

**OLDER SINGLE WOMEN IN TOBA BATAK CULTURE:
FIGHTING STIGMA AND SEEKING IDENTITY****Riany Sitanggang^{1*}, R. Hamdani Harahap², Asima Yanty Sylvania Siahaan³,
Harmona Daulay⁴**^{1,2,3,4} Universitas Sumatera Utara, Dr. T. Mansur No.9, Padang Bulan, Medan***Email:** rihanisitanggang@gmail.com**ABSTRACT**

The Toba Batak community still upholds customs that place marriage as a social obligation, especially for women. In the Batak patrilineal kinship system, women are expected to marry and have children to continue the lineage (clan). Therefore, women who remain single until a mature age are considered to deviate from social norms and often experience pressure and negative stigma. This study aims to reveal the experiences of older single women in Toba Batak society from an existentialist feminist perspective. Using a qualitative approach with phenomenological methods, this research focuses on how older single women face social stigma, stereotypes, and customary pressures, as well as their struggles to gain independence and equal rights. The results show that although older single women face strong social pressure, they still have their own way of defining the meaning of happiness and independence in society.

Keywords: Culture, Feminism, Negative, Patriarchy, Single Women, Stereotypes, Toba Batak.

INTRODUCTION

Women in Toba Batak culture have roles that have been constructed for a long time, with social expectations that require them to marry and have children. The patrilineal kinship system is deeply rooted in this culture, so marriage is not only seen as a personal bond, but also as a social and cultural responsibility (Tantri & Asmarani, 2021). Women who remain single are perceived as individuals who fail to meet cultural norms and often face heavy stigma from family and society (Fredriko, 2024). In a global context, various studies show that older single women experience strong social pressures in various countries (Berg-Cross et al., 2013). In Japan, unmarried women are dubbed “parasite singles”, in China they are called “sheng nu” or “leftover women”, while in India and Iran, single women are considered failures of nature (Chowkhani & Wynne, 2023). This phenomenon also occurs in Toba Batak society, where older single women are often labeled “hapang-hapangon” which carries negative connotations (Purba & Latri, 2021). Nonetheless, social and economic changes have opened up opportunities for women to pursue higher education and build their own careers. Many Batak women choose to be single because they want to develop themselves without the pressure of binding social norms. However, this decision often goes against customary expectations and strong social norms. In addition to social pressures, older single women in Toba Batak culture also face economic constraints and customary laws. Many of

Proceeding 2nd Medan International Economics and Business

Volume 2, Issue 1, 2024

“Human Resource Transformation and Collaborative Innovation to Build Independent and Competitive Business in the Digital Era”

them do not receive full inheritance rights due to the patriarchal system that prioritizes men in the division of family property (Dewi, 2020). In the context of employment, older single women are often considered less emotionally and socially stable than married women, which impacts their career opportunities. In addition, the times have changed the role of women in society (Lubis & Nasution, 2024). More and more women are able to build independent and successful lives without being tied down in marriage. This creates a gap between the traditional values that are still strongly held by society and the reality of modern life that is more open to women's life choices (Lubis et al., 2024). This study aims to explore how older single women in Toba Batak culture experience and interpret their status, and how they navigate their identities in an environment of traditional expectations. By uncovering how Toba Batak culture shapes perceptions of older single women, this study also seeks to understand their subjective experiences in the face of social and customary pressures. More broadly, this research is expected to provide new insights into the social dynamics of older single women and how they can gain greater freedom and acceptance in a society where patriarchal values are still strong.

METHODS

This research uses a qualitative approach with phenomenological methods (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This methodology aims to understand the subjective experiences of older single women in Toba Batak culture and how their social reality is shaped by cultural constructions and patriarchal customs. The grand theory used in this research is the social construction theory of Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1990). The research was conducted through in-depth interviews with ten main informants who are older single women from various educational and professional backgrounds. In addition, observation and document analysis were also used to enrich the research data (Hadi, 2021). The interviews were conducted in person and online to gain a broader perspective on how older single women deal with social expectations and the challenges they face in their daily lives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Position of Single Women in Toba Batak Patriarchal Society

In Toba Batak society, older single women are often perceived as individuals who have not achieved a “perfect” social status because they are not married and have children. They face pressure from their families, relatives and social circles who constantly ask when they will get married. It is not uncommon for them to be the subject of conversation in family or traditional community events, which adds to their psychological burden. One of the main findings in this study is the assumption that older single women cannot have the same dignity as married women. In traditional Batak ceremonies, for example, single women are often placed in a lower position than their married sisters. They also experience discrimination in terms of family inheritance and involvement in various traditional rituals (Panggabean et al., 2024). Furthermore, older single women often experience social ostracism, both overtly and in the form of subtle insinuations. They are perceived as falling short of social expectations and are often the subject of conversation within their communities. This leaves many older

Proceeding 2nd Medan International Economics and Business

Volume 2, Issue 1, 2024

“Human Resource Transformation and Collaborative Innovation to Build Independent and Competitive Business in the Digital Era”

single women feeling socially and emotionally isolated. This psychological pressure can have an impact on the mental state of older single women, who in some cases experience depression or anxiety due to the social pressures they face. In some interviews, it was found that some older single women experience feelings of inferiority because they are constantly compared to their siblings who are married and have children. In addition to community pressures, older single women also often face discrimination in the workplace. They are often perceived as less stable individuals than married women, so they often have fewer opportunities for promotion or strategic positions. This discrimination reinforces the cycle of gender inequality that is still deeply rooted in Toba Batak society.

The Role and Resistance of Older Single Women

Despite facing immense pressure, many older single women in Toba Batak choose to defy traditional norms by establishing economic and educational independence. They pursue careers, establish their own businesses, and contribute to various social and professional fields. Many of them eventually find a broader meaning of life outside of marriage (Firmando, 2021). Most older single women also develop adaptation strategies to deal with social pressures. They tend to seek more inclusive environments, such as professional communities or social groups that are more open to their life choices. Some choose to migrate to big cities, where traditional values are not as strict as in their hometowns. In interviews with several informants, it was found that many of them feel happier and more productive in their single lives. They asserted that happiness does not always have to be measured by marriage, but rather by the freedom to make life choices, develop their careers and have full control over their future (Tampubolon & La Kahija, 2020). Furthermore, this study found that older single women in Toba Batak use various forms of social resistance to counter the pressures they experience. Some choose to be active in women's organisations or social communities, while others use social media to share experiences and build solidarity with other women facing similar situations. Through these efforts, older single women in Batak Toba have begun to create a space for themselves to be recognised and valued as valuable individuals, not only based on their marital status but also the contributions they make in various aspects of social, economic and cultural life (Butar-Butar, 2020).

Feminist Perspective in Analyzing the Status of Single Women

From an existentialist feminist perspective, older single women in Batak Toba are in a situation where they have to constantly prove their existence amidst social pressure. Simone de Beauvoir (2003) in *Second Sex* explains that women are often made ‘the other’ in the patriarchal system, where their existence is only recognised if they are married and carry out domestic roles. Existentialist feminism asserts that women have the freedom to determine their own path in life without having to submit to restrictive social norms. In the Toba Batak context, this concept can be applied to understand how older single women define their happiness and achievements outside of marriage. This confirms that older single women should not be measured only by their marital status, but also by their contribution to

Proceeding 2nd Medan International Economics and Business

Volume 2, Issue 1, 2024

“Human Resource Transformation and Collaborative Innovation to Build Independent and Competitive Business in the Digital Era”

society and their own individual achievements. Furthermore, the feminist analysis in this study suggests that older single women can play an important role in reshaping more inclusive social and cultural norms. By refusing to submit to restrictive expectations, they pave the way for future generations to have more diverse and equal life choices. In Toba Batak society, older single women are often perceived as individuals who have not achieved ‘perfect’ social status because they are not married and have children. They face pressure from family, relatives, and social circles who constantly ask when they will get married. It is not uncommon for them to be the subject of conversation in family or traditional community events, which adds to their psychological burden. One of the main findings of this research is the assumption that older single women cannot have the same dignity as married women. In traditional Batak ceremonies, for example, single women are often placed in a lower position than their married sisters. They are also discriminated against in terms of family inheritance and involvement in traditional rituals.

CONCLUSION

Toba Batak culture still places marriage as a necessity for women, so older single women often experience social stigma and stereotypes. Despite facing various forms of pressure from family and society, many older single women are able to build independent lives and assert their existence in society. Through an existentialist feminist approach, this research asserts that women have the freedom to determine their life path without having to submit to social norms that limit their choices. Therefore, a paradigm shift is needed in Toba Batak society so that older single women can be accepted as individuals who have the right to determine their own lives without having to face excessive social pressure and stigma.

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