rejected the idea of Husserl. He found that the phenomenology was incomplete and mainly focused on the thoughts or consciousness of being rather than the things around the being in the world. Heidegger philosophy on hermeneutics has influenced the two phenomenologists such as Gadamar and Paul Ricoeur (Iwuagwu, 2017).

He introduced the concept of Dasein in his phenomenology in his major unfinished work which he called his magnum opus-*Being and Time*. His work mainly focuses on temporality, historicity and nothingness. He focused on the traditional ontological question "what is being?", "what does the verb 'to be' actually mean?", being-there in relation to its temporality and historicity. He has differentiated the word *Being* and beings meaning entities (Cerbone, 2008). The question of the meaning of *Being* is concerned with what it is that makes beings intelligible *as Beings*, and whatever that factor (Being) is, it is seemingly not itself simply another being among beings.

Heidegger says we are coping with 'beings' already involved in the world. He has characterised the two important concepts of Dasein (i.e., each one of us is a human being) and secondly. The 'essence' of Dasein lies in its Existenz (Existenz here to be taken in a dynamic, active, future oriented sense). Now these two characteristics of Dasein are unified in two modes of Existenz: (a) authentic (*eigentliche*) existence (b) inauthentic (*uneigentliche*) existence. This means that there are two ways in which human beings can 'take up' their existence (for in each case it is their existence) viz. either as their own (authenticity) or, in some sense, as not their own (inauthenticity). For instance (i) a person who realizes that they are choosing their lifestyle (ii) a person who is simply fulfilling a pre-designed role in their society, family, peer group etc.

Both people exist and both people have an existence that is theirs but the former involves an element of choice that is not clearly present in the latter. Heidegger then asks, what is the most general structure in which human beings exist—authentically or inauthentically. And he sees this general structure in the 'empirical,' ontic level of average everydayness. This average everydayness thus forms the starting point for the interpretation of Dasein. This level has, as its fundamental structure, Being-in-the-world. It is a unitary structure which must be seen as a whole. Yet, if we bear this in mind, it is methodologically possible to 'divide' it into different parts and levels. For Heidegger, the question of being as 'What is the sense of being that all entities share?', 'what is the being of all beings?' He says we have forgotten the question of *Being*. After Aristotle, Plato thought of the question of "being *qua* being" (on *hei* on), What it means for anything to be. The foundational question of ontology asks: what does it mean for anything at all to be?

The ontological difference between Being and Beings. “The being of beings ‘is’ itself not a being, so the first philosophical step in understanding the problem of being consists in.... not determining beings as beings by tracing them back in their origins to another being- as if being has the character of a possible being” (Davis, 2014).

He says that being is not the highest being (theology discusses) nor the universal category of entities (ontology). Thus, it is the mixture of the two i.e., ‘ontotheology’ which was present at all times in western metaphysics. Being (*das Sein*) is not itself a being or something that is (*das Seiende*), but rather what determines beings as beings, or what it means for a being or an entity to be.

Heidegger lays out his own conception of phenomenology and claims that the term ‘phenomenology’ does not characterize the “what” of the objects of philosophical research in terms of their content but the ‘how’ of such research. Here, there is a departure from Husserl, for whom there is a well-circumscribed domain of inquiry, the phenomena of consciousness. He rejects Husserl’s idea of consciousness in a purified or absolute sense. Phenomenology as the ‘how’ of research, proceeds under the ‘To the things themselves!’. He was initially influenced by Edmund Husserl on the descriptive aspect of phenomenology.

Paul Ricoeur was a French philosopher who was able to study the work of Karl Jaspers and prepared a translation of Husserl’s *Ideas I* in the margins of the book which he had to conceal from his jailers. From the year 1960, Ricoeur studied human reality by combining phenomenological description and analysis with hermeneutics interpretation. Hermeneutic phenomenology helps to study lived experience through the use of language. Hermeneutics constituted a philosophical method, one among others that he sought to articulate. This is particularly evident in his philosophical

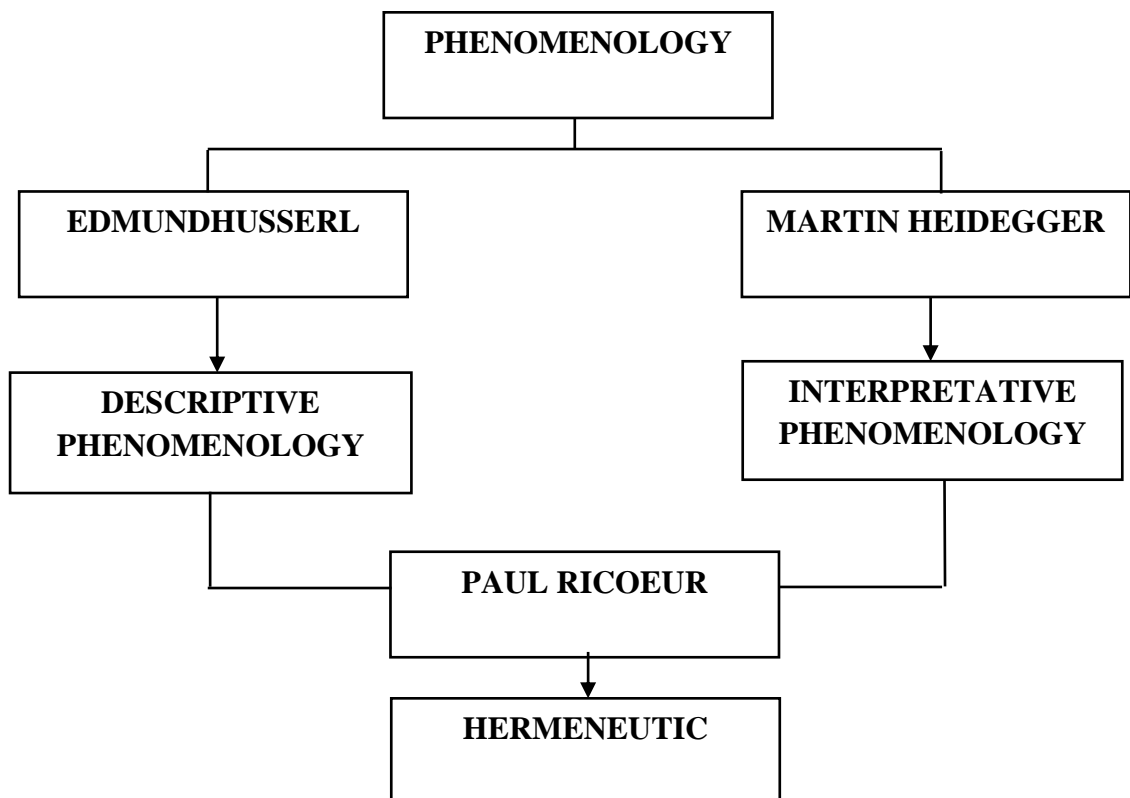
method, one among others that he sought to articulate. His *Philosophy of the Will* volumes provides a phenomenological description of the voluntary in relation to the involuntary, then turning to confront the problem of *an evil will*, he proposes the interpretation of the symbol of evil as they come from the biblical tradition and that of Greek tragedy. Only such an interpretation allows us to grasp the passage from the mere possibility of erring (fallibility) to acknowledging the existence of the fault. Then, to conclude, Ricoeur theorizes about the necessity to articulate pure reflection on the basis of such linguistic symbols which always precede it. This is the meaning of his well known aphorism, “the symbol gives rise to thought”, which has to be understood as a wager (the symbolism of evil) (Pellauer, 2013)

The use of hermeneutics in phenomenology was mainly due to two factors. Firstly, he is able to respect the specific character of the symbolic world. Secondly, he manages to think not behind the symbols but rather from the symbol that is exactly what he has been trying to express when he gives the title symbol gives rise to thought rather symbol gives rise to thinking.

Gradually, he found lacunae in Husserl’s concept of consciousness as it did not focus much on the interpretation of a phenomenon. Therefore, he shifted his interest to Martin Heidegger’s concept on Interpretative Hermeneutic, which Ricoeur fused both the hermeneutic with meaning and interpretation along with descriptive. Interpretive phenomenology, at its core, focusses on the world as lived by a person, while exploring their lived experiences. (Manen, 1997). It mainly functions to explore the vital nature of people’s experiences and interpretations of key features in their life (Spiegelberg, 1982; Sarantakos, 2005; Bryman, 2008). Phenomenology creates a deeper understanding of the subjective human experiences. The way human beings give meaning to their situation. These meanings are derived from their emotions,

desires, memories and actions. The interpretation and valuation of life situations is based on life experience (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). Interpretive phenomenology is used when the research question enquires for the meaning of the phenomenon and the researcher does not bracket their biases and prior engagement with the question under study, whereas descriptive phenomenology is used when the researcher wants to describe the phenomenon under study and brackets their biases (Reiners, 2012).

Fig. 4.1 Flowchart displays Phenomenology and the origin point of Paul Ricoeur's Hermeneutic



Source: Author self-compiled

4.3 Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is the theory and methodology of text interpretation, especially the interpretation of biblical texts, wisdom literature, and philosophical texts. The term 'hermeneutics has been taken from Greek word 'hermenus', which means 'an

interpreter'. In general, hermeneutics is a method or a science of interpreting sacred texts. It covers both the theory of understanding and the interpretation of linguistic and non- linguistic expressions (Barthold, 2016).

Hermeneutics was initially applied to the interpretation or exegesis of scripture. It emerged as a theory of understanding through the work of Fredrich Schleiermacher (Romantic Hermeneutics), Wilhelm Dilthey, Martin Heidegger (hermeneutic phenomenology), Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida (Radical Hermeneutics), Richard Kearney (diacritical hermeneutics), Fredric Jameson (Marxist Hermeneutics). Modern Hermeneutics includes both verbal and non-verbal communication as well as semiotics, presuppositions and pre-understandings (Grondin, 1994).

As per hermeneutic conceptualization of lived experience, the central meaning is attributed to the experience. An account of lived experience is incomplete if it remains purely descriptive; it must contain an interpretation of significance for the person. Ricoeur (1981) argues that a person's life story has two dimensions that contribute to its forward movement or directedness: (i) a chronological sequence of episodes and (ii) a construction of "meaningful totalities out of scattered events" (mentioned in Fechette, Bitzas, Aubry, Kilpatrick & Tremblay, 2020).

4.4 Importance of Paul Ricoeur's Hermeneutic in Lived experience

Paul Ricoeur sets up a link between phenomenology and hermeneutics. He focused on textual interpretation as the primary aim of hermeneutics and developed a theory of interpretation in which he took into account language, reflection, understanding, and the self. He combined phenomenology with a critical hermeneutic philosophy (Ricoeur, 1976, 1984).

According to Ricoeur, the phenomenological assumptions are that language is not merely a system, but that it enunciates lived experiences. Therefore, new recognition of being-in-the-world can be achieved. Furthermore, he emphasizes that language is vital to our existence and experience of the world. He states that a person becomes aware of his or her participation in the world by talking about it (ibid).

In addition, language is central, in the sense that it is neither sign nor concept, but an expression of impressions which include experiences of how we are affected and thereby moved in a situation. Thus, the lived experience and recognition of being in the world are expressed through language (ibid).

A contributor to Husserlian phenomenology, he draws the common distinction between an immediate, primordial real of lived experience and the realm of objectified meaning characteristics of science. The transcendental subject tends to posit itself within a circle of subjectivity. Moreover, Husserlian phenomenology has not remained faithful to the implications of universal intentionality that consciousness has its meaning beyond itself, rather than having meaning unto itself (Ricoeur, 1975). In other words, Husserlian phenomenology descends into subjectivity and idealism.

This present chapter addresses the philosophical hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur to examine in detail the relationship of an interpretative narrative to lived experience of never-married women in Sikkim. The aim of this phenomenological study is to gain a better understanding in the lives of single women by exploring their thoughts and experiences of being single. It was pertinent to analyse the lived experience because it helped to extract the detailed accounts of never-married women (i.e., memories of childhood to experience of adult phase) of single life which involved core elements i.e., natural behaviour, attitudes and artifacts were uncovered (Starks & Brown, 2007).

The phenomenological research design was used to extract the meaning of singleness in research. The findings from the phenomenological study of never-married in Dalton (1992) shows that the major reason for women to remain single is “not finding the right person for marriage”. The right person is the one who encompasses the ideal characteristics and personality of the perfect person with whom they could consider having a relationship. Thus, not finding this person makes women want to remain unmarried. The research also reflected that woman used different kinds of mechanisms to cope with the pressure and the stigma they face by virtue of their single status. In another study conducted by Lesch & Watt, (2018) on single women in South African society, the main reason behind their singlehood was career advancement and not being able to find committed partners for marriage. Their idea of a committed sexual relationship is the ultimate relationship that provides strong bond and companionship support for lifetime (Lesch & Watt, 2018).

Lee and Lie (2020) in their work “Understanding Singleness: A Phenomenological Study of Single Women in Beijing and Singapore” mentioned that the women had equivocal feelings over the reasons they were single, they recognized the advantages, disadvantages, and ambivalence of singlehood, they took a pragmatic approach towards their singleness; and they coped singleness with various practical strategies. Single women understood the advantages and disadvantages of being single. Despite coming from different cultural and social contexts, the word "freedom" and its associated terms were most frequently used by the participants to describe the advantages of being single. Findings of this study suggest that the lives of single women are complex and multifaceted. Nevertheless, there exist some threads that run through these narratives which help best describe the way single women position their

identity within the context of a cultural and social environment that categorizes and stigmatizes them (Lee & Lie, 2020).

In another qualitative phenomenological study “*The Experience of Being an Old Never-Married Single: A Life Course Perspective*” conducted by Winterstein & Rimon (2014) explore the aging experience of the “over 60” group of singles who have never been married and have no children. How they experience their aging process in terms of their singlehood and vice versa. Singlehood in old age is not a one-dimensional phenomenon. The findings produced four major themes that required attention (a) “How come I stayed single?” (b) Between loneliness, aloneness and solitude. (c) “I have to take care of myself in old age.” (d) The self behind prejudices and stereotypes. The findings show that the participants are aware of the price of being single and were able to accept it. According to them, the process of accepting and coming to terms with their life’s reality is constructed through high self-esteem, derived from their social, academic, or functional capabilities. As the normative expectation is to live with partners, children, and grandchildren, the old never-married women have their alternative choice and give meaning to present status. This meaning is expressed by constructing their self-identity and accepting their way of life (Winterstein & Rimon, 2014).

Grutzmacher (2001) in his article ‘*The lived experience of being single for the never-married woman over age thirty*’ uses phenomenological approach and extracted eight themes such as; i) establishing a Pathway for Becoming Single, ii) Awakening of Being Single, iii) Realizing that Happily Ever after Begins with yourself- this is one of the most important themes which vows never-married women’s happiness does not depend on other being i.e., a man or husband for spending entire life but it only depends on oneself., iv) Coming to wholeness, v) Know thyself--it simply means to

understand oneself and the needs of never-married women, answering the question, vi) 'Why aren't I Married? Etc.

The gradual shift in the attitude of women towards marriage and the viewpoint of society towards these never married women has been changing. The emergence of singlehood was a response to the mainstream perspectives on society that dominated the life of women at that time (marriage being the ultimate goal in women's life). These dominant marriages tended to limit women's ability to flourish in the public sphere. Departing from the traditional view, women have been engaged in the domestic sphere.

Rubinstein, Alexander, Goodman, & Luborsky, (1991) in their research on never-married, childless, older women, reported on types of key interpersonal relationships of these women and also examined limits to these key relations, describing some strategies these women have adopted for gaining kin-like relations.

The rise of singlehood as a lifestyle is an unfolding phenomenon in response to the dissatisfaction with traditional marriage. The decline of the economic and ideological bases for traditional marriage is that men no longer have to marry for sexual and emotional needs and women for financial support (Edwards & Eleanor, 1974). Cherlin (2004) explains that marriage itself is becoming deinstitutionalized due to the increase in cohabitation, parenthood outside of marriage, same-sex marriage rights resulting in large numbers of heterosexuals who never marry.

Therefore, it becomes pertinent to study never-married phenomenon from the in-depth analysis and understand the phenomena from the respondent's viewpoint rather than the researcher. In this research, interpretative phenomenology method has been employed since it is useful for understanding the experience of women who are never

married and how they have lived the single phase of their life and what they have encountered during these years are the key points of investigation. To explore how the major decision of not having a spouse and children and what fulfils this space and how they have created singlehood lifestyles was the sole aim of the study.

It is the most congruent approach which allows an explorative enquiry into the lived experiences of never-married women belonging to particular age group 40-80 years; through narration of stories, in-depth interviews, analysing the circumstances with the intention of knowing more about the participant's personal experience on remaining single throughout life.

Humans are born into a narrative world; existence is possible through narrative. According to Gergen & Gergen (1986) states, "narratives are social constructions that are developed in everyday social interaction. They are shared means of making sense of the world". The everyday interpretations of the world can be understood in storied form, through a series of events, mental states and happenings. The aim of the life-story interview is to encourage the participants to provide an extended account of their lives (Murray, 1999). We narrate stories of our lives to others. Narrative allows us to explain these experiences and to identify ourselves. In building personal accounts, we are choosing definite aspects of our life and linking them with others. This practice helps us to affirm that our lives are not a detached series of actions but have a definite position.

While we can convey our life story, the actual pattern of our life takes place and indeed the very structure of the story we tell are shaped by a multiplicity of social and psychological forces both conscious and unconscious (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000).

4.5. Thematic Analysis

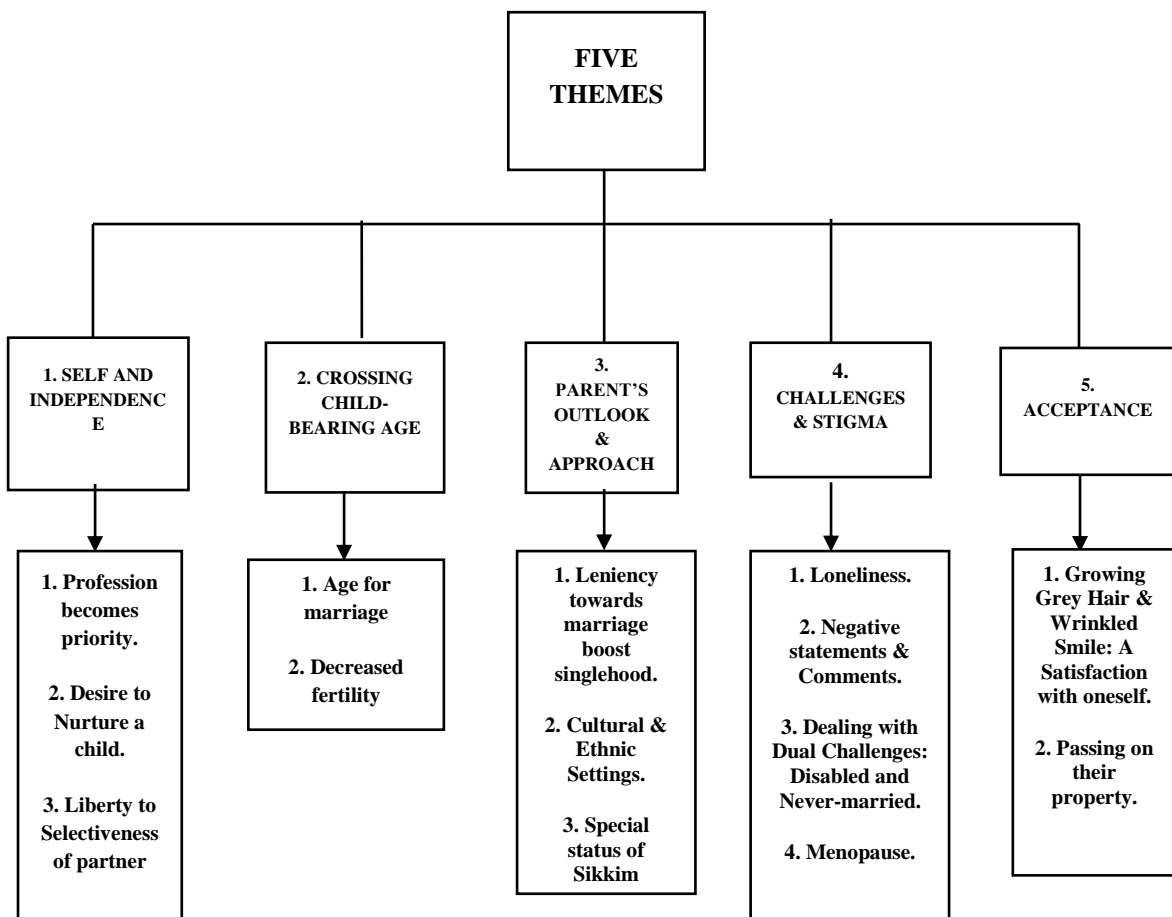
The themes have been adopted to have the clear understanding of the respondent's in-depth interview. This method promotes the classification of the data into thematic categories as well as the examination of "all the cases in the study to make sure that all the manifestations of each theme have been accounted for and compared".

Both rural and urban never-married women from South and East districts of Sikkim shared their experiences of singlehood in the study Pseudo names were given in-order to maintain research ethics. The major four research ethics that were primarily considered during the field study were voluntary participation, subject well-being, identity disclosure and confidentiality (Nestor & Russell, 2019). During this study, some women were reluctant to give their personal details and feared disclosing sensitive information about love affairs, emotional pasts which would risk their self-image in society. On the contrary, others openly discussed their emotional lives and unstable times after the long conversation and frequent visit to their respective places; The respondent's interviews were audio recorded and the session lasted for nearly 120 minutes, each of which helped to build good rapport and maximize the comfort level for personal questions. Sometimes it was also difficult to trace their marital status because even if they are single, they would simply hide it and tell that they were married. The reason behind this was that people would take advantage or talk behind their back about their late singlehood. However, the interview has been taken despite these difficulties and succeeded in building closeness and differentiate their marital status for further questions interview transcripts were read and the researcher extracted from them significant statements relating to the experience of singleness. Similar statements were grouped together into categories. Each of these categories

reflected one aspect of the meaning of singleness for this group of never-married women. Through this process, five salient themes were identified:

- (i) Self and Independence
- (ii) Crossing Marriageable age
- (iii) Parent's Outlook and Approach
- (iv) Challenges and Stigma
- (v) Acceptance

Fig. 4.1: Flowchart displays five themes and their sub-themes compiled from the Fieldwork data.



Sources: Author's Self-compiled

4.5.1. Self and Independence

The single phenomenon has been attached to living alone, usually in their thirties and forties. People belonging to this particular age signified the end of studies with the growth of prime career. A person who is not married till this age chooses to live separately, and if working, spends most of their time at the workplace. In leisure time, some singles choose outings with friends, travel, play sports and indulge in social works and other activities (Forsyth & Johnson, 1995).

Women who are not married consider grandparents, parents, siblings as ‘family’ rather than husband and children. Our society acts stereotypical when it comes to marriage because if a woman is living independently and not married then she is seen as ‘incomplete’. Hindu texts and rituals praise marriage and motherhood, and most of the time it is observed that this glorification gets converted into the woman’s own idea of her perception of the ‘ideal’ femininity. The women failing to bear children thus become a source of shame. This social importance is given to fertility and a subsumed sexuality expressible only through marriage (Patar, 2019).

The self-sustaining and independent women are perceived to be a threat to the traditionally defined social world of men because they don’t experience injustice, prejudice, and social segregation. (Stolk 1981; Watkins 1984; Cargan 1986; Mustard 2000).

Self refers to one’s own being-it is a set of attitudes, beliefs, values, habits, abilities and feelings of an individual. The concept of self can only be understood through consistency of behaviour and continuity of identity (Leary & Tangney, 2012). Human beings identify themselves, through chains of experiences and bundles of autobiographical memories (Fivush, 2011).

In the study, it is found that 70 percent of never-married women choose to stay with their family, only few choose to stay away from family i.e., only 20 percent stayed in rented apartment for better jobs as they shifted from rural areas to urban areas like Gangtok and only 10 percent lived in the same house with a separate kitchen.

The respondents shared the different ways they experienced freedom and independence in their lives. One was a freedom from responsibility for and to other human beings like the husband, children and in-laws. These women valued their ability to make decisions about themselves for themselves. Others saw themselves as free from the constraints they associated with marriage. Freedom and independence were so highly valued by these women that some doubted whether they ever would be willing to sacrifice them for a relationship with a man. As one woman explained:

An excerpt from an interview shows that not being dependent to a woman for livelihood is the sense of achievement for her:

“I think Husband and Children are no more pillars for life, being married and starting a family is not an ultimate goal for women... Though most of my friends got married and have children and I am happy for them but I don't want to step into this 'burden' rather choose to remain unmarried lifelong...”

(Nirmala, 46, in-depth interview, 09.10.2018)

The respondent is accustomed to her present lifestyle and does not feel the absence of a man (husband) or even one's children. In Sikkim, working women are free to make decisions regarding their choice of living and are regarded as 'Man of the house' because daughters are positioned in high status in-terms of support to parents. They do not have to take permission from their husband nor compromise their work for

their children's duties. These never-married women portray the self as reliable, individualism, an identity and more importantly emancipation from the marriage responsibilities. The respondent has experienced freedom differently and does not have similar views. As some of them appreciated the "freedom from intrusion of another human being into your space." Others saw themselves as free from the constraints they associated with marriage. The value of self and independence were highly regarded by these women in the study.

4.5.1. i) Profession becomes priority when marriage becomes optional –

Research has shown that educational attainment prolongs the time of marriage among women. Mensch, Grant, & Blanc in their study (2005) mentioned that increased educational attainment is a possible factor in delaying women's age at first marriage. This implies the higher women's educational attainment the lower their chances of marrying early. The longer the years of schooling, the later the woman will get married. Education leads young women to have greater influences over the timing of marriage and choice of marriage partners. This can be said so because educational attainment seems to keep most women in the schooling system for some number of years compared to their counterparts who are not schooling and are ready to be married after puberty. Thus, as the girl stays in school, she will finish her education before marrying.

Most of the respondents feel that marriage is just optional and would choose career over marriage. They do not want to be guided by a man or seek permission for decision-making. It can be well understood from the following excerpts from interview:

“...my profession involves rigorous time and multi-tasking which can only be accomplished if I give my 100 percent to it and if I get married to someone who doesn't understand my work and space then I guess it's better to be single...”

(Tshering, 42, in-depth interview, 11.07.2018)

It can also be observed that women choose marriage only if they are mentally ready or else being single is more acceptable for them. Some women felt that managing both household tasks and careers is difficult. Never-married women can invest more time at the workplace and earn well. Their priority is not only their job but their performance is equally important. The interview illustrates the point clearly:

“My friend is a doctor in a reputed hospital and she is the mother of two children... I used to look at her and think that she balances well with the profession and household task but in due course of time she shared that whenever she goes back home tired and frustrated from work then she has hell lots of unfinished duties towards her husband and children... which doubled her tension... I used to sympathies with her (sighs)”

(Basumati, 56, in-depth interview, 30.09.2018)

The job of a woman does not end at the workplace but goes beyond; meaning she is expected to perform well and fulfil the task i.e., duties towards husband, child and in-laws. The respondent shared stories of her friend's life which makes her feel sad and at the same point thinks being single is more appropriate than facing trouble lifelong.

Similarly, another respondent shared how the institution of marriage is changing with passage of time and has affected the decision of young people to wedlock. This can be understood from the following:

“Nowadays most of the married couples get separated or file for divorce easily and it is traumatic for both the families. Marriage has no value like before, I have seen my parents living happily together but now the situation has changed... Women are equally educated and sometimes earn more than a man...”

(Manju, 62, in-depth interview, 18.05.2018)

The respondent expressed fear of divorce and separation as it is growing in urban areas. She compares the time when people used to live with their husband’s in-laws and were dependent on a man’s income. The trend of moving on from one relation to another is observed in Sikkim; there are more cases of separation because of extra-marital relations. Economically women are doing well and do not feel the need to rely on a man’s income for sustenance.

“I have a circle of married, widow, divorcee and unmarried group of friends but I share most of my personal thoughts, feelings and emotions with the single ones because we have many things in common...”

(Bhawana, 50, in-depth interview, 07.12.2018)

This shows that never-married women are comfortable within their own group since they share common views, decisions and experiences regarding singleness. It is also interesting to note that, never married women mingle with friends of speckled marital status but experience subtle detachment while discussing familial issues of husband and children specially at home, offices and other activity places, these differences can be observed. One of the respondents, said because of her social nature she had many friends, colleagues and relatives who appreciated her and were welcoming too, but the true sense of belonging for these women was their own single circles and handful of

people who understood them. This leads to a very pertinent question-does society feel negatively about women who deny marriage and embrace single life? The answer to this question remains in the attitude of society towards marriage. A sense of security of the people depends upon the viewpoint of society and the process of adulthood which involves the past childhood memories and the environmental factors which have ingrained throughout life. A respondent recalls her past memory:

“I remember the days of my graduation, when my dad expired due to cancer then I got the job on his behalf... I ended up being a father figure for my two sisters and younger brother....”

(Uden, 65, in-depth interview, 05.08.2018)

Sharing her views, the respondent narrates that her decision to take responsibility was merely due to circumstances and not her choice. The attachment towards family and situation necessity makes every woman step into the role of father the ‘bread-earner’ and in the process of fulfilling the role, she is so dedicated towards her sibling’s growth and development that her choices become secondary and neglected. Marriage is not the priority, rather responsibility becomes primary for never-married women. Our society is gender-biased because after marriage women face direct changes in life such as moving out from one’s own family and adjusting to husband’s house, adapting to new culture, religion, food habits and new life (Kapadia,1954). In case of a man, he is not expected to leave his home and if he wants to stay separately, society blames the wife for leaving the husband’s parents behind and that is usually not acceptable in Sikkimese society.

4.5.1. ii) Desire to Nurture child

Although a woman may not want to spend the rest of her life with a man, somehow the biological need to ultimately care and nurture cannot be ignored as it is said ‘motherhood’ cannot be isolated from ‘womanhood’ (Bhambani & Inbanathan, 2018). Therefore, while questioning a respondent about this need, a respondent shared that

“... Maybe giving support to a child is more important than bearing one yourself...”

(Angela, 43, in-depth interview, 15.04.2018)

The respondent expressed that the process of taking care and providing support is essential rather than giving birth. Some respondents have supported children financially from their locality and some from their relatives. It was important for them to look after these children’s needs or adopt them.

“I am supporting my brother’s second child. I am like a mother to her; she was eight years old when my brother left her with me and went for a job abroad. As he is a single parent and had no choice. I feel now that God had desired something else, she was destined to stay with me... now she is my hope, inspiration and life ...”

(Shanta, 49, in-depth interview, 16.04.2018)

It also shows adoption was a major task as it demands extensive documentation and legal procedures. Some respondents also depicted that it would affect a child's psychology in later stages of life (adulthood), if they come to know that the respondent was not their own parent.

“No one can guarantee if children will be look-after during old age...and My family is enough for me and even if I die alone it doesn't matter... “Tato paani dincha hola bhani kina parkhi nuhai..boru afai khanchu”. (laughs)... (translated: why should I wait for someone to serve me hot water at old age instead I choose to drink myself)”

(Kunzang, 54, in-depth interview, 20.10.2018)

However, this is not the case for some women who did not show any desire of either supporting or adopting children, because they felt that the urge to be around children was fulfilled by their cousin's child (in relation to their nephew or niece).

For this category of women, the child cannot be a support at old age because they have spent their whole lives looking after themselves and being the guardian of the family and, therefore, feel uncomfortable to be dependent on others for each basic need. They fear that some children would leave their parents in crucial times either deserted or at old-age homes. Today's generation of children are independent and, once financially strong, they leave their parents and prefer to live separately. Hence, it is difficult for these women to depend on children for old age support and choose to die alone rather than living as a liability.

4.5.1 iii) Liberty to Select Spouse

This is one of the important sub-themes taken out from the experiences of never-married women in Sikkim. Selecting a partner for marriage is a way of choosing a preferred mate based on any quality which one desires. Selectiveness refers to the process whereby one is gifted with the freedom to choose yet is obliged to standardize one's own existence (Beck & Beck, 1995). It is very common for women to choose 'the best man' for spending the rest of her life, yet it is also rare to find one! However,

Sikkimese society gives liberty to decide one's mate for marriage. Emancipation comes from the culture and social setup in which one is born and socialised. In Sikkim, the never-married women living in urban and rural areas expressed that their criterion for a suitable man for marriage were not contented in society. Almost 50 percent of never-married women at some point of their life had received proposal from either aged, divorcee, widower and sometimes, differently abled men. Limited choices become a purpose to remain single. A respondent expressed that:

“..... I am a senior clerk working at a bank for almost 20 years and it is very difficult for me to choose any man from the same workplace, so I had asked my aunt to find one for me. Initially she was very keen, so she showed me several guys for marriage; however, after discovering that my choices are selective, now she is reluctant to find a companion....”

(Tashi, 45 In-depth interview)

When a woman decides to get married, she desires compatibility in-terms of physical appearance, financial stability, single and mental and emotionally sound. However, if these capacities are not met then eventually, she loses interest in marriage and ends up being single. Here, the idea is not to get married to an ideal man but to someone who is compatible. Similar studies have been found in the Israeli society by Lahad (2012) which found that personal choice and independence are treasured more than anything else in society, especially for women who are not married. The decision to choose potential partners is benefitted unless one's early singlehood, however, at the later stage, the limited choices and non-negotiation occurs.

“My mother taught me that whenever I chose a man in my life then he should have the qualities of that of my father...I recall this line whenever I think of marriage...! At a young age it was very easy to imagine a husband who is perfect and now in reality this made me very selective in finding a suitable one....”

(Sreya, 48 In-depth Interview)

Here, the respondent's mother is selective in choosing the groom for her marriage. Sometimes, family is also the main reason for setting the high standards for searching for the suitable man. When a daughter is also very much reliant on their parents for taking the big decisions in life then it becomes difficult for finding one and ultimately marriage becomes a secondary choice and living single becomes an ultimatum.

4.5.2. Fear of Crossing Child-bearing Age

The biological factor plays an important role in the case of marriage for women since marriageable age means child-bearing age. This is very much specific for women who have not married and remained single lifelong. The never-married women have experienced health problems with increased age. Fertility is one of the crucial factors which affect their decision to marry. Fertility rate in Sikkim is 1.2 percent (children per women) in comparison to national average 2.1 percent (children per women) as per National Family Health Survey-4 (2015-16). The total fertility rate is decreasing severely in the state which is a matter of concern.

The Sikkimese society has been dealing with stress and pressure specially the educated youths which impacts the fertility. This impact is so strong in females that quality of eggs to produce reduces each day and in males the quality of sperm

reduces. In couples the infertility occurs mainly among women constituting 40 percent than male with 30-40 and the remaining 20 percent is known (Pradhan, 2019).

4.5.2. i) Age for selecting a groom

In the case of women, the age factor plays the prime role in reproduction, due to higher chances of infertility. Studies mention that even after regular intercourse the couple is not able to conceive a baby. Infertility treatment is best advisable to the couple based on the woman's age. If she is more than 35 years then the procedure of treatment starts after six months of regular intercourse (Pradhan, 2019). Growing age limits women with child bearing capabilities. The choice of selecting a partner gives an upper hand if she is young and financially independent. The biological and social factors contribute to singlehood. Here, in this study, influence on never-married women has majorly been a cultural influence. Culture influences different people in the way they do things. They can take different things and adapt them to their own ways. Franz Boas (1911) said, "Culture embraces all the manifestations of social habits of a community, the reactions of the individual as affected by the habits of the group in which he lives, and the product of human activities as determined by these habits." Since human's culture develops in social and collective form. Living in isolation, man cannot progress in material and cultural fields. Therefore, culture is not a result of the efforts of an individual alone; it's the result of the collective efforts of uncountable men in society. The efforts are such, which the coming generations also do continuously. This is the reason for the gradual development of culture. It's not the result of an era but of the collective and continuous effort of various people in different eras. The respondent's feature of Sikkimese Culture such as tradition that comes with being the eldest daughter, attitude of women (dominant than man), a string of never-married women in family (aunt, sisters and other female members who

have remained unmarried, influence the upcoming generation and they follow it as a legacy.

4.5.2. ii) Fertility decreases with growing age

In 2018, the Governor of Sikkim while attending the Sikkim Summit for Tribal Status, stated that, "Constantly decreasing fertility rate among the indigenous inhabitants of Sikkim throws an alarming picture" (The Free Press, 5th May, 2018). A fear of decreasing fertility has been for the women in Sikkim. The state shows the average rate of 1.2 percent (children per women) as compared to the rest of national average 2.1 percent (children per women) as per National Family Health Survey 4 (2015-16). This shows that the total fertility rate of Sikkim is half the national average and heading towards decrease. As pointed out by the renowned Dr. Bandana Pradhan Subba, (2019) the two main factors behind the decrease in fertility are Stress and pressure which have become a part of Sikkimese life. Educated youths don't realise that the fertility potential decreases with age, i.e., quality of female eggs diminishes with every passing day, and stress affects the male fertility potential. About 40 percent infertility is due to female factors, 30-40 percent is due to male factors and 20 percent is unexplained (Sikkim Express,2019). Other illnesses for low fertility among women such as ovulatory dysfunction like PCOS; unable to conceive with three or more ovulation induction protocols, like Clomiphene citrate, letrozole (ibid). As per the ASMR report (2012), the healthy reproductive years for a woman is at the age of 20s. With growing age, her fertility declines from age 30 and above. In order to conceive, a 30-year-old woman has 20 percent of chance of getting pregnant meaning for every 100 fertile 30-year-old women trying to get pregnant in one cycle, 20 will be successful and the other 80 will have to try again. By age 40, a woman's chance is

less than 5 percent per cycle, so less than 5 out of every 100 women are expected to be successful each month.

Fertility naturally declines as women get older. However, the time decline begins and the rate at which it progresses varies widely in women, but always begins well before menopause. Generally, fertility begins to drop in your late 20s or early 30s and falls more rapidly after the age of 35. Women who decide to delay pregnancy until after age 35 should obtain information on appropriate testing and treatment while remaining realistic about the chances for success with infertility therapy.

Conceiving and bearing a child is difficult for an unmarried group. If one of the functions of marriage is childbearing, then becoming married might lead to the beginning (resumption) of childbearing. Finally, for some marriage and childbearing might be so complexly intertwined that they represent a single decision.

4.5.3. Parent's Outlook and Approach

Parents are the first social agents who shape and transform a child's future. The attitude of parents towards the marriage of daughter or son affects the decision of either remaining single or married lifelong. The decreased control of parents over marriage of children has influenced single life. This notion of less interference in marriage of daughters or sons has been popular among western society as compared to South Asia and China (Thornton & Fricke, 1987). In the US and Europe, there is minimum control of parents over marriage of children (Smith, 1980). Few narrations were found in the research also; the parents of never-married women have shown the following outlook and approach towards marriage which impacts the lives of these women.

4.5.3. i) Parents approach towards marriage may encourages singlehood-

Parents play an important role in building a child's future. The basic need of a child is fulfilled by his/her parents and if none is achieved then it hinders their development. The prime concern for every parent is to see their daughters or sons to start their own family. The sense of belonging can be felt from early childhood and family. It is a duty as well as a religious sacrament specially for Hindu community (Sonawat, 2001). However, in Sikkim, parents permit children to take decisions with regard to their marriage.

“My Parents have always been supportive towards my decision and I feel lucky that I’m not forced to marry...”

(Binita, 55, in-depth interview, 10.12.2018)

This narrative highlight that parent(s)’s support the decision of their children to delay or avoid marriage. This can be clearly understood when respondents were asked about the parent’s decision towards marriage. Though there are marriage proposals from the relatives and the distant family, she was never forced or compelled to get married.

Another respondent recalls how her father was supportive towards her decision of singlehood:

My father told me, “Mero Chori (daughter) byaa gardainas bhani thikai cha, aru le k bhancha bhani na sochnu. Hamro dharma ma byaa lai sansaric pida, bhancha, ‘Anila’ hunchas bhani ajhai ramro ho” (translated: My Daughter, it’s okay if you don’t get married and don’t think what society might say, As our religion favours Monasticism and preached that marriage is merely a ‘worldly burden’, even if you want to become a monk then also it is acceptable) ...

(Sherap, 52, in-depth interview, 18.11.2018)

4.5.3. ii) Cultural and ethnic settings

Inter-caste marriage in Sikkim is less favoured, as the indigenous tribes and community of Sikkim--Lepcha, Bhutia and Nepali-prefer to marry within their own community. Some even claim that due to the fear of extinction of tribes, people generally choose the groom and bride of their own community (Phadnis, 1980). The custom of elopement is still practiced in rural as well as urban areas which help the couples to marry if they belong to different caste and community. Earlier, traditional marriage in Sikkim took place at an early age, when women got married at the tender age i.e., 12 or 13 and left schooling and took care of the household at quite an early age. The paradigm shift in Sikkimese marriage can be observed from the age of bride and groom. The traditional marriage took place at the tender age of (13-14 years) where elopement was in the rise, education was not the priority, early motherhood resulted in high delivery deaths and affected child's cognitive development (Lama, 2001) but eventually, with increase in education system, advanced career among women as well as men tend to delay marriage at late adulthood i.e. 30, 40 and even 50 age; some population has been opting for non-marriage or singlehood which resulted in growing trend of never-married groups. Nevertheless, in Sikkim also the never-married women have experienced caste discrimination in terms of selecting the mate:

“In my graduation, I had an affair with a high caste Brahmin man for almost seven years and his family was against our relation, because I was from a low caste, Eventually, we had to part...”

(Neharika, 49, in-depth interview, 19. 10.2018)

The Hindu community people belonging to the higher caste such as Chettri, Bahun push their daughters to get married with one's own caste. Inter-caste marriage is difficult. Marriage is usually preferred within one's one caste and community. Some

couples have also been out-casted because of inter-caste marriage. Therefore, women suffer from a sense of insecurity that they will be ostracized out of their own caste.

4.5.3. iii) Special status of Sikkim affects decision making for marriage

Sikkim has special status and provisions under Article 371F which empowers the state to take decisions regarding the social, economic and political rights of people of Sikkim. Some of the special provisions under this act have affected the decision of women to marry beyond the state. The Sikkimese people have a Sikkim Subject Certificate (SSC) which marks the identity of an individual belonging to Sikkim. This SSC has various laws¹⁸ among which social and economic exclusion have been found against women. It states that if a woman marries a man from another state or country then she will lose the right to her property and domicile of the state (Sikkim HDR, 2014).

This factor also hinders one's decision to marry because if Sikkimese love a man who does not belong to one's state then she drops the idea of marriage and some even stay unmarried lifelong. This is not the case for all the women in the state but for a few who studied in metropolitan cities such as Delhi, Kolkata, Mumbai and Bangalore and finally returned. Sometimes, women as well as men look for a partner who is in a similar position or above in education and job; and if it is not met then marriage is hampered and results in separation.

¹⁸Sikkim Subject Certificate (SSC) states that, 'Where female heir or descendent marries a person who does not possess Sikkim Subject Certificate/COI or has acquired foreign citizenship, such female heir/ descendent shall follow the personal law of her husband and as such shall not acquire any interest in the property' (Sikkim Human Development Report 2014).

4.5.4. Challenges and Stigma

Stigma refers to any personal attribute that is “discrediting” to its possessors and that reduces such a person “from a whole and usual person to a tainted and discounted one” (Goffman, 1963). Sometimes stigma also refers to “a social identity that is devalued in a particular context” (Crocker, 1998). Here in this context, the never-married women are often viewed as responsible for their single status due to some character defect or “blemish”, such as promiscuity, immaturity, self-centeredness, or a lack of personal discipline (e.g, Morris et al., 2005). Similarly, the never-married women were regarded as a taboo and women feared getting this label of ‘spinster’, ‘single’ and ‘lonesome’. Stigmatised singles have been dealing with this derogatory term from the time immemorial (Jeffreys, 1985; Mustard, 2004; Byrne 2008 et al.).

Stigma is also a characteristic that is contrary to a norm of a social unit, where “norm” refers to a “shared belief that a person ought to behave in a certain way at a certain time” (Stafford, 1986).

Women who remain single face stigma because singleness is still seen as challenging the norms of femininity– marriage and motherhood (Adams, 1986; DePaulo & Morris, 2005; Ibrahim & Hassan, 2009). They were regarded as a liability on their families due to mental and/or social problems (Kern, 1998). Stigmatizing and stereotyping older singles called “singlism” (DePaulo & Morris, 2007). In addition, the perception of never-married singles over 40 was less tolerant than of younger singles for whom this stage of life was presumed temporary (DePaulo & Morris, 2006), and because of ageist attitudes (Palmore, 2004). Despite the increase in other types of relationships besides marriage, and the higher percentage of never-married men and women, unmarried people are still perceived as deviant from the norms of

society (DePaulo & Morris, 2005). Different countries have experienced stigma related to their singlehood status. In case of Japan, single women spend their whole life taking care of their family, household expenses and the eldest daughter among the other siblings is expected to live with their parents. However, she is regarded as unwanted and obstacle to population growth specially for the decline in birth rates in the country (Yoshida, 2017).

Another country, Israel, has midlife selective women who are called “Bareraniot”. In Hebrew, Breira, refers to either an option or a selection. *Ravakot Bareraniot* (selective single women) in Hebrew slang designates women who have options but are too picky. Women belonging to any country have experienced stigma and faced social challenges in the majority dominant married population. Thus, it is important to analyse these challenges that are confronted by women who have been living independently (Lahad, 2013). Problems faced by these single women are social isolation, emotional support, negative derisions and remarks, health issues, property.

In Sikkim, the stigma faced by never-married women has various forms such as: loneliness, negative statement, dealing with dual challenges specially disabled women and menopause. These forms of challenges have been faced by women who encounter them in their day to day lives.

4.5.4. i) Loneliness-

Loneliness is defined as the state of being lonely or alone. Traditionally, the never-married women have been seen as lonesome and sad. It is portrayed that they struggle with the need to achieve an acceptable identity in society. Negatives mainly consist of the fact that these people have fewer relationships and these are looser and weaker, and as a consequence of this (1) they are alone and (2) they feel lonely. A single

person often ends up lonely and therefore becomes more reliant on emotional help from friends (Carbery & Buhrmeister 1998). In my findings, 40 percent of never-married women of age 40 and above have experienced loneliness and yearns for a companion, they say having a partner does not make oneself happier but relieves sadness and emptiness in life. Women living with their family also feel alone and incomplete. The following respondent has expressed her views below:

“I have been living with my sister in Gangtok after her school and she is like a child to me...Whenever I get low, she is there to support me but, after she got married, I have become alone. I feel she was my companion, my mentor and my stress buster. Now, after work coming back home and seeing myself alone is difficult, I feel that a partner is much needed and singlehood is lonesome!!!...”

(Thupden, Age 50, in-depth Interview)

Loneliness is considered the main disadvantage of singlehood faced by the participants in their entire lives (Baumbusch, 2004). The respondent belonging to age 50 and above felt the absence of a mate in life. She craves for someone to talk, meet and share her grief after her work at home. It becomes difficult for women to meet random man and have a love affair and settle because after certain age the selectiveness for partner is limited. Discussing about their loneliness, many respondents brought the significance of friends in their lives. As a source of companionship and support, these friendship networks provided an important buffer against loneliness.

4.5.4. ii) Negative statements and remarks

The never-married women did not encounter direct negative commentaries from family, relatives or friends but received indirect scoffs which either came in the form of advice from elder members of the family or the male friends who would pass sarcastic comments.

Some shared that their grandparents often told them, “Who will take care of you at old age?” or “God does not favour women who die without being mothers”. The married friends even said that, “marry soon or else bearing a child will be a problem”, “find a man to marry you, or else the best ones will be taken away” ... These statements were not derogatory but hearing them repeatedly was infuriating and bothersome. As these women never felt the absence of man in one’s life nor regretted their decision. In contrast, women were satisfied in terms of not having a male companion who would dominate their decisions and ultimately make them compromise on their priority. These women never regretted their choice of being single. Single life was not much of a problem for never-married women but rather sympathy was frustrating. In a social milieu that functions through normative heteronormativity, the women’s identity is perceived through marriage, childbearing and personhood.

A colloquial term for never-married women in Nepali language, is *budi kanya*. In Bhutia language it is called *Annim*, meaning unmarried women whereas, for female monks it is called *Aneela*. And in Lepcha language, it is called *Thuyu von*. These terms have originated as per each community and referred to old never-married women in rural areas. However, this term is not very familiar in contemporary society. This is also a derogatory word which is not in use and not usually demanded by these women (collected from Field data, 2019).

The never married women in Sikkim specially belonging to rural areas have been living with their siblings and taking care of their family. The eldest daughter is expected to look after the family and sometimes education is also not privileged to her. In contrast, the youngest child in the family is free from the family's responsibility and provides a better education and career oriented than other siblings (Observation from fieldwork, 21st June 2017-1st December 2018.).

In rural areas, there are more than five to six children in one household. Sometimes, the parents are not able to provide education to all the children due to financial instability and only the few fortunate children receive the highest qualification and get jobs in government sectors. The eldest daughter is expected to look after parents, siblings and provide labour in the fields and with time daughter feels more inclined towards her familial responsibility:

“My father was a farmer and mother housewife; I had 10 siblings among which 3 younger sisters died during delivery and the remaining sisters and brothers were my responsibility because being the eldest daughter I had to look after them...”

(Srijana, 47, in-depth interview, 21.03.2018)

The respondent cares for her parents and as well as her siblings which is more central for her. She sacrificed her studies, dreams and opportunities which she deserved. Nevertheless, it gives her a sense of achievement and self-worth looking after her younger siblings and seeing them achieve success in life. In Sikkim, rural women are inclined towards their old aged parents or parent and the system of old age homes is usually not preferred as compared to other metropolitan cities:

“My younger sister is working in the Education Department at Gangtok and earns well, sometimes sends money and visits home during holidays. I feel that my sacrifice has paid off. At home, I have to take care of Apa, he is old and alone, blessings are enough for me, how can I leave him at this age and be selfish to get married...”

(Mayalmit, 50, in-depth interview, 18.02.2018)

The respondent lives with her father who is her only support. She does not want to leave her parents and get married fearing that her husband would not allow her to take her father with her. It is the custom of every Indian family that once the daughter is married to a man then he cannot shift to his wife’s house but rather women have to stay with the husband’s family. It is taken as a shame if some families keep their son-in-law at their daughter's house.

The never-married women consider living with the old aged parents is not taken as a burden but rather a prime responsibility. The culture of Sikkimese society expects the eldest daughter to be the caretaker and decision maker of the household.

4.5.4. iii) Dealing with Dual Challenges: Disabled and Never-married-

The stigma attached to disability is still prevalent in society and it is one of the most important social issues faced by the people from time immemorial. The society where we live, the mindset we possess, are prejudiced and rigid. It can be observed from the birth of a child until death. Our society continues to impose various man-made roles, rules, and norms. Duality exists in our mind and in our daily life practices. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) definition, ‘Disability is not just a health problem. It is a complex phenomenon, reflecting the interaction between features of a person’s body and features of the society in which he or she lives.’

Historically, disabilities among women have been the prime concern in society as they have been considered 'not fit' in-terms of sexual partners or role of mothers (Parker, 1993). Women suffering from disability mostly remain single than non-disabled women or men (Asch et al., 2001; Hanna & Rogovsky, 1992). The chance of marriage reduces and acceptance from society becomes difficult. Among the white middle-class women, the building of romantic relationships with men for disabled women rather than non-disabled ones become difficult and challenging (Encyclopaedia women and society, 2001). The unavailability of adequate counselling on sexuality, birth control, pregnancy and childbirth from medical and rehabilitation professionals have been considered to be some of the reasons behind the growth of disabled people. The working population of disabled is seen higher in these states Sikkim, Jammu & Kashmir, Bihar, Maharashtra and Orissa (Paul & Saha, 2015). As per the 2011 Census of India, the disabled person in Sikkim comprises 2.9 percent of the total population and the disabled women constitute about 8,408 in total and in rural area 7,311 and in urban 1,097; it has the highest percentage of persons with disabilities in comparison to other northeast states¹⁹. In 2013, Sikkim launched a program to support marriages of persons with disabilities, where couples get 2 lakhs one-time grant, if one of them has a disability. The state also provides scholarships to students with disabilities studying inside or outside the state.

In 2013, the state Government initiated schemes Incentives to couples for marriage with disabled persons. This scheme is a recent plan and still has large masses of disabled couples to cover. However, the difficulty faced by the disabled never-

¹⁹North-East states like Sikkim; Nagaland & Manipur districts have a disabled population which has a direct effect on the curvature of the economy. Arunachal Pradesh (4.3%), Sikkim, Jammu & Kashmir, Tamil Nadu and Rajasthan have contributed more than 2 percent disabled working population to the total workers. (Paul and Saha, 2015).

married women has not been considered as such. Only 2 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were mentioned – Sikkim Vikalang Sahayata Samiti (SVSS) and the Spastic Society of Sikkim (SSS). SSS is the only RCI recognized training centre in Sikkim for its course on care giving. Special schools have been constructed for the disabled children.

In the case of Sikkim, people who suffer from disability live in insecurity because they are unaware about their condition, rights and legalities. Dependency towards family members, workplace, basic amenities is one concerning factor that leaves PWDs insecure. Exclusion in decision-making, social circle and education of disabled people often directly affects their lives (Sharma, 2017). Out of 200 respondents only 5 comprises of disabled women in the study. Being never-married and disabled was more challenging for these Sikkimese women, the mobility and physical impairments, learning, hearing disability was majorly faced by these women. Some of these women were even discarded from homes and not taken care of. A respondent from South Sikkim who was suffering from hearing disability shared:

“I stay here alone, my sister is married in Namchi, most of the time my neighbours serve me food, they are helpful... Sometimes, I feel scared to sleep alone so I put the lights on...”

(Shanti, 42, in-depth interview, 20. 11.2018)

The respondent stays alone and her neighbours are the only support who look after her food and other basic necessities. It becomes important for these women to rely on others for their food, clothes and economic needs. The respondent in the study expresses that fear of living alone because her sister is married and has her own family.

Similarly, another respondent shares that:

“My father wanted me to get married and settle down but it’s difficult to find one...”

“Who will marry me...? my one hand and left leg do not function anymore. I will be a burden to my future husband...”

(Dawa, 49, In-depth interview, 20.11.2018)

The respondent does not want to get married because of her locomotor’s disability. Marriage demands women and men to be physically ‘fit’ and if one partner lacks these attributes then it becomes challenging for the parents to find a ‘perfect’ bride or groom. The woman who desires to get married and does not find a suitable mate due to her physical deformity suffers trauma and feels worthless. Though her parents support her condition, an unknown man will not take care of her lifelong. Disability factors can cause one to delay marriage or remain single throughout, as the research shows that women with disability are likely to remain single than non-disabled ones (Asch et al., 2001, Hanna & Rogovslay, 1992 in Denmark and Paludi, 2008).

4.5.4. iv) Menopause: questioning the fertility life of women / an obstacle for late marriage

The word "menopause" means "end of monthly cycles". It has been derived from the Greek word pausis (cessation) and the root men- (month). It also signifies an end to fertility among women. The other end of menstrual life of women is known as menopause. It also signifies the end of fertility life among women from the particular age groups of 40 and above, but the mean age of menopause for women is 51. For several centuries the average age at menopause hasn't changed, despite an increase in

life expectancy. It also acts as a hurdle for marriage in women as it symbolizes the onset of old age which ultimately impacts reproduction which is the base for marriage. Women have been affected psychologically as it involves various mental trauma and biological changes have been involved in the process (WHO, 1981).

Dominant views on fertility, ageing and female roles help shape women's expectations of and attitudes towards menopause, and influence the social status accorded to women in middle age. These views inform women's expectations, subjective experiences, and the meanings they attach to menopause (Lock, 1994; McMaster, Pitts & Poyah, 1997; Boulet et al., 1994). The moodiness and irritability in some menopausal women may be shown in physical symptoms such as hot flushes or night sweats. Depression is the major problem faced by these menopausal women. Throughout their reproductive years, women experience significantly higher rates of depression than men, with female: male ratios approximately 2:1 (Astbury & Cabral de Mello, 2000).

Despite the fact that the gender difference in depression is most marked during the reproductive years, experiences related to changes in sex hormones, such as pregnancy, the use of oral contraceptives, hormone replacement therapy and 19 menopause, do not appear to account for this difference (Stephens & Ross, 2002; Kessler, 2003).

Cultural divide and social continuum among married and never-married women identity issues like women of urban compared with that of rural women status, looks down among the women in low status whereas women of urban status consider themselves superior in-terms of empowerment (education, career and facilities).

4.5.5. Acceptance

This particular theme helps to identify the key areas with the acceptance of growing old-age among never-married women. The quality of life depended much on the way they received education, well-being and the ability to deal with the current state. The dependency towards husband and children at old age have been jettisoned for these women so it becomes relevant to rummage around alternative sources for combating and accepting the singlehood phase. Study conducted in Southwestern Ontario city among eight women belonging to age 65 and 77, found that the 'ability to be alone' is the significant factor which old never-married women have accomplished with time (Baumbusch, 2004). Martin (1994) in their study on Canadian older people revealed that "never-married women are happier and more fulfilled than their married counterparts". As compared to married couples, these never-married women were satisfied in-terms of education, careers and lifestyles.

The individual's adjustment and satisfaction with singlehood can only be understood through socio-psychological factors. Self-esteem is important among never-married women because it helps to evaluate one's attitude towards singlehood (Cockrum & White, 1985).

More than half of the respondents in the interview have expressed that they do not fear the growing age but with passing time they have learned to deal with the current phase of life. It is not a new phenomenon for these women as they have accepted lonely old-age gracefully. The only limitation attached to singlehood was physical weakness and absence of social support with increasing age.

4.5.5. (i) Grey Hair and wrinkled smiles: A satisfaction with oneself

Most of the literature on singlehood refers to young people (Mahay & Lewin, 2007). Research on aging families pays inadequate attention to the group of never-married singles over 60 (Conney & Dunne, 2001). In addition, the experience of being older and single, or being single and old, has been neither extensively described (McDill, Hall, & Turell, 2006) regarding self-perception of older never-married singles, Gubrium (1975) described their status as a “premium” in old age, compared to other marital statuses, because they do not experience the loss of the form of self-validation that is marriage. Rubinstein (1987) presented a more complex picture, and found that older never-married singles might experience other forms of loss.

For this 60 years old respondent she is satisfied with her single status because she compares her life with other old married women who are taking care of their grandchildren even when they are having severe health issues. She also mentions that conflict with her son's wife could lead to an unhealthy environment at home she mentions joyfully:

“At my age, women are taking care of grandchildren and sometimes facing terrible fights with daughter-in-law but thankfully, I don't have to face all these family issues....”

(Sangay, 52, In-depth interview 10.04.2019)

“Age is just a number” for never-married women as they are still healthy at the age of 60s and 80s. These women tend to be strong mentally and emotionally as they still plan to roam rather than sitting at home and hoping for help. Self-esteem is what these women give importance to. Sikkimese families are not conservative regarding marriage as the unwed daughters at home are not a burden for parents but rather a

support for their old age. If a family has a majority of unmarried women at home, then younger sisters would look as a source of inspiration and opt for the same in some cases.

In recent times, these never-married women form groups and travel places on weekends. They have more strong bonds and they enjoy their company which becomes a major source of happiness.

“I stay with my sisters and we have a big group of unmarried women at home... I enjoy their company and being in my 60s we still visit places and travel a lot. To remain single was not my own decision but destiny... My relatives sometimes get jealous and wish that if they were not married then they would have been free of familial tensions and responsibility...”

(In-depth interview: 15.03.2019)

One of the respondents even shared that some of their friends envy their single status. The stereotypical notion of never-married as ‘incomplete’ has been waning and women are still contemplating on remaining single as a viable option for life.

4.5.5. (ii) Passing on their property

It is very important for legal heirs to secure the asset after the death of the person in whose name it is registered. There are legal formalities to obtain ownership of a property. Formalities may differ based on the nature of the property, rights over it, the number of legal heirs and others. In the presence of a will, the process is relatively simpler; executors are required to administer the property as per the will. But legal heirs can challenge the will if it is contrary to law. Once the beneficiaries and their

shares, rights and liabilities are decided, the property has to be transferred in their names.

In case a deceased owner of property does not leave behind a will, the legal heirs will inherit the assets as per the provisions of the Hindu Succession Act, 1956 in the prescribed order. The first preference is given to Class-I legal heirs, which include close relatives like parents, spouse, children and their successors. However, when it comes to never-married women she can transfer the will to the successor as entitled to. When a house has been left without a will, a female heir is entitled to claim a share and stay in the house. However, only the male heir has a right to divide the property and the female heir cannot call for a partition.

“After my death, I have mentioned in the Will that my property should be transferred to the legal successor... as my niece has looked after me in hard days...”

(Binita, 58, In-depth interview 21.04.2019)

Passing on the property to niece or nephews has been the major task for never-married women. As they do not have children, transferring the property to their close ones is the only option. Never-married women who have property and savings can transfer their will as per their choice.

“I don’t trust anyone neither my brother nor my relatives so I have decided to donate my wealth in the church for social causes...”

(Sangay, 60 In-depth interview 17.04.2019)

Donating property for social service has also been done by never-married women. The never-married women belonging Christian community have liberty to donate to

the church. This is very much common among the Christian never-married women in Sikkim.

4.6. Summary

The lived experience of never-married women has been extracted with the help of an in-depth interview using Paul Ricoeur's interpretative analysis. He combined phenomenology with a critical hermeneutic philosophy, and created a new understanding through critical interpretation (Ricoeur, 1976). The never-married women belonging to age 40 and above have been interviewed and various themes have been segregated using interpretative analysis.

According to Ricoeur (1981) the lived experience of an individual can be extracted with the use of both the descriptive and interpretative method. He also emphasised that the life story of a person has two aspects that provides to its forward movement or directedness through: (i) series of sequence of episodes and (ii) a building of "meaningful totalities out of scattered events' '.

Similarly, the never-married women have been living single for many years and have dealt with various life circumstances and phases; Their life experiences from the age of 40 and above has been a roller coaster in which age, lifestyle, choices of searching for life partner, not settling with random man and the role of Sikkimese parents has given them push to these women to lead their life as per their choices. Woman is an indispensable component of the society; she plays a constructive role both as a mother and wife. The never-married women defy such roles as they have placed solely 'women' above all roles. The traditional idea of respectable women was only possible through being mother of a child which manifested nurture and care giver, being someone's wife portrait adulthood meaning responsibility to start a family.

Eventually, women have been opting for singlehood which shows that her separate identity of being women is significant. As such social structures and policies are planned in such a way that support marriage institutions and neglects the need of unmarried people. Thus, never-married women have created spaces of their own. The decision to remain single has been challenging for these women as it requires a lot of self-motivation and attitude. Compared to the younger of age 40 to 50, the older never-married women of age 60-78 years have no regrets with their current state of singlehood.

The respondents in the study came from varied family backgrounds and classes. The experiences of these never-married women could not be captured in one frame. For instance, some never-married women belonging to urban areas and better careers depended on their earnings as it was their only source which could fulfil their happiness. This contentment could be achieved through travelling, activities, shopping and building assets and many more. 'Singleness is seen as a trade-off', where negative stereotypes and absence of a partner may be justified by ability to further one's career or pursue other options (Baumbusch, 2004; Dalton, 1992). We have the notion that never-married people have only single reasons which lead them to this status of singlehood. However, this proved to be wrong as people who are never-married have come up with various reasons and factors. The strong sense of independence and attitude of older never-married women can give an insight for prediction of present younger women in later phases of life. At the age of 70s and 80s, it becomes more essential that their experiences of the aging process and old age be better understood for the sake of improving stereotypes and setting forth models of successful aging.

Chapter 5

Support Mechanism of Never-Married Women in Sikkim

5.1 Introduction

Support mechanism refers to the help taken by an individual which serves as a protective barrier while dealing with obstacles. It also promotes positivity and better experiences in one's life. As per Collins dictionary (2021), the definition of support mechanism is any formal system or method for providing assistance, as well as a remedy for pain and suffering (Barrett, 1999). Authors like (Weiss, 1975; Austrom, 1984) have emphasized that support is an escape from loneliness, negativity and exclusion. It is a source of power and confidence in difficult times.

Past literature in social sciences research has mainly focused on the old-age support sought by never-married women at the later stages of life (Keith, Rubinstein, 1987; Rubinstein, Alexander, Goodman, & Luborsky, 1991; Wu & Pollard, 1998; Kim & Scafer, 2000; Gierveld, 2004; Winterstein & Rimon, 2014). However, the idea of 'support' does not come with age but rather through situations and circumstances that one has faced in tough times.

Support can be driven by any person, at any time and is not limited to a certain age of an individual. Hence, the concept of support cannot be summed up with a single definition, since it is multi-dimensional. Support mechanism in this study has been categorized into three broad areas viz. social, economic and emotional support mechanism.

Social support is one of the primary sources of support for never-married women in Sikkim. This support especially comes from their friends and family because the majority of never-married women have been seen living with their parents or residing

near their natal home and it is only in rare cases that they prefer to live independently. Support also acts as a pillar at the time of loneliness and stress. Thus, a support mechanism is essential for never-married women because with growing age, one's health diminishes, and the informal care received from the spouse and children are missing (Rook, 1984).

Sociologists have conceptualized family and kinship with regard to affine relations through blood and marriage. Our societies are entrenched with the traditional concept of marriage and bearing of children. The concept of 'family' from a heterosexual and child-centric orientation establishes the purpose of marriage as procreation. (Rempel, Holmes, & Zanna, 1985). However, the idea of '*whom do you seek for support in later stages of life?*' has been slowly changing as family formation patterns are changing e.g., families without children, same sex parents, etc. This emerging phenomenon is still novel and is getting slowly accepted by several societies (Cox, 1998). However, in case of never-married women, the affinal kins are absent as they rely heavily on blood and non-kin relations. They form a network of non-kin groups i.e., friends, colleagues and formal groups (Sarkisian and Gerstel, 2015).

There is a typical notion in society that biological children take care of older parents and, if childless, then spouses are the sole support for each other. However, this view is not applicable with regard to never-married women because non-kin and relatives are their support (Winterstein & Rimon, 2014). The tendency to view oneself (relatively) more as an altruistic provider of support and less as a dependent receiver may be better interpreted within a cultural or social psychological framework rather than purely as a systematic bias. (Silverstein & Giarrusso, 2010). The study conducted by Hogman (2015) on never-married elderly women showed that support from relatives is common among the wealthier groups, whereas, in lower strata groups,

preference was given to non-kin. The pattern of residence and living arrangement affected the support mechanism of elderly never-married women. Most women were able to support themselves because they were employed for a major part of their lives, but when old age ailments like rheumatism and cataract set in physical support for the body is needed

Relying on children is common for ageing parents, but if childless, then the case is different. At old age, children are perceived as ‘insurance’, meaning economical support at later stages of life; which is absent in case of never-married women. Hence, these women have an alternative in the form of care-giving relationships (Rubinstein, 1987 cited in Winterstein & Rimon, 2014).

5.2 Sources of Support for Never-Married Women in Western and Indian societies

Women’s history and gender history have developed into nuanced fields, taking into account the multiple dimensions of women’s lives, including race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class. However, most studies still concentrate, consciously or not, on married women (Tallentire, 2006).

Western societies have currently accepted singlehood, though not fully but partially. This can be seen in western literature (Rose, 1990; DePaulo, 2007; Trimberger, 2008; Traister, 2016; McKeown, 2017; Kislev, 2019). These studies reveal that women in western countries are highly educated, financially independent and accepted their status of singlehood. However, for some women the case is different because they are targeted and humiliated because of their single identity (Spreitzer & Riley, 1974).

In the 15th Century, it was believed that never-married women were seen as a competition and so, were not given employment. In Germany, wages of spinsters

were intentionally kept low so that single women could not support themselves, and thus shifted into the household of male master or artisan and ended up working for them (Bennett & Froide, 1999). Over the course of time, the never-married women have been portrayed as the recipient of society's humiliating treatment, which was sometimes difficult to cope with (Reynolds, 2008). In the U.S., the lifestyles of never-married women differed in terms of culture, imperatives and social structure (Trimberger, 2008). The cultural parameters and societal setup influenced one's decision to remain single or get into wedlock.

The support mechanism for never-married women is gained from communities working for singles and NGOs. Kislev (2019) conducted research on the never-married population in the U.S. and some European countries between ages 30 and 78 who have opted for support mechanisms from social networks, innovative communities, and social and familial ties in new ways. Thus, more involvement in social groups and associations, policy for singles, insurance etc. resulted in more acceptance for never-married women and late-married women in American society (Traister, 2016). In 1877, Susan Anthony, in her speech called 'The Homes of single Women' voiced for gender equality for never-married women in the U.S. However, the liberation for never-married women did not come easily, it was gained through immemorial struggles and mobilization

The western academicians such as Wendy Morris, Rachel F. Moran, Bella DePaulo, E. Kay Trimberger and many more have highlighted the new perspectives and emerging single life in American society, emphasizing that the contemporary single women are less bothered about self and, in contrast, others are more concerned about their lives (Chambers-Schiller, 1984). Similarly, the never-married women have their own set of friends and colleagues who play a very significant part in their lives.

The interpersonal networks of never-married women are sourced from family, friends, fellow workers, neighbors, and voluntary associations.

The support of friends and siblings is exceedingly important for never-married women. Fischer (1982) and Moore (1990) found that never-married people have a wider group of friends and prefer to socialize more and develop a wider network. Friendship networks boost people's freedom and also provide bonds of support. Research supports that such a network of different types of friends is especially favorable for health and well-being. It is a key to community building, companionship and sense of belonging and trust (Trimberger, 2005). While never-married women were particularly close to their sisters, abundant evidence exists of many who enjoyed close relationships with their brothers. Single women's relationships with their brothers seem to be characterized more by material assistance, while ties with sisters were characterized as much by companionship and emotional support. In many cases, differences of opinion over material matters also led to tensions between brothers and their single sisters (Froide, 2007).

The trend of senior online dating websites for singles has been launched worldwide. In western countries, there is a hike in these agencies who act as a cupid or a matchmaker for the never-married. For instance, "OurTime.com" was formed for the community of singles belonging to the senior category, with the purpose of meeting people and spending time together, and their aim to widen their social network and find companionship. Another similar online site called "Meetup.com" was designed for single women in their 30s belonging to New York City. Meeting online is more common among those in relatively new relationships. Among those who have been in their romantic relationship for less than three years, meeting online

is just as common as meeting through friends or family. For dating and finding a good match, friends and family are the common source of help for adults.

In Western societies there is abundant availability of psychological counselling centers for people dealing with societal stress and anxiety (Whitley, 1980). The practice of consulting a psychologist is a common phenomenon because every individual experience psychological instability resulting in diminishing self-worth (Baker & Benjamin, 2000). The clinical psychologists especially dealing with problems of never-married women have increased in American society. They focus on the issues of loneliness, depression and self-doubt arising out of everyday chaos (Keith, 1986). Women's therapy has been extremely helpful in order to understand the struggles of single people. Single's counselling for women help to understand one's own pattern and the ability to connect with people (DePaulo, 2019). There are many online counselling centers available for single women such as Therapy2change, Good therapy, and Counselling for single women. Moreover, individual therapy examines negative thoughts and feelings, anxiety that might accompany them such as unhealthy relationship patterns or a traumatic experience from the past. It mainly tries to alter the negative experience into positivity in the lives of never-married women. It is an effective treatment for a host of emotional problems. Simply talking about your thoughts and feelings with a supportive person can often make you feel better. Care services are also available which is a community-based agency working for aged lonely and deprived people which provides nursing services and emotional support in Western countries (such as Norway, Switzerland, Canada, Germany, Britain and USA).

The onset of globalization and liberalization in the mid-1990's not only impacted the economic structure of India but also transformed the social fabric. The

institutions of marriage and family are under constant modification in many parts of the world, especially where women are precipitously seeking upward mobility and greater equality (Jiang & Gong, 2019). In the Indian context, marriage is essential to become a complete woman (Nair, 1994). In Indian society, marriage and motherhood delineates what womanhood should ideally be. Women lacking such relationships beyond a certain age are therefore left out in a marginalized and stigmatized state and are perceived differently from those who are married. The historical dominance of patriarchal Hindu society considers the unmarried women as inferior. They are barred from inheriting property and only marriage could provide her property in the form of *stridhan*, including movable assets such as jewelry, clothes, utensils or cattle and for some immovable assets such as landed property.

As mentioned in Manusmriti, “a wife along with her property belongs to her husband” (Halder & Jaishankar, 2008-09). The first part of the Brahmanical discourse on women perceived them as essentially sexually insatiable and, therefore, sinful. However, at the same time, Brahmanical thought recognized that women could play a vital role in the reproduction of its ‘world’, both biologically and socially, particularly in the establishment of caste purity, lineage and family. Consequently, women and their sexuality/fertility needed to be controlled and channeled. (Ray, 1999) If parents married their daughters at the proper time, then they were highly respectable in society (Nandy, 1988).

In a nation where the institution of marriage is viewed as sanctified and ethical, the women who defy marriage and agree to live without husband and children are the ‘odd ones’, they are regarded as ‘selfish’ and ‘self-centered women’. The support from society to such women is only a handful; Singh (2000) found that the denial for marriage by Indian single women experiences violence in their families,

specially, widows are often exploited in their in-law's family. The literature (Jethani 1994; Krishnakumari, 1987; Neshla, 1994) on the never-married women in India shows that only a few women have received support from the society and the rest are left with little choice. Arranged marriage, which is common among the Indian society, makes it more difficult for women to find a suitable match. As Sontag explains, "The single woman's aging process is a marker of her gradual withdrawal from the marriage market, signifying her diminished sexual and reproductive value and function" (Sontag, 1983).

In Indian society, it is viewed as a failure on the part of the parents or on the part of the woman itself if the marriage is not solemnized. The novel concept of providing support to singles through community formation in India has been borrowed from Western society as the founders of such groups reside overseas and implement the knowledge after their return to India.

The old singles living in metropolitan cities developed the necessity to join the single community especially the one's belonging in the age group of 50 and above. The paid community centres for these singles have fulfilled the basic needs of life; for instance, seeking doctor's appointments when it is difficult for family members to assist them, cook food, taking care in illness, motivate at low times, or give company. One of the functional communities working for the Indian single population is JOY (Just Older Youth). It was started in the year 2017 by a Facebook group with a member count of over 70 with the motive to support the left-out singles belonging to the age group of 50-60 or above. (Malhotra, 2018).

Another community working for never-married women is called Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan (ENSS), founded by Ginny Shrivastava in 2005. Helps single women in

India fight for her rights and provides legal and social support. However, these communities are not created solely for never-married women but for the separated, widowed, divorcees and ones with missing spouses. A pre-marital counselling cell was launched in 2012 by a single woman named Vanitha Sahaya Vani with the main aim to help single women who were forced to get married by the family members. Mostly young girls would seek help due to marital pressure from their family members. Some of the reasons shared by the counselling team for avoiding marriage by women were dowry, domestic violence, traumatic death of family members due to unsuccessful marriages and many more. Indian families do not approve if the daughters avoid marriage and become career conscious and acquire good education, seeing these as reasons why they would remain unmarried, or a rejection of the traditional roles of wife and mother (The Hindu, 2016).

Similarly, CORO (Committee of Resource Organization) aids in organizing training and creating Mahila Mandals and Self-Help Groups (SHGs). It has developed a community-based approach for facilitating change from within India's most marginalized and oppressed single women such as widowed, abandoned, separated and never-married-- single women who cannot afford education, employment or a self-sufficient life, the inaccessible governmental schemes and policies, and the ones unaware of one's own rights. This organization has been formed across the Beed, Latur, Osmanabad and Nanded districts of Marathwada in Maharashtra (Coroindia.org). Singles retirement communities have numerous built-in programs to help encourage individuals to interact with others. As a 'single' individual who is older, they may not have a lot of social interaction. However, in these communities, events, social activities, and a lot of one-on-one opportunities are available.

5.3 Sources of Support for Never-Married in Sikkim

The sources of support for never-married women differ as per age, social setup and economic status. The study tries to unearth the predominant cultural perceptions of never-married women and how these women seek support from the society in terms of social, economic and emotional needs. Social support includes kin, friendship from peers and social network groups. Secondly, the economic support of never-married women includes retirement pension, dependence on siblings and parents if unemployed, and savings and insurance. Thirdly, the emotional support includes religious and spiritual engagement, recreational activities, and a sense of emotional stability from a child belonging to family or own village and opting for adoption.

5.3.1 Social support–

Social support is a powerful predictor of living a healthy and long life. With the growing age this support from society has a greater impact on the individual's social status, well-being and personality (Dykstra, 2015). McDowell (2006) defined social support as “the availability of people whom the individual trusts, on whom he [or she] can rely, and who make him [or her] feel cared for and valued as a person.”

It is basically a positive exchange with the network of members that leads to healthy living or helps cope with the negative situations in life. The social support that people receive helps to maintain an overall sense of stability and self-worth (Thoits, 2011). Regular monitoring, visiting and caregiving are some forms of assistance of social support. Sometimes, people also pay for this kind of support which include professional care workers (McPherson & Wister, 2008).

Pearlin (1985) mentions three aspects of social support: (a) social networks which are referred to as support from several people with whom the individual has

contact (b) group affiliation which are generally with those groups the individual has an attachment to, and (c) interpersonal interactions which are active affiliations involving trust and intimacy.

Amongst never-married women in Sikkim, social support plays an important role in every stage of life and cannot be clubbed into one single phenomena of support because of multi-ethnic structure and varying types of support received. The limitations and the social needs vary as per growing age. The never-married women at the age of 60 and above have different ideas of support than the young never-married women. This social support is significant for the never-married women as it links them to the larger support from the society.

In the Sikkimese culture, social support is received from extended families. The custom of visiting extended family members in case of emergency like demise or severe illness of a member in the family house is common. The presence of the family member provides a great deal of psychological and moral support.

The saying “Blood is thicker than water” is rightly applicable in the society as the relatives and far cousins are expected to visit, first followed by friends, co-workers and neighbors at the time of any occasion like a wedding, or in times of severe illness and bereavement. Family members play an important task in providing emotional support such as exchanging confidences, advice or comfort instead of friends. (Dykstra, 2015).

The structural support (so-called social integration) refers to the extent by which a recipient is connected with in a social network, like the number of social ties or how integrated a person is within his or her social network. Burnley and Kuth (1989) examined the social relationship of singles and its importance in their life.

According to them, the need for friendships and familial relationships is higher for singles. Single women had neither spouses or children; their world of personal relationships put more emphasis on siblings and a wider kinship network (Froide, 2007). An interesting fact about never-married women in Sikkim is that most of the families have lineage of non-married females, for example: *Phupu* (father's sister) who is not married and sometimes *chema* (mother's sister) are also single. This pattern of never-married women in the family influences young ones to opt for singlehood as an alternative to marriage. No doubt there are other numerous reasons for not marrying but the trend set by the elder females is sometimes followed by the younger generation. Sikkimese society accepts women even if they choose to remain unmarried and hold them in high esteem due to the contribution made by them in economic activities. Moreover, the social structure gives them socio-cultural autonomy, authority, involvement in the decision-making process within the household across communities.

The practice of polyandry among tribal communities and the custom of bride-price is another factor because of which women are considered as an asset in the household (Dhamala, 1985 cited in Sikkim HDR, 2001). In Lepcha marriage customs, bride-price is one of the most significant customs, where the groom has to repay the bride's parents even if he has to sell his labour in the bride's house (Fudong, 2018).

Table 5.1 Types of Support for Never-Married Women in Sikkim

Types of Support	No. of respondents (N)	Percentage
Parents	33	13.2
Niece and Nephews	32	12.8
Peer	29	11.6
Retirement	26	10.4
Dependent on family members	22	8.8
State Welfare Old age pension	18	7.2
Neighbours	16	6.4
Religion conversion	12	4.8
Savings	15	6
Support Children from local village	14	5.6
Social Work	13	5.2
Single household	12	4.8
Adoption	8	3.2
Total	250	100%

Source: Fieldwork 21st June 2017- 1st September 2018.

The above table 5.1 reveals that not having children did not affect these never-married women—12.8 percent of never-married women relied on younger family members like their nephews, niece, sisters and brother’s families. When the respondents were questioned about the desire to adopt children almost 5.6 percent replied that they would support the child rather than adopting, helping economically without claiming to be one’s parent. Only 3.2 percent of never-married women have opted for adoption because it is very tedious and further legal documentation is very demanding. Traditionally, among the Buddhist community, the custom of donation and adoption of deprived children is observed. Preference was given to those children who had lost their parents, those who were financially unstable or were victims of child abuse, However, 4.8 percent of never-married women lived unaccompanied. In such situations, social contact with the neighbors was of great help to these women. Recently, among urban never-married women the new source of networking of social

support is via popular social media like WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram (interview, 22.01.2018).

In Sikkim, more than 50 percent of the old population lives with their adult children (HDI, 2014). Although the eldest son is traditionally expected to live with his parents, and his wife is responsible for taking care of the parents-in-law when they become old and ill.

In some cases, during the absence of a son, the responsibility of parents is taken up by the unmarried daughter in the family. Unlike other Indian states, the number of old age homes in Sikkim is comparatively less²⁰ as there is not much demand for shelter homes for aged people because caring and looking after the aged eldest member in the family is an unwritten norm.

5.3.1. (i) Kin forms the key relationship-

Kinship is the most important principle of social organization for humans. It is the relationship between persons who are linked either through blood ties or marriage. Sikkimese families are close-knit and form strong bonds through consanguine, affinal and fictive ties. Some research suggests that singles exchange more support with their parents than married (Laditka & Laditka, 2001; Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2004, 2012; Suitor & Pillemer, 2006), although some other research finds no such differences (Campbell & Martin-Matthews, 2003; Johnson & Lo Sasso, 2000).

In the present study, the respondent shared that their single status helped them in developing strong consanguine bonds and also to cultivate some fictive ties. Social bonds have the primary role in making life easier for never-married women as it

²⁰There are two old age homes located in the East district of Sikkim namely 'Lee Aal Old Age Home' in Tintek which takes care of 15 aged people and another old age home named 'Ishwaramba Samiti Old age home' in Jalipool, East Sikkim, which consist of 17 inmates, with 7 female and 10 males aged (posted in Voice of Sikkim, 8.01.2017).

helped them to form close bonding and reliability. It depends upon the possibilities of residential arrangement among the family members which becomes crucial in times of occasions such as festivals, parties, marriage, and death rituals. Friendship and social clique are of prime importance to respondents due to which they never feel lonely.

“In my family, my aunt is near to me; we share everything, from planning a tour to shopping... The one I trust and she is my family cum friend...”

(In-depth Interview, Meghna 43)

Social order is maintained when it comes to veneration and hierarchy in age. The oldest male or female member in the family is given a high position and imparts traditional knowledge while performing rites and rituals at home. The young members in the family are given full attention and support. The involvement of all the family members can be observed in the religious ceremonies and events. Unlike other states in India, in Sikkim, never-married women enjoy equal share while participating in family ceremonies and religious festivals. The Nepali community belonging to Hindu religion believe that women who are unmarried are regarded as ‘pure’, since they are celibate and if over 50 years, then the onset of menopause implies that they are free to perform all the religious rites and duties at the temple and home²¹. The never-married women belonging to age 49 and above have experienced this liberty.

“While young females at home are having periods, then only male members and myself are allowed to sit in Puja or serve food to the

²¹Menstruation is a social and religious taboo in India as it is considered impure as per Hindu belief (Garg and Anand, 2015). The stigma attached to menstrual flow is experienced by women for instance prohibition in participating in any religious task, entering into kitchen, touching holy books, sour food and even offering food to dead ancestors (Puri and Kapoor, 2006).

priests because we are considered 'pure' and God does not accept our offerings."

(In-depth Interview, Mamta, 58)

It should be noted that these adherences regarding menstruation are primarily within Hindu community, as some of the never-married women belonging to the Bhutia and Lepcha community, who are Buddhist or Christians by faith, do not observe these taboos.

Coping with singlehood becomes much easier when there is sharing among the family and relatives. The absence of care, love and support result in trauma for any individual as humans are the social animal which prefers to live within one's own community and groups. Parents and siblings play an important part in the lives of never-married women. In families, the female lineage being strong can be one of the reasons for women opting for a single life. By following the pattern of single lives in families where two or more single sisters remain never-married, the influence is stronger on the young generation to opt for singlehood. The relationships of never-married women with other female members such as mother, sisters and nieces are stronger than those with male members (Froide, 2007).

While close relations to their immediate family is of the greatest import to single women, bonds of kinship are not limited to just that. Extended kin also played active roles in the lives of never-married women. Female friends could be as important as female kin to other never-married women. Friends and non-kin, such as landladies and servants, could become 'surrogate kin' to single women without family members. Rather than never-married women lacking significant and intimate relationships

because they did not have husbands and children, they created and nurtured important and close relationships with other women, both kin and non-kin.

5.3.1. (ii) Friendship ties act as Social Continuum

A significant relation for never-married women is friendship. These women build circles of friends which become their source of care and support. Friends provide social security and comfort. Cockrum & White (1985) in their study found that supportive friends are a vital reason for conforming to singlehood and as an acceptable way of life. Their findings suggest that supportive family, friends, co-workers, and others play an important part in the life and happiness of single adults by validating and reaffirming to never-married individuals that they are not deviant. Shostak (1987) argued that a supportive group of friends is necessary to deal with issues of loneliness among single adults.

I treasure our friendship; my childhood friend is like my family and whenever I am sad or feel stressed, I go out and meet her...“After I choose to remain single for lifelong, my single friends became my companion because they are there at my low times and do not makes me feel alone...I do not have to rely on my family or married sisters who have their own life... ”

(In-depth Interview, Kunchuk, 45)

These relationships help form a network which is close and durable. In the present era of globalization, the social institutions like marriage, family and kinship are undergoing transformation. Changes are taking place in marriages because of societal shifts in norms, values and orientations due to several exogenous and endogenous forces. The forces of globalization and modernization have introduced new cultural

dimensions of autonomy and individual choice. This is reflective in the following narrative:

“Since my mother died long years ago, my father got married and left us, so now my family consists of my sister, niece, nephew and friends...They support me and our bonds keep my life going...”

(In-depth Interview, Joshna, 50)

Here, the respondent shares close contact with her siblings, nephews and friends. The ties with family and friends are important sources of well-being since stable networks provide continuity for the self (Ward, 1979). Single women reveal a complex set of experiences surrounding the decision to remain single. Despite cultural and psychological pressures toward marriage and discriminatory social practices, respondents testified to personal growth, an increase in opportunities and friendships, and a sense of independence that validated their present lifestyles. The networks of social relationships provide sharing, intimacy, and continuity. The social integration, closeness, and permanence provided by the marital relationship are not present to the never-married ones (Stein, 1976). Froide (2005) examined that growing age and parental demise leads to women becoming householders.

But the narrative changed for women according to their social situation. Some belonging to poorer families often faced more difficulties and had to make compromises.

“When I had a major surgery, doctors advised me to take complete bed rest for about 3 months and it was difficult for my mother to look after me as she is on medication and my sisters are married and busy with their marital life. So, I felt helpless and then I thought of my friend who

was my last hope so I took the courage and requested her to help me in my difficult times. She immediately agreed to my request and supported me to recover early. I feel friends are more important than family....”

(In-depth Interview, Bibechna, 41)

The positive and affirming attitude towards friends more than the family can be observed in this narration. Friendly relationships differ from the family environment in being more open, more subject to change, and based on a sense of choice and free exchange than on an accident of birth, blood ties, conventionality, and reciprocal role obligations. However, although respondents emphasized the importance of variety and change, they were virtually unanimous in upholding the value of close, caring friendships that last over a period of time (Stein, 1975).

5.3.1. (iii) Search for male/female companions through social networking sites

Social networking sites have been growing fast in this digital world. People are more connected through the virtual than the real world. Sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram have helped people connect for social, commercial and political purposes. Among these sites, Facebook and Instagram have been popular for online dating, finding prospective groom/bride and sometimes even checking partners' matrimony. These social networking sites help one to progress and sustain effective support systems. Nonetheless, some have even experienced the negative effect of social networking sites such as extortion, money laundering, pornography and hacking of personal account. There are numerous cybercrimes encountered from the use of multimedia. Wellman & Hayhornwaite (2002) have found that interaction through online is considered as a separate and integrated part of modern social life determined by the same needs as face-to-face interaction.

In 2007, the study conducted by Myspace showed that women have been using social media for posting photographs and building social connections. The fact that both men and women tended to have the majority of female friends in their list. Women are perhaps more popular in social networking sites as women can both give and receive positive emotions (Dasgupta, 2018). The social circles of never-married women have been found to be bigger than the married ones (DePaulo, 2019). Here, the never-married women of age 40 and above have been using it to meet, chat and share their views with new and existing friends. Some have even found a companion and for some the search is still on. The concept of dating through these social networking sites has been the easiest and most affordable. According to a Respondent,

“I have been using Facebook for more than 15 years, it helped me to trace my long-lost friends. At times, when I am bored and exhausted it gives me relief to chat with my friends and they have been supportive. I feel it’s better to have a friend at a distance which does not require my physical presence...”

(In-depth Interview, Lakhit, 45)

The use of social-networking sites by these never-married women in Sikkim has been popular. Either for searching for a partner, old school mates, new friends or even for marriage. The respondent also felt ‘supported and ‘cared for’ while chatting over Facebook, as it gave them respite and liberty to choose her companion.

“I had been chatting with many men on Facebook and one of the guys even proposed to me for marriage... I guess he is serious about our relationship so I decided to continue our chats and he even promised to

visit my hometown and meet my parents...”

(In-depth interview, Srijana, 48)

“No matter what my age, my FB friends do not judge me! At times, whenever I meet my non-virtual friends, they comment on my age, and what I missed in life, I feel reluctant and avoid them usually...”

(In-depth Interview, Pushpa, 52)

Here the respondent shared her opinion on the merits of accessing the social networking site. Although the respondent has developed relationships in the virtual world, it has helped in building contacts and forming a wider social network. Sometimes, as happenstance, they also meet unknown men and form a healthy relationship. In some cases, there is the question of safety, since in these online connections it is possible to conceal the original character and women have a chance of getting cheated emotionally. Moreover, there have been instances when they have been duped of money.

5.3.2 Economic support-

In Sikkim, the participation of women in economic activities is high. Apart from engaging in agricultural activities in rural areas, women are playing a major role in other economic activities like trading. The State Government has approved 30 percent reservation for women of Sikkimese communities in posts and services to be filled by direct undertakings. In the sphere of higher education, the position of women has improved with growing awareness and changing societal perceptions towards women education and also due to the emphasis laid by the State Government for the development of human resources. Women enjoy comparatively greater liberty in Sikkim as compared to other states of the Indian Union in various traditions (Sinha,

1975). Single women are economically independent and satisfied with their single status, freedom and earn self-sufficient income for future security (Beri & Beri, 2013). Economic support refers to the monetary assistance for never-married women. Single women's pension, savings, retirement pension (if working), insurances and inherited assets are some of the economic securities given to the never-married women.

In the study, the retired never-married women of age 60 years and above have reported savings in banks and pensions for their future needs. Almost 16.4 percent rely on retirement pension and 13.6 percent on insurance, 18 percent on the bank and post office savings and remaining 16 percent dependent on family income i.e., brother's income and inherited property and 16.8 percent on State-sponsored old age pension from the Welfare department (refer Table 5.2). Schwenk (1992) found that women aged 65 years or older are highly educated and have high incomes and more wealth. In the same vein, never-married women are valued as long as they are working and economic security is available, but are considered burdensome if they are dependent. (Krishna kumari, 1987).

The Ministry of Women and Child Development launched the "Mahila-E-Haat" a unique direct online marketing platform to meet the aspirations and needs of women entrepreneurs, Self Help Groups and NGOs. Indira Gandhi National Old Age Pension Scheme (IGNOAPS) covers all senior citizens living below the poverty line and the rate of monthly pension would be raised to Rs.1000 per month per person and revised at intervals to prevent its deflation due to higher cost purchasing.

Table 5.2 Economic support for Never-Married Women in the state.

Economic Support	No. of respondents	Percentage
Savings on Banks and Post Office	45	18
Retirement Pension	41	16.4
Insurance	34	13.6
Dependent	40	16
Beneficiary of State Single Pension	36	14.4
Beneficiary of State Old Age	42	16.8
None	12	4.8
Total	250	100%

Source: Interview taken on 2018-19

5.3.2 (i) Reliability towards Retirement Pension –

Retirement is a time when people take a break from their job after a long tenure. Most of the educated never-married women in urban areas have been relying on their pension. Many of them have worked in the public sector for the past thirty-forty years which have helped them in crucial times. Retirement and pension systems are fundamentals to every modern welfare system-retirement is an aspect of the modern institutionalized life course of the present day (Kohli 1986 in Scherger & Hagemann, 2014). These retirement pension schemes have helped never-married women during financial crunch as they do not rely on their family for their basic needs, as being the decision maker of the house, it becomes uncomfortable for these women (Dorfman, 1989). Some women have also planned to work after retirement as they feel that sitting at home would definitely make them feel helpless and valueless, a respondent shared her future prospects after retirement:

“With my retirement pension, I want to build a Home-stay and have a small kitchen garden where I can grow vegetables and have a nursery of my own... I don’t have children for whom I have to think... so I will

invest in my future plans... just thinking of renovating my house, visiting my far relatives and planning for a long holiday with my sisters...”

(Dichen, 59 In-depth interview)

The dreams and aspirations of these old, never-married women still continue to grow. As these women have accepted single life positively so planning for activities in their leisure hours and fulfilling their desires have been their sole aim after retirement.

The never-married women in Sikkim have been receiving pension from the Government of Sikkim under the ‘Unmarried Pension Schemes’ for the age group of 45 to 59 years. This pension scheme started in the year 2015 with a minimum monthly pension of Rs. 500 for BPL category women. Only recently, from July 2017, has the pension amount been increased to Rs. 2000 per month. In case of death or permanent migration of the unmarried pensioner outside Sikkim, the pension discontinues and the family members have to give back the passbook to the Social Welfare Department (Mangar, 2016).

Women living in rural areas especially from the South District were not aware of the pension, while interviewing almost 50 percent of women did not know about the schemes provided by the government of Sikkim. Almost 30 percent of women hesitated to apply for the pension because it required to elaborate documentation²² and the extensive time taken to process the files was burdensome. However, in the East district, 20 percent of the never-married women stated that they have been availing pension and it aided in their financial crisis. The study found that these never-married

²²A form should be filled up by the unmarried women at the local Block Development Officer’s (BDO) office and generate the required documents along with a bank account number. For selecting the beneficiaries, a three-member committee is established with the secretary of the department as the chairperson and the joint secretary and the social welfare officer as other members. After the documentation process was over, there would be a scrutiny and the secretary of the social justice, empowerment and welfare department would give the final approval. In order to continue the pension, an unmarried woman has to submit a certificate every year stating her single status to the local BDO.

women could easily avail the pension because they were aware about the scheme, had easy accessibility to the office, since disbursement of funds is located in Gangtok itself i.e., the main branch of the Social Welfare Department.

Lastly, most of the women had the ‘Unmarried Certificate’ (**APPENDIX III**) which is essential for applying for the pension. The data provided by the Welfare Department shows the highest numbers of beneficiaries (167) from the East. Interestingly, in the South district, the number of beneficiaries is less as compared to the West (106) and East (164) districts of Sikkim but has the highest population of never-married women in the state.

**Table 5.3 Total number of Beneficiary in Unmarried Pension Schemes,
Government of Sikkim**

DISTRICTS	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18(26.10.17)
NORTH	13	30	32
EAST	55	167 (H)	164
WEST	8	108	106
SOUTH	12	69	63
TOTAL	88	374	365

Source: Welfare Department, Government of Sikkim.

While comparing from the year 2015-16 to 2017-18, the number of beneficiaries has increased from number 88 to 365. While the highest number of beneficiaries were in the year 2016-17 i.e., 374.

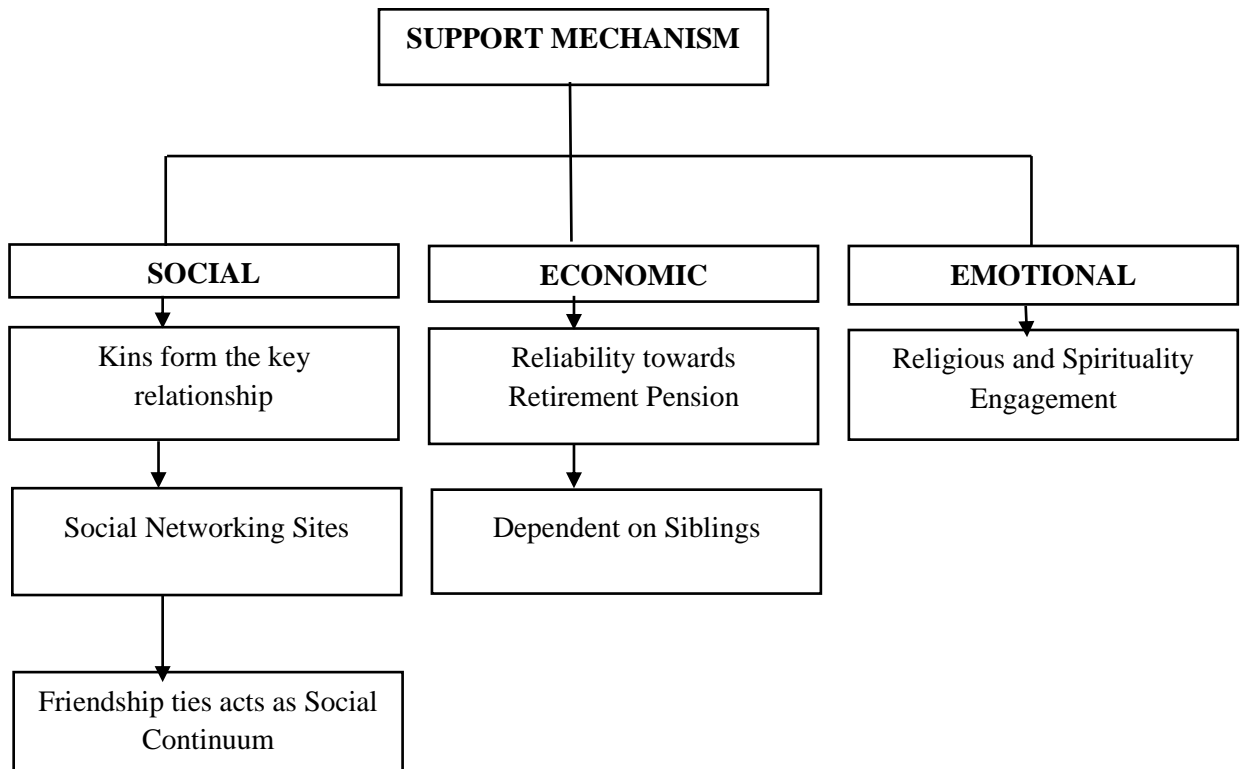
Table 5.3 shows that the district-wise pension scheme is not availed by the majority of never-married women and still needs large masses to be covered by the government primarily focusing in the rural areas of the state. Retired never-married women are more involved with friends, family, organizations, and volunteer work than retired men or lifelong housewives (Carp, 2001; Dorfman, 1995; Etaugh & Bridges, 2006).

These social contacts are important for the life satisfaction of retired women, particularly those who are unmarried (Dorfman & Rubenstein, 1993; Reeves & Darville, 1994).

5.3.2. (ii) Dependence on Siblings-

In case of siblings, the elder brother is expected to take the responsibility of the house and take care of parents, younger sisters and brothers. This practice is common irrespective of any ethnic community. The elder unmarried brother provides the basic necessities to his sister who is not married. While in the case of a married brother, it is different because he has to take care of his wife and children. The support is further divided among new members of the house which makes it difficult for the never-married woman to accept it. This is not true for women who are educated and employed because the finance and expenses of the house is taken care by the women themselves. The brother's support towards his sister is based upon his job security and income. In contrast, having a sister is greatly different from having a brother. The sisters share with each other to help cope with more difficult times. She is compared to a mother figure and there is less interference from her husband. And if she is unmarried then she can be a great deal of support and the bond is much stronger than with a brother.

Fig.5.1 Flowchart of Support Mechanism among the Never-Married Women in Sikkim



Sources: Self-compiled

5.3.3. Emotional Support

According to Cobb (1976) the definition of support also includes emotional support, where an individual feels valued and belongs to a web of communication and mutual responsibility. Emotional support can also be beneficial for extending transience among aged groups (Brown, Nesse, Vinokur, & Smith, 2003 mentioned in Chappell & Funk, 2011). Cultural, spiritual, regional, socio-economic, educational and environmental factors as well as health status impacts older adults' perceptions and choices about their healthcare needs.

Baines, Evans, and Neysmith (1998) used a similar definition for care: “the physical, mental and emotional activities and effort involved in looking after, responding to, and supporting others”. Thus, emotional support in the present study refers to the

psychological support received by never-married women with the arrival of old age. It is basically an emotional, spiritual, instrumental, and religious support which the never-married women seek from the society.

The present study reveals that emotional support varies according to the age and social setup, never-married women belonging to the age group 40-59 years seek emotional and instrumental support, whereas women belonging to 60-80 years are more involved in spiritual and religious sources of support.

The varied cultures and religious setup in Sikkim have produced different understandings and beliefs as per the community. Among the Buddhist community, the belief in life after death i.e., reincarnation, is strongly believed. So, the chanting of prayers and continual process of devotion towards God leads to a happy and good life after death.

In recent times, spiritual centers like Art of Living, Brahma Kumari and Kabir Pant dharma established at the capital of the state i.e., Gangtok is the main hub for the working population in the state. These centers are functioning all over the world, yet they are a new phenomenon in the state. These centers, with their breathing and meditation techniques help in relieving tensions and conflict which people encounter in their everyday life.

Women in the concerned study have been visiting these centers and have experienced positive changes in their physical and emotional health. Only 7.5 percent of the respondents (Table.5.1) who have converted their religion in the study have opted for Kabir Pant Dharma. Religious conversion to Christianity is seen among the Scheduled Caste, Lepcha and Rai community. Studies show that people who are highly spiritual tend to be less lonely and have more self-esteem and are committed towards their

religion. It was this inclination towards religion among never-married women that tend to reduce loneliness (Paloutzian & Ellison, 1982).

Other sources of emotional support were participation in social work or joining NGO's. Around 5.5 percent of the respondents (refer table 5.1) were found to be involved in social work and established organizations like Orphanage homes, Destitute Children Centre and disabled homes. Taking care of orphans gave them satisfaction. The amount of time spent with social work was very valuable and helped never-married women mentally. The support of natal kin, relative ease in obtaining divorce, a growing emphasis on conjugality, education and employment or the capacity for independent earning are the factors that give women bargaining power.

5.3.3 (i) Religious and Spirituality Engagement-

Religious and spiritual engagement are alternatives to resolve conflict within one's mind. Human mind is dealing with fear and confusion related to decision-making, information and adaptation. In regard to this, never-married women in Sikkim try to move in the realm of spirituality to overcome emotional insecurity

*“At the age of 36, I left my birth religion and joined ‘Sadhu Dharma’...
It has been more than 15 years... I think my life would have been
incomplete if I had neglected this opportunity...”*

(Priya, 55, In-depth interview)

Kabir Pant is a sect locally known as ‘Sadhu dharmā’ in colloquial terms. Some individuals from the Nepali community have adopted this religion in Sikkim and other parts of Bengal. During the interview, the respondent mentioned that she has been following this religion for the past 15 years and the reason behind it was to gain psychological peace and motivation which was important to her. ‘Sadhu Dharma’

teaches people to disregard all the problems and difficulties in life and follow certain rules and restrictions. Few never-married women in Sikkim have opted for this path in-order to overcome the societal pressurized life.

“I am more inclined towards God and have dedicated myself towards him... I don't want a man in my life because I fear that my concentration towards God would be divided...”

(Zangmu, 65 In-depth interview)

Respondents further opined that her ‘concentration towards God would be divided’- meaning her time and energy towards God for gaining ultimate peace and power would be distracted. For this group of women, spirituality is a way of life. The presence of a man and children will divert her energies into the emotional and physical side making her detached towards spirituality.

“Meditation and yoga have helped me overcome depression, so I avoid missing it for a single day... I feel this is my morning pill...”

(Dolcee, 49 In-depth interview)

In Sikkim, never-married women have adopted this mechanism to overcome depression. Most of the never-married women have accepted openly that it helped them in dealing with symptoms of menopause too. At the age of 50s, women usually experience various bodily changes and emotional stress. Meditation relieves tension and helps them to deal with it. It has become a tool for these never-married to practice daily.

5.4 Societal Perception of Never-Married Women in Sikkim

Social perception refers to the ability to make accurate interpretations and inferences about other people from their general physical appearance, verbal, and nonverbal patterns of communication. Facial expressions, tone of voice, hand gestures, and body position or movement are all people with higher levels of social perception pick up on to work out what other people are thinking, feeling or are likely to do next (Aronson et al., 2010).

Among the most important reasons in the development of sociology of perception is that it challenges the normally taken-for-granted view that our perceptions are “unfiltered and veridical” (Fiske & Taylor 1991), free of socio-cultural “distortions.” Before turning to the sociology of perception, then, it is helpful to more fully define this “common sense” view. Perception does not involve thinking or interpretation but is a matter of direct sensory perception; sensory stimuli are the only influence.

In order to have a varied perception of singlehood and how society perceives these never-married women, social agents like a family which includes parents, siblings and peer groups would be helpful. A comprehensive sensibility on this can also be established by looking into the viewpoints of married men and women, and also of unmarried young boys and girls belonging to the age group of 25-35 years. The public and personal level of viewpoints was analyzed using focus group discussion. Focus group discussion is frequently used as a qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of social issues. The method aims to obtain data from a purposely selected group of individuals rather than from a statistically representative sample of a broader population (Nyumba, et al., 2018).

(FGD) Focus group discussion was conducted with these married and unmarried men and women, in order to explore people's understanding, interpretation and to understand people's construction, notions, and interpretation of remaining single.

According to Michael Foucault (2019), surveillance is the fear of being gazed upon by the society on every wrong action, this concept is very much related to the never-married women because they fear that if they do anything outside social norms and values then they will be punished or disregarded by society. The monitoring and control from society is sometimes visible and invisible. Disciplinary powers are everywhere, and everyone is subjected to it. The women who are not married are regarded as vulnerable in some societies and this is compounded by the constant suggestion and advice to get married. Society is profoundly troubled by women who survive—by choice or circumstance—independent of male control, support and patronage.

‘By being single, a woman is thought to be more ‘available’ and hence more susceptible to sexual violence, social oppression and economic exploitation. In the absence of ‘male protection’, single women— especially multiply disadvantaged ones—are at the receiving end of several forms of injustice’ (ibid).

5.5 Sources of support in rural areas for Never-Married Women in Sikkim

Majority of the population aged 60 and above lives in rural areas of Sikkim with 81.5 percent and remaining dwells in the urban regions (Census, 2011 cited in UNFPA). In rural areas, for sustenance, people in Sikkim have the ‘Pewa system²³’, Adhiya²⁴,

²³According to state law, in joint households, especially at the time of partition of the property, all property, including pewa and daijo, is considered joint property, unless there is documentary proof that they were given as gifts (as daijo or pewa) or self-earned.

economically sustainable for generating sources for unemployed and very well practiced by never-married women for their future needs.

Every household in the villages has agricultural land, a small or big kitchen garden and the rest work in Canteen, MGNREGA²⁵, ICDS, Tailoring, Grocery etc. There is no unemployment as most people in the rural areas also work in fields or have small shops and survive on their own. The introduction of micro finances has helped most of the people in the state who can make a benefit out of it. The main aim of microfinance is to empower women with monetary assistance, (credit, loan and insurance). SHGs have been playing a significant role in women empowerment in Sikkim, especially by raising their income and mode of savings (Gautam & Chettri, 2016). Sikkim has low Self-Help Group (SHG) performance due to lack of proper communication, literacy, geographical position, and availability of banking services are considered to be the hindrance in this respect. Microfinance and SHGs have shown tremendous improvement in North-Eastern State of India. However, there is some difficulty in applying for loans for never-married women in some microfinance banks (Guarantor requirement of male member/son, husband/brother). The dependency towards these small banks can easily be compensated by the state bank of Sikkim which provides loans for women at the minimal rate and people having land *parcha* (Land documents registered on own) can well be used for establishing business or small firms. For never-married women in rural areas the support is her 'land' and her 'ability' to make use of her assets during old age has been found to make her living comfortable further.

²⁴Aadhya is a kind of contractual sharecropper. where the tenant of the land gives half the profit to the landowner and keeps the half to themselves. Though the farmer cultivates agriculture and invests in the production, the amount of money is divided into equal shares because the land does not belong to the farmer.

5.5. Perception of Married men and women

Marriage provides social support and intimacy for both men and women, hence, generating health regulatory and prevention behaviours among women (Thoits, 1992; Umberson, 1987). Marriage is beneficial for both biological and psychological needs. Sometimes, it also acts as ‘buffer against stress’ (Kessler & Essex, 1982; Berkman, 1988).

A married woman felt that “being single was a blessing”, she recalled the days when she spent her life at home with mother, father and siblings. The paternal home commonly referred as *Maita* in Nepali language was extremely missed after marriage as the woman is regarded to stay at husband’s home *Sasurali* until her death. This custom of marriage is followed by every community in Sikkim. Thus, single life is valued and rare for these married women. They perceive that never-married women enjoy the liberty in terms of decision-making and do not have to seek permission from in-laws and husbands. Some married women also felt that never-married women are more connected to their friends and family because they do not have to devote time to children and husband. Some groups of married women envy single life because they see never-married women have more time for self and space for recreational activity.

Some married women also felt that never-married women specially in the age group of 45 and above were insensitive and devoid of emotions. According to a respondent,

“If a woman is unmarried then it creates a biological and emotional void for her which becomes difficult to deal in her later age”

(FGD, Married female, 32)

Another respondent recalled that her aunt was not married, although very well placed and earning a good salary was and not appreciated by the family members because of her dominant and insensitive nature. According to another women,

“It’s incomplete to become a woman if someone does not choose to become a wife and mother... I guess it’s against the law of nature’s ...”

(FGD, married female, 35)

Some felt that the never-married women created a strict guardian-like image rather than being gentle and friendly which detached them from the family. Social isolation among the never-married women was used as a defensive mechanism to avoid the constant pressure of marriage from society. Sometimes, they are so occupied with themselves that it becomes difficult to intervene in their space and some even avoid social events at home and neighborhood as they want to avoid the intriguing question like “when will you get married.

In Sikkim, the married women are not pressured by parents while selecting a spouse. There have been instances where women and men eloped though their horoscope did not match but marriage took place on the mutual understanding of both the families. There is a custom where Nepali Hindu community people despite its caste and status will try to first match *chinha* meaning ‘horoscope chart’ of the couple for fixing one’s marriage. The married women assume that women who are not married did not find a mate because their *chinha* was not favourable. There have been cases where the marriage got cancelled due to the horoscope not matching.

According to the married men, never-married women were self-centered and arrogant because they have missed the nurturing element of their life. If a woman is married, her energies are channelized between her children and husband, making her happy

and content. Never-married women are perceived as someone who is deprived of being a mother even in spite of the urge to raise a child.

Married men perceived that never-married women were living with dissatisfaction and regret their singlehood status. Authors like Nanik, Tairas & Hendriani (2008) revealed that, "Unmarried people were seen as quieter, colder, and more uncaring than married people". The persistence of such stereotypes also depends on societal norms, values, and attitudes.

5.6. Perception of young unmarried men and women

During the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with 25 unmarried young men and women of age group 25-35 years almost half the participants responded that marriage was not easy as they had a long list of criteria for choosing a life partner. The unmarried young women in Sikkim expressed their desire to have a spouse who works in the Government sector, belongs to the same caste and most importantly the one who holds (SSC) Sikkim Subject Certificate²⁶, i.e., a domicile of the state. It is found that men's income and position in career turns out to be more attractive in marriage markets and thus pulls more options for men to get married (Gwartney & Stroup, 1973).

The unmarried women who supported singlehood felt that being single keeps physical appearance intact, because after marriage a woman's body gets de-shaped and especially after childbirth, they become less appealing. Another factor which is important to these young unmarried women is investing in friendship, planning long trips and tours. They have more freedom to spend on their personal needs.

²⁶Sikkim Subject Certificate is given to a person who belongs to Sikkim and whose parents were registered Sikkim Subject holders and can avail all the benefits of the state including government jobs, buy and sell land, state government loans, incentives from government and many more.

Similar case has been observed in Pacific and Asian countries where childbearing is prohibited outside marriage (Jones, 2007). In Sikkim, most of the Bhutia and Lepcha families have adopted a deprived child from local villages in order to support them financially without giving its surname.

Young unmarried men opined that never-married women were much easier to work with as they sensed reliability and responsibility. Though some wanted to avoid causal relationships with elder never married women as they are independent women and would have difficulty adjusting at home. The combination of compatibility and fertility were preferred by the never-married males. However, because of patriarchy, women are not accepted to be in higher positions in terms of career. For example: Respondent states:

“My family has been searching for a bride for me because they think I will die without getting married, at my age i.e., 40, men will not be interested to settle down...”

(FGD, Unmarried Male, 41)

The gender biasness is somewhere reflected in this narrative. Symbolic interactionist argues that the role is a configuration or gestalt- not a list of duties, but rather an organized set of ideas or principles that people employ in order to know how to behave. The role can be thought of as a resource that participants in a situation draw from in order to carry on their activities.

The generalized other is, like a role, a perspective that the person must imaginatively adopt in order to take into account in forming his or her own conduct. It is made up of standards, expectations, principles, norms, and ideas that are held in common by the

members of a particular social group. In a complex society, there is not one generalized other, of course, but many (Hewitt, 2002).

“Women are choosier than men because their list of qualities for a husband is too long and it’s difficult to fit in that list...”

(FGD, Unmarried female, 41)

In Sikkim there are few chances for men to have an arranged marriage, as most of the families approve of the bride as per their son’s choice and love marriage is common. However, caste is an important marker for marriage and, another important factor for Sikkimese women is Certificate of Identification (COI), which decides the fate for women in achieving the state’s benefit.

“I have female colleagues at my office and mostly not married, I see them planning for a tour, friends’ reunion, birthday events and many more...they look so enthusiastic and free spirited!”

(FGD, Unmarried female, 44)

Literature like Cockrum & White, 1985; Keith, 1986; Ward, 1979; Waehler, 1991 highlight that ‘never-married women are the sufferer and victim in marriage market’, however in the present scenario, never-married women are seen as independent and free from the responsibility of husband and children. Their lifestyle is sometimes envied by married couples as they cannot imagine a woman without the role of wife or mother.

The respondent in the study mentions that it’s not easier for men to come under the criteria of marriage because women in Sikkim are mostly employed and earning well and self-reliant which makes it difficult to settle with any ‘tom-dick and harry’...”

The never-married women form an image of self from what others perceive about them. This has a great impact on their own character, attitude, and judgement in society (Nanik, Tairas, Hendriani, 2018). According to Brehm and Kassin (1996), the interpretation of society towards the never-married women involves four stages. Such stages are observation, attribution, integration, and confirmation. This last stage is temporary because it depends on the individual's belief in safeguarding precision in creating an impression about single women. The societal perception of never-married women in Sikkim has been both positive and negative which is based on varied arguments and discussion.

5.7. Perception of Parents

The acuity of Sikkimese parents about their daughters remaining single varies from community to community. When inquired from Bhutia parents about their daughter's single status, she mentioned that initially she was worried about her decision of not marrying' but gradually accepted it. They felt that spending the rest of their lives with their daughters is a blessing unlike other parents faced with the disheartening situation when daughters have to follow a virilocal system in marriage.

They also shared that the economic stability and job satisfaction which her daughter felt, was instrumental in shaping her thinking. The Lepcha parents of never-married women were satisfied with her status and did not view women as a burden but indeed the gift and support for old age. On the contrary, Nepali parents of middle-class families wished to see their daughters married and play with grandchildren. It is obvious that old-aged people crave the social environment of children which makes them happier to deal with aged life. The Sikkimese Nepali follow Hinduism and only few are Buddhist and Christians. The Nepali community there are derogatory terms for never-married women i.e., *budi kanya* literally means 'old never-married women'

not commonly used but prevalent in the past. The origin of the term is not known and not popular in recent times. Still signifies that traditionally the status of never-married women was low and not seen with respect by the society.

Educated parents viewed daughters as assets and respected their daughter's decision of remaining single, especially if they are earning. The tribal societies are known to be flexible regarding separation and divorce as they are governed by customary laws, yet stress on marrying within one's own community.

Thus, the traditional institution of marriage is not fading and there is no sign of decline in marriage Sikkim, however, the growing population of never-married, does convey that singlehood is quietly asserting its right to be taken seriously, creating its own subculture.

5.8. Perception of Siblings

Research highlights that the married have less contact with siblings in the family (Connidis & Campbell, 2001) Examining the transitions, White (2001) finds that marital formation is associated with reduced sibling contact and receipt of help, whereas marital dissolution is associated with greater sibling contact. No research examines gender differences in the effects of marital status on sibling ties.

The brothers and sisters living with their never-married sisters in Sikkim do not have such a complex relationship. One of the respondents said,

“I have one elder sister who is not married and since childhood she has become a mother- like- figure...she has sacrificed her youth for up-bringing and making me capable of being independent...I owe her a lot...”

The siblings of never-married women view that the elder sister devotes her time and energy looking after their younger siblings. She is like a mother figure for the younger siblings. The sacrifice and time form a significant part of their culture.

“All our three sisters have been living together with our father since their mother's demise. We can't even think of marriage because it might separate us and since our parents taught us to focus more on career than other things. Our everyday life became so busy that marriage was secondary for us.... I feel proud to have the support of my siblings and they...”

The relationship between these sisters shows that being never married was not born out of responsibility but out of mutual love and attachment. The perception of never-married siblings encouraged other members to opt for singlehood in Sikkimese society.

“My wife and I have been looking for a groom for my sister but she is hesitant and not interested in getting married. She has been with us and it's our duty to help her build her own 'family' because in near future we will be having children and our family will be extended so she might also crave for the same... I am worried for her and with growing age her loneliness might creep in....”

The societal pressure on never-married women can be perceived from this narrative, where singlehood is not seen as a viable option. The male member in the family feels that a woman cannot stay single as it may disturb their normal life resulting in loneliness as she advances in age. Despite his sensitive concern for his sister, the brother expressed his inability to support his sister as this would amount to double

responsibility and accountability for him as he has his conjugal family to support. Therefore, it is an unwritten, unstated fact that married siblings can fully support their unmarried siblings.

“My elder sisters have remained single throughout her life... she has a peculiar nature which sometimes becomes difficult to adjust with her into daily life. She is very much concerned about my daughter which sometimes leads to an argument between my sister and wife. She loves my daughter and takes care in our absence too... The desire to become a mother is satisfied through our daughter but I feel its injustice for her...”

Nieces and nephews played an important role in the lives of never-married women. Their relationships and bonds were considered parent-childlike. These collateral ties presented shared positive bonds. Their relationship was viewed as an important part in the lives of never-married women.

The relations that respondents developed with these children were very significant to them and they spoke, too, of their own centrality in the lives of their nieces and nephews and of their hopes of having influenced their lives in positive and enduring ways. The never-married women cherished their relationships with nieces and nephews to that of a parent-child tie.

5.9 Policies Implementation for Never-Married Women in Sikkim

The state has provided monetary assistance for ‘single women’ but in government parlance, the term ‘single women’ specifies never-married women which renders the ambiguity of the term primarily because ‘single’ is a broad rubric which covers multiple statuses viz. divorcee, widow, separated and never-married.

A scheme, 'Single Women Pension' was started in the year 2014 by the state government of Sikkim. It is applicable to women of a particular age group, an amount of Rs.500 is given to Below Poverty Level (BPL) card holders who possess unmarried certificates issued by the state government.

As per the State, the proper definition of 'family' is loosely constructed. As per the report of Social Welfare of Sikkim (2017), the total number of beneficiaries of Single Women Pension in the state is 365. The number is less as compared to the large population of BPL category of never-married women in the state i.e. While interviewing some of the respondents said that they were 'not aware of such a scheme' and if they sought to avail then 'heavy documentation' which involved much time was difficult. Hence, it was not accessible for these groups of women. They felt that the amount was much less and could not fulfil their daily expenses. With the growing market prices and livelihood in Sikkim could not meet the demands of these never-married women. After every six months, the never-married woman has to state her marital status that she is not married with the renewal of 'unmarried certificate' issued by the state government (Firdos, 2017).

The renewal of certificates and to prove the identity of being a Sikkimese woman also creates the question of belongingness to the state. Other issues faced by these never-married women were inheritance of property with unequal pay because they do not possess 'one's family'. In 2008, Sikkim Succession Bill, granted the right to inherit ancestral property. In case the woman is married to a man belonging to another state or non-domicile holder then the immovable property inherited, gifted or purchased by women cannot be transferred and registered in their names (Bhutia, 2017). The inheritance of property rights for Sikkimese women has become both a

boon and ban because it comes with the condition which does not guarantee her safeguards in the long run.

Customarily, a Sikkimese woman after marriage is given gifts of movable assets rather than immovable assets like property (Bhattacharya, 1994 mentioned in Bhutia, 2017). Though unmarried women in Sikkim are at a better position than other states of India, yet the equal share of property was much of a problem. The reason being they do not hold 'next generation' of family for which holding of larger property was not acceptable by the married siblings. The gender biases towards the distribution of land and financial assets could still be reflected in-case of never-married women.

5.10 Summary

This chapter deals with the sources of support mechanisms and perception of the Sikkimese society toward never-married women. The sources of support mechanisms have been divided into social, economic, and emotional support. Social support is broadly defined as assistance or nurturance given by one individual to another, usually in the form of material aid, services, and information. This is a significant source of support for never-married women in Sikkim because this particular support is gained from kin and through friendship from peers and in social network groups. The respondents received the greatest support from their parents, as they were not forced to get married at an early age. Delayed marriage or waiting for the right time to get married is common among Sikkimese women. The second greatest support was from their nieces and nephews. The respondents are surrounded by a young generation, which has helped to nurture their motherly instinct. As for friends and colleagues, the never-married women of Sikkim value their friends and spend quality time with them. The dual process of social interaction, i.e., the link between the

individual and society, can be observed through the lens of Herbert Blumer's symbolic interactionism.

On the level of symbolic interaction, human group life is a vast process in which people form, sustain and transform the objects of their world as they come to give meaning to objects. Objects have no fixed status, and their meaning is sustained through the indications and definitions that people make of the objects. In this process, the primary sources of support are those received from the family (kin, siblings and relatives), peers and social networks.

Secondly, economic support for never-married women in Sikkim includes retirement pension, savings insurance, State Welfare Single Women pension, old age pension, financial support of siblings and property inherited from parents. The handful of beneficiaries were the result of various reasons such as lack of awareness of the schemes, insufficient documents of the pension holder and shortage of state funds. For emotional support, religious and spiritual engagement, recreational activities, supporting a child from their own village and, in rare cases, adoption were opted by never-married women.

On the other hand, Blumer's (1969) idea of symbolic interactionism is relevant for the perception of the Sikkimese society. Symbolic interactionism emphasizes on four core concepts: (i) individuals act based on the meanings objects have for them; (ii) interaction occurs within a particular social and cultural context in which physical and social objects (persons) as well as situations must be defined or categorized based on individual meanings; (iii) meanings emerge from interactions with other individuals and society; and (iv) meanings are continuously created and recreated by interpreting processes during one's interaction with others.

Blumer focused on the meaning of objects for a person defined to him by others with whom he had interacted; for instance, supportive relationships perform a vital function and are an important source for confirming that singlehood is acceptable among adults (Cockrum & White, 1985).

Women enjoy comparatively greater liberty in Sikkim than in other states and cultures of the Indian Union. (Sinha, 1975) Past studies on single women in India (Jethani, 1994; Mishra; Neshla, 1994; Krishna kumari, 1987) have mentioned that these women are lonely, frustrated, ugly, not complete, exploited or even cursed. On the other hand, the never-married women in Sikkim rarely experience chastisement for any kind of Stigma from society. The never-married women who have reached 60 have self-acceptance which is a turning point in a single's life. The never-married women have good careers and have liberated themselves from social ties which made them happy. The role of parents also plays a crucial part in building the future of a child. In Sikkim, most of the parents choose not to force their daughter for marriage and it is left for children to decide whether they are employed or non-employed. The decision to remain single is taken positively and not stigmatized as compared to Indian society. Single women must not relinquish their identity to pursue marriage. Depending upon the status and position achieved by the individual in the society the never-married women have grown career-wise and liberated from social ties which made them choose happiness for themselves, away from the marriage market which demands women to be 'perfect' and yet choose to change her life socially and emotionally. In Sikkim, most of the parents choose not to force their daughter for marriage and it is left for children to decide whether they are employed or non-employed. The decision to remain single is taken positively and not stigmatised.

It was found that the absence of social security from the state needs more attention. Also, awareness is important for rural never-married women as they lack proper information regarding the benefits of the government like Single Women Pensions Schemes (SWPS) which needs to cover a greater number of beneficiaries. On the other hand, women have been able to support their family in rural areas from the self-sustenance schemes which have impacted on a greater level. No insurance schemes for emergency needs found among older never-married women.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

I

Sikkim has a diverse ethnic population and a wide geographical area. The demographic balance of the state has evolved over the past few decades, and while the population continues to grow, current fertility has declined. A woman in Sikkim will have 2.0 children in her lifetime (NFHS-3 report). The state's overall fertility rate is lower than the replacement rate (though this is more prevalent in urban areas) and one child lower in urban areas than in rural areas. However, even in rural areas, the fertility rate of 2.2 children per woman is approaching the replacement level (International Institute of Population Science and Macro International, 2007). This report indicates deteriorating women's health and lowering childbearing abilities determining one's chances of getting married. In Sikkim, the decreasing fertility rate has resulted from the delayed marriage (Mukhia, 2021).

There is no single reason but rather a combination of factors that women choose to remain never-married in the state. Marriage is typically viewed as an obligation at a certain age, and nearly all women are married off by the age of 40. Historically, the concept of complete 'womanhood' only reaches its culmination if she adhered to childbearing and rearing capabilities. According to the traditional norm, if a woman does not marry beyond the marriageable age, then she seeks to spend her life either with parents, siblings, or alone in the reluctance to find a groom. It is interesting to note that the number of never-married women in Sikkim is also increasing both in rural and urban areas (Census, 2011). With increased age, the likelihood of marrying

diminishes, and the chance of remaining single increases. Consequently, singlehood has emerged as a viable alternative to marriage in the state.

There is considerable research on the lives of never-married women studied from the Indian cultural setting (Singh, 1982; Jethani 1994; Kapoor, 2005; Trimberger, 2008). Singlehood is not a socially acceptable lifestyle, but the number of never-married women is increasing dramatically. New trends of partnerships such as living together or live-in relationships, unwed mothers, separation and divorce have become fairly common occurrences in Indian society (Glick & Spanier, 1980). Their employment provides them with financial freedom, which influences their attitudes about marriage (Beri & Beri, 2013). As a result of urbanization and modernization, single women have emerged as a separate component of Indian culture today. However, in the context of northeast states, the research is limited and only impinges on the reasons rather than the whole idea of singlehood and its repercussions on the state.

In Sikkim's cultural settings family and marriage have been a priority for every individual, however, the new social identity created by the never-married women in this small state has given rise to singlehood. The central objective of the research is to sociologically assess never-married women in Sikkim to explore their decision to remain unwed for lifelong and to apprehend the core reasons behind their increase as a substantial demographic in the state. The perception of Sikkimese society towards the never-married women and their lived experiences has been the main focus of the study.

Against this backdrop, the present study attempts to understand the social setting of these never-married women residing in Sikkim. It also tries to unravel the

reason behind its increase by exploring the socio-cultural and economic backgrounds, the reason behind factors contributing to the never-married women, the perception and support mechanism of never-married women has been the main focus of the study.

The percentage of never-married women living in Sikkim constitute 5.6 percent as per Census (2011) belonging to the age group 40 and above. The marriageable age differs as per individuals and societies, however, the peak marriageable age for women falls between 30-39 years. After crossing this age group, the majority of women tend to live single throughout. The population of women who have crossed the marriageable age remained unwed for long periods, and do not fall into the categories of the widow, divorcee, separated, or single mothers.

Social status of never-married women has never been investigated sociologically as a topic of research in extant literature particularly in the North-Eastern states and in a broader context in Indian society. It focuses on the broad area of the social, cultural, and economic aspects of the research. The aim was to explore and articulate the increasing numbers of singlehood in the state and their consequences on the marital status of women in the Sikkimese society. The sample size consisted of 250 respondents belonging to the age group of 40 and above. The research area includes the East and South districts of Sikkim, both the urban and rural areas have been taken into consideration. As the majority of the population lives in rural areas which made it significant to include both sectors of the state. The urban/rural lifestyle, cultural and societal perception constituted salient aspects of the study.

This thesis is divided into six chapters. The first chapter introduces the research topic followed by the statement of the problem; the literature review, the research

questions, objectives, research methods, techniques, and study limitations. The second chapter title, 'Socio-cultural background of Never-married women in Sikkim,' highlights the historical backdrop of the Monarchical setup and Post Merger era. The settlement of three ethnic communities in the state, such as Lepcha, Bhutia, and Nepali, majorly focusing on the historicity, family lineage, social norms, and structure of each community have been described. Shifting towards the general overview of women in Sikkim, focusing on socio-economic profile and legal property rights.

The profile of the respondents has been divided into eight components as Age, Education, Occupation, Monthly income, social groups, Religion, Decision making and Head of the Household. An analysis of this has helped to understand the factors behind singlehood and its impact on the structure of social and cultural patterns of the Sikkimese society.

The third chapter, "Factors Associated with Singlehood in Sikkim- A Symbolic Interactionist Inquiry," discusses the overall factors related to the never-married women in Sikkim. The factors have been merged with the theory of Herbert Blumer's Symbolic Interactionism. The three premises of Blumer's Symbolic Interactionism and singlehood. The chapter has been divided into primary and secondary factors.

The primary factor addresses the significant component that is responsible for the increase in the number of never-married women in the state. This includes the age, education, occupation, religion, culture, and health of the never-married women in Sikkim. Age cohorts play a vital role in determining one's marriage. The age spent looking for a good partner not only delays marriage but being selective in choosing a mate for oneself leads to late singlehood. The working never-married women aged 40 and above prioritized careers over marriage, especially living in Gangtok's urban

suburbs. At an early age, never-married women obtained higher education, built a career, and took care of their old parents. As a result, it was discovered in the current study that young never-married women are more in numbers than the old singles, the percentage of young never-married women aged 40 to 49 years and 50 to 59 years accounts for 26.4 percent and 22 percent. These young singles belong to the working population and earn an average income of Rs.20,000 to 30,000 which shows that women are financially independent and do not rely on others for self-sustenance.

In the case of old singles, there is less in percentage and only 19.2 percent belong to 60-69; and only 14.8 percent are from the age group 80 and above. This percentage of old singles have fully lived their single lives. It has been determined that with increased age, there is a decrease in the percentage of never-married women due to late marriage, which occurs around the age of 45-50 years, sometimes death with older age and occurrence of chronic illness. Another important component found in the study is education which has motivated women to become self-reliant and independent. Enhancing one's knowledge and helping in decision making to create one's own identity through higher education, determined to reach one's goal and open to one's choices. It has been discovered that women who pursue higher education become more selective in terms of marriage partners and search for compatibility in education and a well-established career. It has also been found that 30.4 percent of never-married women have obtained Graduation and Post- Graduation Degrees in the study. The majority of respondents have received higher education such as (M.A, LLM, M.Ed., B.Ed., MPhil, and Ph.D.).

On the contrary, few respondents i.e., 6.5 percent did not even attend school due to family responsibility and unmet challenges but have been surviving by engaging in small sector jobs such as selling vegetables, SHGs, running canteen, and parlor.

It is also astonishing to note that women in the past who were never-married were regarded as surplus women, absence of economic assets to the household due the shortage of demand for their labour in spinning, weaving and other economic activities are now regarded as the main working population. These women were compelled to work on low wages and heavily dependent on their family for survival but now they are at a higher position and devote more time at the workplace. They do not require maternal or child care leave which makes them more efficient and regular than married counterparts. Thus, social and economic shift has made never-married women highly desirable to avail designated posts in any field of work activities. They do not struggle to balance the household responsibilities and are financially independent. Almost 33 percent are working in government sectors which also indicates that never-married women are secured, self-sufficient, and receiving the benefits of the government. Advanced career and living independently have been their economic support at an old age. It has been found that women who are not married tend to devote most of their time at the workplace, the priority, and satisfaction gained from the job rather than other activities. It can be observed that the suitable percentage of never-married women do contribute to the economic sector of the state and are largely engaged in various fields.

In terms of religion, it is important to note in the study Hindu never-married women constitute 36 percent. The never-married women are higher in Hinduism due to the fact that the Hindu Nepali population is higher in the state and only a few percentages of the Bhutia and Lepcha communities follow Buddhism as religious conversion of the Lepcha community into Christianity has been found in the state. It is quite interesting to note that the teachings of Hinduism forbade celibacy and monasticism; believe that marriage is a blessing and completes a human cycle. It helps one to lead a

spiritual life. It can be understood that religious texts cannot control the decision of women to choose a single life. As the majority of the Hindu population in the study have opted to remain never-married lifelong in spite of the religious norms.

It is found in the study, apart from Hinduism, the second highest never-married women following Buddhism constitute 24.4 percent, and Christianity is 16 percent. Buddhism and Christianity are two religions that somewhere favour and promote single life. The individual is free to decide her marital status. There is no obligation or defined norms for women to get married. It welcomes an individual's choice to remain single. It was also found in the study that few never-married women have adopted Brahma Kumari and Kabir Pant which was recently introduced in Sikkim. Thus, acts as a source of support and a community engagement for never-married women in the state.

As per the community distribution, the ethnic dimension has been an important mark in the Sikkimese society. Nepali community has the largest population followed by Bhutia and Lepcha in the state. There is not much difference in the percentage between Bhutia and Lepcha communities. These two communities have been opting for singlehood due to low sex ratio, lack of eligible men in the marriage market, and highly prefers spouses of the same community. Most of the Bhutia and Lepcha women are not under compulsion to marry at a certain age, the community itself belief in flexibility of marriage and the influence of Buddhism in the community has given women an upper hand to opt for single life.

The Nepali community has a higher percentage of never-married women in the study. The reason behind this is that discrimination in inter-caste marriage, highly qualified educators, and various castes and sub-caste have distinct approaches towards

marriage. However, only the Newar community has less percentage of never-married women i.e., 4.4 percent as compared to other castes in the study. The reason behind this is the practice of a traditional ritual called *Bel Bibaha*. The marriage with the fruit called *Bel* or wood apple signifies husband. For this community, marriage is a priority and forbids Newari women being called a widow even after the death of the husband.

There are three phases of marriage performed by Newari females; firstly, before attaining puberty called *Bel Bibaha*, secondly; married to Sun God called *bara* or *tayegu*, and lastly, with the human. The Newari daughter is never considered to be an unmarried woman and to remain married without a man is also a unique ritual followed by the community. Society views singlehood and widowhood as a stigma in order to escape stereotypes such as widow, single women, and from Sati and freeing women from the orthodox traditional Hindu marriage system (Mangar, 2019).

Secondary factors focus on psychological reasons behind never-married women. It entails responsibility, preference, fear, the groom's demand, less parental pressure, and bonds. The responsibility to take care of parents or siblings has affected the decision of never-married women in life. However, the respondents belonging to age 40 and above have been living with their parents and taking care rather than staying single. The never-married women have been working independently and looking after their siblings, younger generation, and relatives. Adapting and adjusting to new behavioral roles and environments seems difficult for women who have spent almost 30-40 years at home with their families. Therefore, almost 55 percent of respondents seem to avoid marriage because they are deeply attached with their family which makes it difficult to compromise with their new homes or in-laws. In Sikkim, women prefer to live with the family rather than living separately. Some parents demand economic support if the children are working outside and living alone. Almost 50

percent of never-married women at some point of their life had received proposal from either aged, divorcee, widower and sometimes, differently abled men. Limited choices become a purpose to remain single.

The fourth chapter entitled, "lived experiences and interpretative analysis of never-married women in Sikkim," deals with the theoretical and in-depth interviews taken from 30 never-married women belonging to East and South Sikkim. In this particular chapter, the phenomenological research design has been used to extract the meaning of singleness and the lived experience through the use of language. Language plays a significant role in delivering the essence, the idea of self and understanding the lived experience of never-married women in this research. In order to understand this concept, Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic phenomenology has been incorporated in the present study. Ricoeur sets up a link between phenomenology and hermeneutics. He mainly aimed at the textual interpretation as the primary aim of hermeneutics and developed a theory of interpretation in which language, reflection, understanding, and the self has been the prime concern. He combined phenomenology with a critical hermeneutic philosophy (Ricoeur, 1976, 1984).

Paul Ricoeur's theory on hermeneutic phenomenology has been divided into three parts in order to have a clear understanding of the study on never-married women.

Firstly, the key theoretical points from Ricoeur's philosophy that forms the basis of the current research. Secondly, to analyse and investigate the lived experience of never-married women in Sikkim with reference to Ricoeur's philosophy of language. Thirdly, to describe the complete text that consists of field notes and in-depth interviews which are analyzed and critically interpreted through the Ricoeur's theory of narrative and interpretation. This is examined by the narration and specific

in-depth interviews collected from the study that investigates what it means to be unwed in the marriage dominated Sikkimese society and its underlying causes that led to singlehood. Thus, a discussion of the research is presented herewith.

Language is central, in the sense that it is neither a sign nor concept, but an expression of impressions which include experiences of how it is affected and moved in a situation. Thus, subjectivity is the main characteristic of Ricoeur's thinking. Thus, lived experience and recognition of being in the world are expressed through language. One is characterized by one's physical existence, by being able to sense, move, think, tell and be affected by the situation (Simony, Specht, Andersen, Johansen, Nielsen & Agerskov, 2018).

The findings from the phenomenological study of never-married in Sikkim draws on particular premises from Ricoeur's philosophy. Five major reasons for women to remain never-married are divided into themes such as i) Self and Independence, ii) Crossing Marriageable age, iii) Parent's Outlook and approach, iv) challenges and stigma and v) acceptance. These themes have been arranged in such a manner that it begins with an individualistic approach moving towards social groups like parents, societal challenges and coping strategies. For instance, a narrative state:

“I think Husband and Children are no more pillars for life, being married and starting a family is not an ultimate goal for women... Though most of my friends got married and have children and I am happy for them but I don't want to step into this 'burden' rather choose to remain unmarried lifelong...” (Nirmala, 46, 09.10.2018)

This particular excerpt taken from the in-depth interviews, shows that the *self* has been of prime importance to the never-married women. Rejecting the traditional norm

and accepting the new forms of social life has been observed among the never-married women in the state. As Ricoeur (1981) argues that a person's life story has two dimensions that contribute to its forward movement or directedness: (i) a chronological sequence of episodes and (ii) a construction of "meaningful totalities out of scattered events" (mentioned in Fechette, Bitzas, Aubry, Kilpatrick and Tremblay, 2020). Here, the chronological series of episodes can refer to various instances encountered by the never-married women such as; liberty to select a spouse, decline in fertility, desire to adopt a child. Ricoeur states that the most humble narrative is always more than a chronological series of events" (Ricoeur, 1981). Thus, the lived experience of never-married women is incomplete if it purely remains descriptive; it must have an interpretation of importance for the person.

The fifth chapter, "Support Mechanism of Never-Married Women in Sikkim," deals with two sections; the first section focuses on the sources of support. Support taken by never-married women in other three societies such as Western, Indian societies and Sikkimese society have been discussed in an elucidated manner. The study has found three sources of support for never-married women in Sikkim viz; social support, economic support, and emotional support. This support also acts as coping strategies incurred at day-to-day life obstacles and challenges faced by never-married women, it also bridges the gap between the society and individual.

The social support includes support from family, parents, siblings, friends and social networking sites. Economic support includes support from retirement pension, old age pension. Emotional support includes religious, spiritual engagement and extended family's support.

On a similar note, the perception of society plays a vital role in understanding the viewpoint of society towards never-married women in Sikkim. Therefore, the second section of this particular chapter majorly talks about the perception of never-married women and its consequences on the relationship with the society. One of the close relations the never-married women maintain is with Parents'. The perception of parent(s) has an important role to play for their never-married daughter(s). The viewpoint differs as per the community, socialisation, and religion. On the whole, the Sikkimese parent(s) do not have major control over the decision of marriage. Therefore, the daughters have an advantage to marry with their chosen partners which sometimes does not end up in marriage, creating a space for singlehood.

It is found that the close bonding with siblings has affected the lifestyle of never-married women. It is often found that the elder daughter remains never-married as she is the mother figure in the house, taking care of the younger siblings, working and financially independent, in case of a married brother, the interference of an unwed sister often creates chaos in the household matters.

The perception of married and unmarried people in the society do not share similar viewpoints. Married people said that single life is a bliss, better youth and freedom, less responsibilities, free to take decisions, and a biological and emotional void has been experienced by married people while dealing with never-married people. On the other hand, young unmarried people found that the selectiveness of partners, more single benefits, reliability and responsibility. Based on their nature, some also commented that never-married women are more competitive, insecure, short-tempered and bossy. The perception reflects the understanding of various groups of people belonging to Sikkimese society.

In the present study, it is found that 70 percent of never-married women lived with their family, 20 percent were living alone in rented apartments far from their village and only 10 percent lived with relatives in the same house with a separate kitchen. Thus, the majority of never-married women preferred to live with their parents which indicates that they seek company of either family or siblings. It is important for them to have familial environs. It is also interesting to note that, they feel detached with married friends and can easily cope with their single friends, as the conversation of husband and children of married friends makes it difficult to relate their present single status. These women felt more comfortable with single circles and a handful of people who understood them.

The second section deals with the perception of Sikkimese society on never-married women. Perception of Married men and women, young unmarried men and women, Parents and Siblings. Strong Familial bonds have been found among never-married women in rural and urban areas.

This thesis narrates, discusses, and analyses how the never-married women in Sikkim use their socio-cultural and ethnic lives to form a different social status in Sikkimese society. The never-married women defy the structurally embedded notion of marriage and accept the status of singlehood. This projects a positive attitude towards their singlehood status which reflects their supportive role of family and friends.

II

The study is based on both the primary and secondary data, it appraises various dimensions and challenges as well as the changing social dynamics of women's attitude towards marriage. This research clearly indicates that never-married women

in Sikkim have been rising in social status and are living on their own choice rather than being coerced. In terms of decision-making, choosing single life, no parental control over marriage decisions, increased education, less need of children to support aging parents, free to choose spouse have been some of the power exercised by the never-married women in Sikkim.

Understanding the literature, it is also found that the concept of Never-married is location-centric because in western societies never-married is not a taboo whereas in Indian society it is stigmatized, because of the dominant patriarchal society, marriage becomes a priority for Indian parents, and rejection to marriage becomes a questionable issue, however, the case of Sikkim is special because women are not compelled to get married; they are either single by choice or by circumstances, parent's do not force the children to get married instead leave the decision to themselves. The decision of marriage is left on their children and the absence of arranged marriage has also contributed to singlehood. The societal pressure on daughters after crossing the marriageable age is rarely found in the study.

However, it also raises the subject of low health among the females who have crossed 40 and above, have experienced low fertility which affects their reproductive parts, the psychological trauma of being lonely, and the limited family growth/ inheritance, no support in old age, no family to look after. The study also indicates that to comprehend and analyze the factors behind never-married women in Sikkim from the Symbolic Interactionist viewpoint. Herbert Blumer's symbolic interactionism has been very helpful in explaining the nature and overall dimension of never-married women in Sikkim. This theory clearly depicts the dual process of interaction, i.e., the link between the individual and society. However, symbolic interactionism was established to comprehend society from a 'bottom up' perspective where the micro-

level study was given more focus in order to understand the function of society. The individual played a significant role because it used language and symbols in their communication with others.

Symbolic interaction functions into two thoughts; firstly, we consider, interpret, and adapt to other people's acts, and secondly, it connects us to society, and vice versa, thus reflecting the society into which we are acting.

In the present research, the respondents working and earning a handsome salary are considered self-independent, pillars of family support. The Sikkimese society is closely knit in terms of familial bond, the early death of parents, and the need to educate younger siblings or to look after children of widowed siblings have also been identified as contributory factors for women to remain single lifelong.

The sense of belongingness and attachment of never-married women were found with their kinship ties which are much wider and strong in both urban and rural areas. Never-married women living in Sikkim avoid staying alone or single household is usually not preferred unless one has to leave home for work. They share close-knit with parents and family. Particular support is received from kin and through friendship from peers and in social network groups, nieces, and nephews. The respondents received the greatest support from their parents, as they were not forced to get married at an early age. Delayed marriage or waiting for the right time to get married is common among Sikkimese women. An Indian family is subjected to decide the groom of the bride which is purely based on 'eligibility' which means that the age of a woman has to be youthful and younger than the man. However, in the case of Sikkim, parents leave the decision of marriage to their children. Thus, leading to delay in marriage and also might encourage singlehood.

The study revealed that the sources of support for never-married women vary depending on their age, social standing, and financial situation. The goal of the study is to uncover the dominant cultural attitudes of never-married women, as well as how they seek support from society in terms of social, economic, and emotional requirements. Kinship, peer friendship, and social network groups are all social support.

Amongst never-married women in Sikkim, social support plays an important role in every stage of life and cannot be clubbed into one single phenomenon of support because of the multi-ethnic structure and varying types of support received. The limitations and the social needs vary as per growing age. The never-married women at the age of 60 and above have different ideas of support than the young never-married women. This social support is significant for the never-married women as it links them to the larger support from society. In the Sikkimese culture, social support is from extended families. The custom of visiting extended family members in case of emergencies like demise or severe illness of a member in the family house is common. The presence of the family member provides a great deal of psychological and moral support.

Sikkim has special status and provisions under Article 371F which empowers the state to make decisions regarding the social, economic, and political rights of the people of Sikkim. The Sikkimese people have a Sikkim Subject Certificate (SSC) which marks the identity of an individual belonging to the state. Some of the special provisions under this act have affected the decision of women to marry beyond the state. This factor also hinders one's decision to marry because if Sikkimese women love a man who does not belong to one's state then she might have to drop the idea of marriage as

her SSC and the benefits attached to it be forfeited. Thus, the fear of losing has resulted in staying never-married lifelong.

The current study is confined to a sociological investigation of never-married women living in Sikkim's rural and urban areas. Only two districts in the state had been taken into consideration which does not reflect the entire population of never-married women. Therefore, the other two districts North and West need a further scope for exploration to comprehend the numerous intricacies of never-married women. These districts can be incorporated as the future scope of this study because the social status of never-married women is essential and demands equal attention in a marriage-dominated society.

Hence, it can be concluded that there are multiple factors that work simultaneously behind singlehood in Sikkim. Apart from the acceptance and support received from the Sikkimese society, another significant tool for enhancing the lives of never-married women is to provide better government schemes and establish NGOs or forming single groups association because recognition and promoting singleness plays a key role in boosting the confidence of never-married women in the state. Another beneficial tool for uplifting the never-married status is generating reservations in employment, which would limit chances of dependency and lessen the burden on parents and siblings for the financial support. Economic stability cannot solely work for the improvement of the lives of these women but social stability is equally important for providing better social life and more acceptance among the family, peer groups and colleagues. More opportunities would create less chance of compromise for marriage. The feeling of insecurity arises without marriage once the parents are no longer alive, loneliness arises. Never-married women in Sikkim have not been born out of stigma but rather through acceptance of singleness in the society. The delaying

of marriage and not marrying has led to the growth in the never-married population in the state. However, the traditional institution of marriage is not fading and there is no sign of decline in marriage pattern. The growing population of never-married does convey that singlehood is quietly asserting its right to be taken seriously and creating its own sub-culture in Sikkimese society.

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GLOSSARY OF MEANINGS

Glossary	Meanings
<i>Aadhaya</i>	Form of contractual sharecropper
<i>Aneela</i>	Female Buddhist monk
<i>Annim</i>	Unmarried female in Bhutia community
<i>Bel Bihaha</i>	Marriage with wood apple in Newar community
<i>Bhote or Bhot</i>	Bhutia people
<i>Budikanya</i>	Never-married women in Nepali language
<i>Chang</i>	Millet beer
<i>Chema</i>	Mother's younger sister in Nepali language
<i>Chinha</i>	Birth astrology
<i>Daijo</i>	Wealth from bride side
<i>Denzongpas/Lhopas</i>	Sikkim in Bhutia language
<i>Dzumsa</i>	Self-governing system in Lachen and Lachung villages only
<i>Ghora Dhune</i>	Practice of rinsing feet of Nepali bride in marriage
<i>Kham</i>	Province of Eastern Tibet

<i>Maita</i>	Bride's family home in Nepali community
<i>Moo</i>	Clan in Lepcha community
<i>Phupu</i>	Father's sister in Nepali language
<i>Sasurali</i>	Bride's husband's home after marriage
<i>Tayegu/Bara</i>	Marriage with Sun God
<i>Thuyu von</i>	Never-married women in Lepcha community

APPENDIX I

Department of Sociology

Sikkim University, Gangtok, Sikkim

Sociological Inquiry into the Lives of Never-Married Women: A Study of Sikkim

Questionnaires

Date: _____

A. Socio-Economic Background

1. Age

- 1) 40-49 2) 50-59 3) 60-69 4) 70 and above

2. Qualification

- 1) Below Primary 2) Above Primary 3) Graduate 4) Post Graduate

3. Occupation

- 1) Government 2) Private Services 3) Business 4) Unemployed
Services

4. Monthly Income

- 1) Below 10,000 2) 10,001-20,000 3) 20,001-30,000 4) 30,000 and
above

5. Religion

- 1) Hindu 2) Muslim 3) Buddhist 4) Christian

6. Caste

- 1) General 2) OBC 3) SC 4) ST 5) Other

7. Father's Occupation

- 1) Govt. Services 2) Pvt. Service 3) Business 4) Others

8. Mother's Occupation

5) Govt. Services 6) Pvt. Services 7) Business 4)Others

9. Permanent

Address: _____

Number of Siblings- Elder Brother

Younger Sister

Elder Sister

Younger Brother

A. Views on Marriage

10. What is your view on marriage?

11. Do you feel that women should stay single? Tick one. If yes why....

Yes No May Be Don't Know

12. Are you the 'sole earner' in your family?

Yes No

13. Does your family insist you to get married?

Yes No Sometimes Never

14. According to you, what is the definition of perfect life partner?

15. Do you think marriage is compulsory for women? State reasons.

16. Do you have to look after your family/siblings?

17. Who is the decision maker in the house?

B. Importance of Single life:

18. Do you enjoy the company of your married friends more or the single

19. Do you have a close male friend? If yes, then does he belong to same or other caste? Do you believe in living relationship?

20. Do you support the idea of living relationship?

21. Are you satisfied with your current status of single life? Specify with reasons

C. Questions on Child Preference:

22. Do you think that having child is important for women?

23. Do you want to adopt any child? Yes No May Be Don't Know

24. Do you inherit property (Land, House, car and other asset)?

D. Questions on Challenges and Stigma faced:

25. Have you encountered any type of taunts/ comments regarding Singlehood in your society/friends/family? Yes No May Be Don't Know

26. If YES, then what kind of comments? Please explain

27. Does anyone in your family, neighborhood and relative have searched groom for you?

28. Do your parents support you in your decision of living single?

Yes	No	Sometimes	Don't Know
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29. Have you ever felt that being married is better than living single?

30. How is single women treated in your community?

31. Is there any stigma regarding women who are not married in your community?

32. In Death ceremonies, never-married woman has same rituals as that of married women? Please explain

33. Is there any term used for never-married women in your community?

E. Questions on Governmental Schemes:

34. Do you receive any unmarried women pension from the state government?

35. Are there any other special privileges given to women who are never married?

36. While applying for state governmental jobs are any relaxation for women who are unmarried?

Thank you for your co-operation!

APPENDIX II

UNMARRIED CERTIFICATE

Enclosures: Enclosures required if the applicant applying for the service through himself/herself:

Is Enclosure Mandatory	Type of Enclosure(s)	Original/Photocopy	Attestation Required	Documents Recommended
Yes	Citizenship Proof	Original	Not required	Sikkim Voter ID Card/COI/ICC/SSC/Other
Yes	Recommendation	Original	Not required	Councilor Recommendation/Panchayat Recommendation/MLA Recommendation/Other
Yes	Affidavit	Original	Not required	Affidavit from self
Yes	Application fee proof	Original	Not required	Bank Receipt
No	Additional Documents	Original	Not required	Additional Enclosure

Enclosures required if the applicant is applying for the service through his/her father:

Is Enclosure Mandatory	Type of Enclosure(s)	Original/Photocopy	Attestation Required	Documents Recommended
Yes	Citizenship Proof of father	Original	Not required	Sikkim Voter ID Card/COI/ICC/SSC/Other
Yes	Father-Child Relationship Proof	Original	Not required	Transfer Certificate/Birth Certificate/School Certificate/Other
Yes	Recommendation	Original	Not required	Councilor Recommendation/Panchayat Recommendation/MLA Recommendation /Other
Yes	Affidavit	Original	Not required	Affidavit from Parent
Yes	Application fee proof	Original	Not required	Bank Receipt
No	Additional Documents	Original	Not required	Additional Enclosure

Application Charge: Rs. 50/- Major head: 0070- Other Administrative Services

Finance. **Unmarried form Service Unit Types:**

Land Revenue Disaster Management Department [Office of the Sub-Divisional Magistrate].

Land Revenue Disaster Management Department [District Administrative

Centre]Rural Management Development Department [Gram Vikash Kendriya].

APPENDIX III

UNMARRIED WOMEN PENSION RULES



GOVERNMENT OF SIKKIM
SOCIAL JUSTICE, EMPOWERMENT AND WELFARE DEPARTMENT
(SOCIAL WELFARE DIVISION)
GANGTOK

No. 7/87C-9/102.

Dated 15/4/13.

NOTIFICATION

In exercise of the powers conferred by Rule 3 of Sikkim Unmarried Women Pension Rules, 2013, the State Government is hereby pleased to notify pension amount of Rs. 500/- per month to the Unmarried Women between the age group of 45 to 59 years with effect from 21.3.2013.

By order and in the name of the Governor.

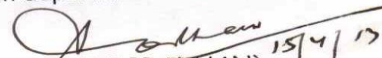
Sd/-
(G.P. UPADHYAYA) IAS
PRINCIPAL SECRETARY

SOCIAL JUSTICE, EMPOWERMENT AND WELFARE DEPARTMENT

Memo No. GOS/SJE&WD/2013/5(112) 7 to 10, Dated:- 15/4/13.

Copy for information to:-

1. All Secretaries/Heads of Department
2. District Collectors/ East, West, South and North
3. Additional Secretary, Home Department for publication in official Gazette
4. Additional Director(Accounts),SJE&WD
5. Sub-Divisional Magistrate, Ravangla, Rongli, Chungthang, Pakyong, Soreng
6. Director, IPR Department-for publication in Sikkim Herald in two consecutive issues.
7. All Block Development Officers
8. P.S to Hon'ble Speaker/Sikkim Legislative Assembly
9. P.S to Hon'ble Deputy Speaker/Sikkim Legislative Assembly
10. P.S to Hon'ble Ministers
11. Social Welfare Officer(North/East)
12. Social Welfare Officer(South/West)
13. Assistant Director(I.T) for hoisting in departmental website
14. File
15. Guard file


(K.B. PRADHAN)

JOINT SECRETARY
(SOCIAL WELFARE DIVISION)

SOCIAL JUSTICE, EMPOWERMENT AND WELFARE DEPARTMENT
File No. GOS/SJE&WD/2013/5(112)

APPENDIX IV

SIKKIM SUCCESSION ACT

GOVERNMENT

SIKKIM



GAZETTE

EXTRAORDINARY
PUBLISHED BY AUTHORITY

Gangtok

Monday 28th July, 2008

No. 308

GOVERNMENT OF SIKKIM
LAW DEPARTMENT
GANGTOK

No. 22/LD/P/2008

Date: 24.07.2008

NOTIFICATION

The following Act passed by the Sikkim Legislative Assembly and having received the assent of the Governor on 28th day of June, 2008 is hereby published for general information:-

THE SIKKIM SUCCESSION ACT, 2008
(Act No. 22 of 2008)
AN ACT

to provide for law relating to succession to movable and immovable properties of Sikkimese people.

Be it enacted by the Legislature of Sikkim in the Fifty-ninth Year of the Republic of India as follows:-

PRELIMINARY

*Short title,
extent and
commencement.*

1. (1) This Act may be called The Sikkim Succession Act, 2008.
(2) It extends to the whole of Sikkim.
(3) It shall come into force on such date as the State Government may by notification in the Official Gazette appoint and different dates may be appointed for different provisions of this Act.

*Application
of the Act.*

2. The Act shall apply to:
 - a) any person who possesses Sikkim Subject Certificate/Certificate of Identification (COI);
 - b) descendants of Sikkim Subject Certificate holder identified through COI.Note:- A woman who has married a non- Sikkimese or has acquired foreign citizenship shall not be eligible to enjoy the rights of descendants and heirs held as descendants under this Act.

Note:- Descendents include sons or daughters and their lineal descendents and include those as specified in Schedule I.

Note:- Descendants include sons or daughters and their lineal descendants and include those as specified in Schedule I.

Definitions.

3. In this Act, unless the context otherwise requires,-

- (a) "Act" means The Sikkim Succession Act, 2008;
- (b) "administrator" means a person appointed by competent authority to administer the estate of a deceased person;
- (c) "Government" means State Government of Sikkim;
- (d) "heir" means any person male or female who is entitled to succeed to the property of an intestate under this Act;
- (e) "intestate" means a person is deemed to die intestate in respect of property of which he or she has not made testamentary disposition capable of taking effect;
- (f) "minor" means a person who (has not attained the age of majority) or has not completed the age of eighteen years;
- (g) "probate" means copy of a will certified under the seal of court of competent jurisdiction with a grant of administration to the estate of the testator;
- (h) "Sikkimese" means persons belonging to Bhutia, Lepcha and Nepali Community of Sikkimese origin identified through Sikkim Subject Certificate or Certificate of Identification;
- (i) "will" means the legal declaration of the intention of a testator with respect to his property which he desires to be carried out after his death.

Act not to apply to certain person/class or community.

4. (1) The State Government may by notification in the Official Gazette exempt the applicability of this Act to the members of community or tribe or sect or such other category etc. as may be specified if it is considered expedient to do so.
- (2) The State Government may by notification withdraw or revoke such exemption prospectively.

PART I
Intestate Succession

Intestate property.

5. (1) A person is deemed to die intestate in respect of all property of which he has not made a testamentary disposition.
- (2) Where the intestate has left no widow his property shall go to his lineal descendants or to those not being lineal descendants according to rules of succession contained herein after and if he has left none shall go to the next of descendants from his brother or to sister if unmarried or abandoned by husband.
- (3) A husband shall have the same right in respect of his wife's property, if she dies intestate, as a widow has in respect of her husband's property if he dies intestate.

Devolution of property.

6. (1) When a male Sikkimese who dies after the commencement of this Act having at the time of his death an interest in the property or has a self-acquired property, the property shall devolve to the extent of his interest by survivorship upon the surviving members of his family which includes his wife, sons and daughters if unmarried in equal proportion:

Provided that if the deceased has left behind him a surviving female relative who claims interest in such property in such cases the property shall devolve to the extent she is entitled.

(2) If two or more heirs succeed together to the property of an intestate they shall take property *per capita and as inheriting respective shares in equal proportion.*

(3) The property of an intestate devolves upon the wife or the husband or upon those who are of the kindred of the deceased as per the Schedule.

(4) Where an intestate has left a widow without any lineal descendants, the property shall devolve to the next of the descendents of the brother of the deceased husband in the manner as specified in the Schedule.

(5) Where a female heir or descendant marries a person who does not possess Sikkim Subject Certificate/COI or has acquired foreign citizenship, such female heir/ descendant shall follow the personal law of her husband and as such shall not acquire any interest in the property:

(6) Where the parents of a minor die intestate such property shall be looked after by administrator if none of the relatives of the deceased within the eligible category of heir comes forward to look after the property.

(7) Where a person has no son, the property will devolve on the daughter, subject to sub-section (5) of Section 6.

(8) An abandoned or divorced woman having the liability to take care of the children and has no source of income, shall have the right to a share in equal proportion along with other heirs to the property of the husband:

Provided that where woman has deserted her husband with or without children and has remarried shall forfeit her right to her share in the husband's property. However, the children shall be eligible to their share of property as per the law.

(9) The property of an intestate shall devolve in equal shares among all the heirs.

Right of child in womb

7. Notwithstanding anything contained in sub-section (1) of Section 6, a child who was in the womb at the time of the death of an intestate and who is subsequently born alive shall have the same right to succeed to the intestate as if he or she had been born before the death of the intestate.

Preference of heir.

8. Heir related to an intestate by full blood shall be preferred to heirs related by half blood, if the nature of relationship is the same in other respect.

Disqualification of heirs.

9. (1) A person who commits murder or abets the commission of murder shall be disqualified from inheriting the property of the person murdered.

(2) If any person is disqualified from inheriting any property under this Act, it shall devolve as if such person had died before the intestate.

Escheat.

10. If an intestate has left no heir to succeed to his or her property in accordance with the provisions of this Act, such property shall devolve on the Government and the Government shall take the property subject to all the obligations and liabilities to which an heir would have been subject to.

The State Government may, by Notification, make rules for carrying out the purposes of this Act.

PART II

Testamentary succession

Testamentary succession.

11. Every person of sound mind not being a minor may dispose of his property by Will.

Will obtained by fraud etc.

12. A Will or any part of a Will, the making of which has been caused by fraud or coercion or importunity is void.

Will may be revoked or altered.

13. A will may be revoked or altered by the maker of it at any time when he is competent to dispose of his property by Will.

Execution of Will.

14. A Will shall be executed according to the following rules:-

- (a) The testator shall sign or shall affix his mark to the Will or it shall be signed by some other person in his presence by his direction.
- (b) The signature or the mark of the testator or the signature of the person signing for him shall be so placed that it shall appear that it was intended to give effect to the Will.
- (c) The Will shall be attested by two or more witnesses.

SCHEDULE

Heirs in Class I

1. Son, daughter, widow, mother, son of predeceased son, daughter of a predeceased son, widow of a predeceased son.

Heirs in Class II

1. Son's daughter's son
2. Son's daughter's daughter
3. Daughter's son's son
4. Daughter's son's daughter
5. Brother's son
6. Sister's sons
7. Brother's daughter
8. Sister's daughter

Class II heirs shall come into play only in the event of Class I heir not being available.

By Order.

R..K PURKAYASTHA (SSJS)
LR-cum-Secretary
Law Department
File No. 16 (82) LD/P/2008