

The Interconnectedness of Others, Self, and God: Unmarried Older Balinese Women's Journeys Toward a Meaningful Life

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Abstract: Our society constructs women's roles as wives and mothers. Likewise, the Balinese positions women as caretakers who are obligated to marry, provide offspring, and look after their family. Therefore, women who choose to be single, especially until late adulthood, are stigmatised as selfish and immature. This study aims to understand what constitutes a meaningful life for unmarried older women and the related factors that support a meaningful life. The participants were five unmarried older Balinese women. Interview data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis by Braun & Clarke and show that a meaningful life for unmarried older women consists of Others (meaningful social relationships), Self (being grateful in life), and God (believing in God). To achieve a meaningful life, self-acceptance as an older and unmarried person is needed. The findings are expected to inform policies and programs that emphasise the social activity and connection between older people and their communities.

Keywords: Balinese older women; meaningful life; self-acceptance; unmarried

1. Introduction

Previous research found several reasons behind individuals' choice to be single, including unpreparedness in starting a family, delay in marital decision, trauma related to romantic relationships, and parenting style that is associated with difficulties in building self-efficacy towards commitment in adulthood (Kurniati et al., 2014; Pratama & Masykur, 2020). The Central Bureau of Statistics reported that the percentage of single women in Indonesia is higher than that of single men in both urban and rural areas, specifically within the 10-24 and 25-44 age groups (BPS, 2023). In detail, 79.15% of women aged 10-24 are single, and 9.34% of women aged 25-44 are single. These figures indicate that

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the number of single women is four times greater than the number of single men in the same year (BPS, 2023).

Singleness refers to the state of being unmarried or not in a romantic relationship and the cause could be related to lifestyle or any other circumstances (Stein, 1978). In terms of the duration, there are short-term and long-term singleness or permanent. Short-term singleness is generally experienced by individuals before they decide to get married, while long-term singleness occurs when individuals ultimately do not have a partner or do not marry for the rest of their lives (Hidayatullah & Larassaty, 2017). Specific to women, Wulandari et al. (2015) found that being single is mostly related to women's intention to focus more on their careers, place less priority on marital life, and issues in building commitment.

Data on unmarried older women are not specifically discussed in the Central Bureau of Statistics report, but conclusions can be drawn from data on the number of female breadwinners aged 60+. According to the report, older women who became breadwinners comprised 1.54% of the total (of what), which includes older people living in urban and rural areas (BPS, 2023). With many single trends associated with self-actualisation and economic freedom in women, it is estimated that the number of unmarried older women will increase. This growth of this population is believed to lead to an improvement in the quality of life among singles (Himawan et al., 2017). However, based on data from the Central Bureau of Statistics regarding the percentage of poverty by gender, the poverty rate among women was 9.65% higher than men. This shows that being unmarried in late adulthood is uncorrelated to self-actualisation, in which the poverty rate in older women is still relatively high (see BPS, 2022a). Based on this report, this study focuses on how unmarried older women, perceive their status, and whether this status facilitates or constrains their life, specifically about what constitutes a meaningful life for unmarried older Balinese women and the factors that influence their pursuit of a meaningful life.

At the societal level, single men are less stigmatized than single women. An unmarried older woman is constructed as a "spinster" (Nanik & Hendriani, 2016; Pratama & Masykur, 2020). Furthermore, society determines women's roles as wives and mothers. Women are expected to execute domestic tasks, such as looking after family members, managing family expenditures, and doing household chores. This set of roles, combined with norms and values, have created role expectations, in which to meet the expectations women should be married and produce offspring (Kurniasari & Leonardi, 2013).

Likewise, in Balinese culture, a virtuous woman should be devoted to her family. Women are positioned as caregivers who play important roles in managing household religious tasks (Nisa, 2018). As caregivers, women will

achieve virtue when they are married, have offspring, and look after their husbands and family members (Dewi et al., 2020). Meanwhile, unmarried Balinese women are stigmatised as “*daha tua*” or “*old virgin*”. They constantly face internal and external conflicts and pressure due to the inability to practice their obligations and meet social expectations (Dewi et al., 2020; Nisa, 2018). Failure to fulfil role expectations may lead to a negative attitude from society. Here, a cultural narrative about marriage and family intertwine with cultural stigma on single have influenced societies’ perception of singleness and influences the way unmarried older women perceive themselves accordingly. The societal perception is rooted in the renowned Balinese legend of Calonarang. This story perpetuates the stigma surrounding unmarried women, as exemplified by Ratna Manggali’s experiences who remained unmarried, as no suitors dared to pursue her due to her powerful mother. Calonarang, as a mother, feared that her daughter would be stigmatised as an old maid, while Ratna Manggali herself struggled with shame and societal disapproval (Ardhana et al., 2015).

Moreover, unmarried older women are more vulnerable to loneliness due to the absence of nuclear family members (Hawa & Sucipto, 2022). Thus, unmarried older women, especially those who face financial challenges due to limited employment opportunities, often rely on extended family support for both instrumental and emotional needs. In such cases, the extended family may provide financial support, such as daily allowances and insurance (Tampubolon & Kahija, 2020), as well as emotional support to ensure security and comfort (Primanita & Lestari, 2018).

Concerning the stigma and challenges faced by unmarried older women, this study aims to understand what constitutes a meaningful life for unmarried older Balinese women and the factors that influence their pursuit of a meaningful life. In doing so, this study accommodates cultural and religious perspectives due to their power in constructing unmarried older women’s identities within a dominant narrative of marriage and family in Bali.

This study critically challenges the concept of successful ageing, which is a global perspective in ageing studies and policies. In Indonesia, ageing often involves issues such as poverty and loneliness, which affect the mental health of older people. National data often associates poverty and loneliness with older women, especially those who live alone and are single. This group is frequently portrayed as ‘fragile’. Drawing from positive psychology, this study aims to address the gap in the literature, which tends to frame unmarried older women in a negative light, for example, research on anxiety, poverty, ageing, decline, and limitations of unmarried older women (Septiana & Syafiq, 2013; Pratiwi et al., 2018; Lestari et al., 2023). This ultimately limits society’s perspective on unmarried older women. Therefore, further exploring the lives of unmarried

older women enables researchers to understand how they navigate challenges around singleness in pursuing a meaningful life. This study aims to inform programs focused on the empowerment of older people through integrated services at the community level to support healthy, autonomous, active, and productive ageing. In particular, it seeks to support unmarried older women to remain socially engaged despite their marital status.

2. Literature Review

Previous studies on unmarried women in Indonesia have discussed identity, stigma, and adjustment (Primanita & Lestari, 2018; Septiana & Syafiq, 2013), happiness and meaningful life (Hawa & Sucipto, 2022; Hidayatullah & Larasati, 2017), and the meaning of death (Pratiwi, et al., 2018). In general, unmarried women's identities are constructed as 'old virgins', 'leftovers', or 'expired', which create discursive effects on stigmatisation and discrimination against them (Septiana & Syafiq, 2013).

To negotiate role expectations and achieve self-acceptance as unmarried women, they show both self and social adjustments (Primanita & Lestari, 2018; Septiana & Syafiq, 2013). Self-adjustment focuses on internal resources, such as maintaining positive emotions, avoiding negative thoughts caused by stigmatisation, surrendering to God's will, being grateful, and remaining optimistic about their future (Hawa & Sucipto, 2022; Hidayatullah & Larassaty, 2017; Primanita & Lestari, 2018; Septiana & Syafiq, 2013). Social adjustment, on the other hand, emphasises fostering positive interactions with the surroundings, gaining family support, and engaging in alternative social activities (Hawa & Sucipto, 2022; Primanita & Lestari, 2018; Septiana & Syafiq, 2013). Adequate self and social adjustments lead to happiness and a meaningful life among unmarried women.

Specific to unmarried older women, research by Pratiwi et al. (2018) highlighted the meaning of death and coping strategies to tackle death anxiety. In many cases, death anxiety among unmarried older women is linked to childlessness and failure in continuing family legacy, especially material legacy. As a result, unmarried older women often increase their religiosity and altruism towards others to feel secure about their lives and mental health. Within the Balinese context, research conducted by Primanita & Lestari (2018) explored self and social adjustment among unmarried Balinese women, revealing similarities with Putra and Creese (2016) study on strategies utilised by widows and divorcees to navigate cultural constraints and social stigma.

These previous studies have demonstrated some critical findings related to identity, stigma, adjustment, and the pursuit of a meaningful life for unmarried women, particularly women in their adulthood. Regardless of the

social stigma, adult women are seen as individuals with the full potential to find meaning in singleness. However, when it comes to unmarried older women, a study highlighted death anxiety. Death is the opposite issue of meaningful life. Here we agree with previous studies highlighted public discussions on ageing in Indonesia that often depict older people as declined, lacking potential, and nearing the end of life (Lestari et al., 2021; Lestari et al., 2023). This influences how unmarried older women are framed in research, including how a phenomenon or variable is chosen.

This study tries to address these gaps: a) previous studies have explored the positive aspects of singleness, including adjustment (Primanita & Lestari, 2018; Septiana & Syafiq, 2013), happiness (Hawa & Sucipto, 2022; Hidayatullah & Larasati, 2017), and women empowerment. However, research exclusively focusing on unmarried older women is notably scarce, b) our cultural stigma on ageing sometimes limits our horizon in initiating research about ageing. Societal constructs surrounding older people in Indonesia significantly influence research priorities on ageing, predominantly framing ageing in terms of vulnerability and decline (Lestari et al., 2021; Lestari et al., 2023), c) we argue that these stigmas surrounding ageing and singleness create significant barriers to integrating both contexts within research, hindering our understanding of their intersections through the lens of empowerment and well-being.

Using a positive psychology perspective and Balinese culture to inform our research, we try to understand how unmarried older women navigate the stigma and challenges around singleness in pursuing a meaningful life. In other words, this study aims to understand what constitutes a meaningful life for unmarried older Balinese women and the factors that influence their pursuit of a meaningful life.

3. Methods and theories

3.1 *Methods*

This qualitative study employed Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) to address the research objectives. Grounded in social constructionism, this approach acknowledges the pluralistic nature of meaningful life constructions. By embracing ontological pluralism and epistemological induction, this study adopts an inductive, data-driven stance, aligning with Reflexive Thematic Analysis's emphasis on empirical data during the analytical process (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Whereas previous studies and theories around ageing, women, singleness, and Balinese local knowledge are positioned as prior knowledge that informs authors' understanding of the study context.

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews conducted from January until March 2024. The research participants were recruited and self-selected from the community using purposive sampling. Participants met these criteria: a) women aged 60 and older, b) unmarried (never been married), and c) able to communicate in Balinese or Indonesian language. Information sheets describing the study were provided and explained to participants, followed by informed consent. Ultimately, five unmarried older women were included in the study (see Table 1). This sample size was sufficient to identify patterns across the data and address the research questions (Novira & Fikry, 2021; Simamora & Kadiyono, 2021; Safitri & Savira, 2022).

Table 1. Characteristics of participants

No.	Characteristic	Kamboja	Mawar	Anggrek	Lily	Dahlia
1	Age	78	60	71	80	66
2	Marital status	Unmarried	Unmarried	Unmarried	Unmarried	Unmarried
3	Education	Did not attend school	Completed Senior High School	Attended Elementary School, up to Grade 3	Dropped out of school	Did not attend school
4	Living arrangement	Living with extended family (siblings, nieces, nephews, and grandchild)	Living with mother, sibling, and brother-in-law	Living with sibling	Living with extended family (siblings, nieces, nephews, and grandchild)	Living with extended family (siblings, nieces, nephews, and grandchild)
5	Occupation	Seller	Seller	Part-time helper	Seller	Seller

Source: Author (2024)

During the interview, participants were asked general questions related to their experiences with singleness, for example: What is your view on being unmarried? Can you tell me about your life experience as an unmarried older woman? Prompt questions were prepared and used during the interviews to allow for deeper exploration of the participants’ stories. The interview sessions were recorded using a tape recorder, and the recordings were then transcribed

verbatim. The transcripts were used for data analysis. Since the interviews were conducted in Balinese or Indonesian, the quotes used in the analysis were translated and back-translated into English by professional translators.

Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis approach was used to analyse the data through several steps: open coding, building sub-themes and themes, and naming the themes. These were done through iterative phases conducted within and across individuals and multi-coders. The process resembles a hermeneutic spiral of data analysis (Ayres, 2000; Ayres et al., 2003). In this process, singlehood in older women was examined through the lens of Balinese cultural values, so that grounding the findings in this cultural context. Coding was conducted by the first author and reviewed by the co-author. We identified 443 codes and 30 sub-themes, which were then grouped into three main themes under a meaningful life and two themes under related factors supporting a meaningful life. In describing and presenting the findings, a 15-point checklist of criteria for good thematic analysis, including transcribing, coding, analysis, and report writing by Braun & Clarke (2006) was followed.

3.2 Meaning of Life and Meaningful Life

The study of unmarried older women is situated within the social constructionist paradigm. Social constructionism perceives knowledge as a result of daily interaction between persons and how language is utilised to construct reality (Andrews, 2012; Efran et al., 2014). Social constructionists believe that reality can be deconstructed or constructed differently by different observers (Berger & Luckmann, 1991; Elder-Vass, 2012; Gorski, 2013; Wilig, 1999). Therefore, this study positioned theory as a prior knowledge that leads to the researcher's familiarity with the phenomenon, which does not determine the ontology and epistemology of a meaningful life among unmarried older women. In terms of ontology, this study believes that experiences around singleness among older women and how they pursue a meaningful life are plural. Therefore, in understanding the research objectives, this study is driven by empirical data rather than theoretical frameworks. However, to enhance our understanding of the concepts of 'the meaning of life' and 'meaningful life', the next two paragraphs will provide definitions, related terms, and insights from previous studies.

Frankl (1992) stated that achieving the meaning of life is the ultimate human goal or desire. Finding the meaning of life brings happiness and fulfilment to individuals. This meaning can be found in everyday experiences, whether they are pleasant or unpleasant. Interpretation and meaning-making are central to Frankl's (1992) theory, which states that searching for meaning facilitates growth despite unpleasant experiences. Self-growth is associated with happiness, usefulness, and meaningful life.

Searching for meaning motivates and encourages humans to do useful activities. There are three ways to find meaning in life: (a) through what the individual contributes to the community (creative value), (b) through what the individual receives from their environment, such as love and beauty (appreciation value), and (c) through the individual's reactions towards destiny and changes (attitude value) (Bastaman, 2007). In the Indonesian context, Bastaman (2007) adapted Crumbaugh's work/theory on ways to find the meaning of life. Bastaman called it "*Panca Cara Temuan Makna*" (five ways of finding meaning), which consists of (a) self-understanding, by objectively recognising one's strengths and weaknesses, (b) positive activities, by doing things that are considered positive and useful in everyday life, (c) healthy relationships, by fostering good interpersonal relationships that provide mutual support, (d) strengthened values, in the form of creative values, appreciation values, attitude values, and hope, and (e) worship, by following God's commands and avoiding God's prohibitions.

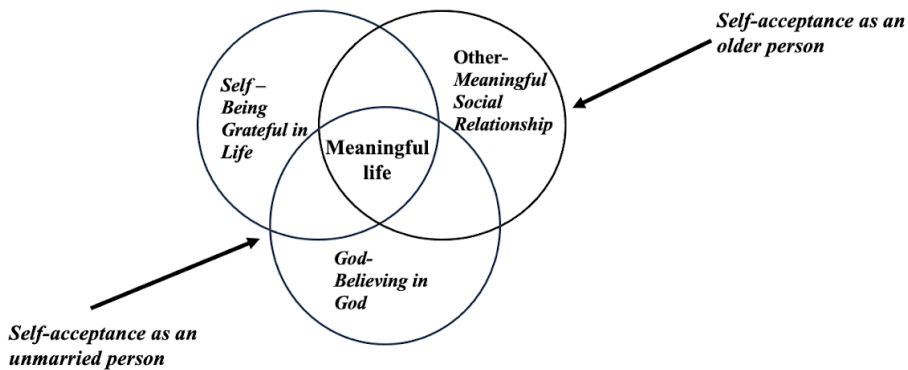
Moreover, Bastaman (2007) found that individuals who live a meaningful life tend to feel freer and can easily adapt to their work, activities, and environment. A meaningful life fosters wisdom, positive thinking, and the ability to demonstrate reciprocal behaviour, particularly in love and relationships. A meaningful life is dynamic, it needs ongoing motivation and commitment from individuals to pursue their goals in life.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

This study revealed two key findings. Firstly, this study identified three themes related to what constitutes a meaningful life for unmarried older Balinese women 1) **Others**, 2) **Self** and 3) **God**. Secondly, factors facilitating a meaningful life included self-acceptance of ageing and singleness.

It can be seen from Picture 1 that Others are illustrated as meaningful social relationships, the Self is illustrated as being grateful in life, and God is illustrated as believing in God. The interaction between these three elements contributes to a meaningful life for unmarried older women. Then, achieving a meaningful life is based on two things: self-acceptance as an older person and self-acceptance as an unmarried person, each of which has internal and external factors. The following section elaborates on these findings and provides a detailed analysis of participants' anonymised extracts using pseudonyms.



Picture 1. Meaningful Life of Balinese Unmarried Older Women: Conceptual Findings (Source: Authors, 2024)

4.1.1 Others - Meaningful Social Relationships

Building social relationships is very important for unmarried older women. Social relationships affect well-being and quality of life in old age. Relationships within the family and the wider community play vital roles in providing emotional, financial, and physical support for unmarried older women.

a. Reciprocal relationship within the family

For unmarried older women, maintaining good family relationships is crucial. Family provides instrumental and emotional support. Instrumental support includes physical and financial care and access to healthcare providers. Emotional support provides a sense of security and comfort through family visits.

Extract 1

I've received meal and drink. However, it is hard for me to prepare my meal. I can't see to take the food.... It is my nephew who always brings me cinnamon, and boils it for me to drink (Lily, 80 years old).

From Extract 1, Lily, who has visual and mobility limitations due to her illness, feels supported by the assistance of her extended family who provide instrumental and emotional support. The extract shows how her family provides traditional medicine, such as cinnamon, as an alternative treatment to replace chemotherapy. Lily's condition constrains her ability to work, so her extended family covers her expenses, making it difficult for her to fulfil her economic needs.

Spending time with grandchildren also brings happiness, laughter and warmth to older women. Grandchildren are a source of emotional support. They are also a symbol of security and legacy, especially as they create a sense of reassurance about future care.

Extract 2

The grandchild usually buys (food)... in the past when I was still able to work, how much was it?... I got one hundred every Galungan, my grandchildren will be like 'Ni Ajang where is the money?' How do you call it? They asked for holiday allowance [...] everyone said thank you. [...] 'Kembang Kertas (pseudonym) one day if Ni Ajang is sick, please take care of Ni Ajang, shower Ni Ajang with your love and care', 'Yes Ni Ajang', she said in return (Anggrek, 71 years old).

Extract 2 demonstrates reciprocity between unmarried older women and their non-biological grandchildren. Reciprocity provides a sense of pride, as Anggrek positions herself as a productive individual who is able to care for her grandchildren by giving them holiday allowance on Galungan (a Balinese ceremony celebrating the victory of *dharma* over *adharma* or the triumph of God over evil). On the other hand, when she gets older and needs help, she positions herself as a care recipient and positions her grandchildren as caregivers. Anggrek is confident that bonding with her grandchildren will secure her position as a care recipient who deserves support. Grandchildren are positioned as sources of support and substitutes for the nuclear family that she does not have. Roles played by family in providing care for unmarried older women facilitate reciprocity.

This demonstrates that even though unmarried older women positioned themselves as care recipients due to their limitations, they also continue their role as care providers to contribute to their families. For example, in Extract 3, Kamboja tries to actively contribute without expecting anything in return, despite her limitations.

Extract 3

...in general, please do help sincerely. Even though I never asked for anything, they always helped me, [...]. I asked for their help when I was not able to provide for my needs. But if I had coffee and sugar, I refused their help (Kamboja, 80 years old).

For Kamboja, being a care recipient due to her status as an unmarried older woman is not a given, even though her family is willing to support her. She views family care and assistance as situational, to be received only when her needs are unmet. She also views herself as a care provider capable of looking

after her family. This reciprocity is a gesture of gratitude and giving back to her family for everything that has been provided for Kamboja.

b. Reciprocal relationship with the community

Social interactions within their environment allow unmarried older women to feel connected and avoid loneliness. The Balinese social system contains a set of rituals embedded in social practices within the community (Pitriani, 2020). These social practices provide opportunities for older people to participate in various community activities, such as *ngayah* at the temple.

Extract 4

...happy (laughs) to share stories...ngayah at the banjar, or my family temple, I do ngayah regularly... (Mawar, 59 years old).

From Extract 4, Mawar revealed that *ngayah* (a tradition of voluntary donations in the form of material and services, in which helping one another for the common good becomes the central value) is a fun activity for her because it is an opportunity to share her stories and experiences with others. This kind of opportunity has encouraged unmarried older women to explore their neighbourhood to find alternative activities to prevent isolation and loneliness due to their singleness. In this context, *ngayah* is perceived as care for older people provided by the community, in which older people become the recipients. In return, older people reciprocate by also positioning themselves as care providers, by contributing and helping the members of the community, as can be seen in Extract 5:

Extract 5

I'm happy when I help others, whoever they are, regardless of their health status and age. One day, there was an old man who was neglected by his daughter-in-law. [...] When I went to the market, I brought more money and gave it to him (Anggrek, 71 years old).

Anggrek, who often gets help from her surroundings, tries to give back by helping others, especially older people in her community. The outcome is a sense of self-fulfilment and happiness. Ultimately, reciprocity within the family and in the community shape unmarried older women's life experiences.

Extract 6

I don't dare to disrespect other people. We love one another, other people love me too. If people love us, people will think twice about abusing me. However, I think it will be a different story if I do not behave and disrespect them (Lily, 80 years old).

Extract 6 shows Lily's perspective on how to maintain good relationships, which draws on the *karma phala* (the term in Hinduism refers to the results of the individual actions) principle. For Lily, others will never disrespect and abuse her as long as she treats them the same. Lily applies *karma phala* in her life to create good friendships, to keep social interactions harmonious without harming one another.

4.1.2 Self - Being grateful in life

Gratitude is a result of the positive meanings that unmarried older women attribute to their experiences. It is not only an outcome of maintaining a positive outlook or finding meanings, but also a coping mechanism to evaluate their lives, including the ups and downs. Gratitude enables them to appreciate their experiences, despite the challenges they have gone through.

Extract 7

A good amount (of wealth), not much. It is forbidden to say you have nothing. I am grateful that Sang Hyang Widhi Wasa showed me my destiny and showered me with his fortune (Anggrek, 71 years old).

According to Extract 7, Anggrek's gratitude is more about thanking God for allowing her to keep working until old age. Through gratitude, unmarried older women understand that many things that happen in their lives are related to how they appreciate every process, both in the past and future.

4.1.3 God - Believing in God

Unmarried older women believe that God has great power in directing, guiding, and protecting their lives. For them, praying is a ritual that fosters wisdom and optimism towards life.

Extract 8

I still do the offering, for example, saiban and canang. On the workdays, I wake up earlier, sometimes at 3 or 4 am, so that I am able to finish praying before I go to work (Anggrek, 71 years old).

Anggrek's busy working life does not become an excuse to put aside her obligation to God. Therefore, Anggrek always tries to wake up early so that all the house chores, preparing *saiban* (a simple daily offering in Balinese Hindu which usually done in the morning after cooking) and *canang* (a daily offering in Balinese Hindu to thank God in prayer), and praying are done before she goes to work. Believing in God as part of religious beliefs has unconsciously created obligations to prioritise the rituals within the faith. A meaningful life

can be achieved through self-acceptance, both as an older and an unmarried person. The following section presents the findings in detail.

4.1.4 Self-acceptance as an older person

Self-acceptance as an older person involves recognising and embracing the physical, psychological, and social changes that come with ageing. Rather than surrendering and giving up, acceptance means understanding and realising that these changes are normal and inevitable. Older people who recognise and accept the ageing process tend to show a positive outlook on life, which may lead to successful ageing.

a. Internal factors of self-acceptance as an older person

Internal factors related to self-acceptance as an older person include health status, physical limitations, and expectations regarding ageing. A decline in health is common among the participants, including high or low blood pressure, ulcers, decreased hearing and vision, and some comorbid conditions.

Extract 9

I have been sick for a long time, around 10 years, I have had surgery in Bangli. There is no pension. I could not do anything about it, other than live with my pain and bring it to death (Lily, 80 years old).

From Extract 9, it can be seen that Lily has been suffering from a breast tumour for quite some time. Lily's old age makes her vulnerable to illnesses due to declining physiological functions. Economic conditions and age constrain Lily from continuing her medical treatment. However, she demonstrates acceptance and resilience as a tumour survivor with scarce financial resources.

Illness in old age has undoubtedly limited older people's mobility and activities, especially during periods of relapse. One participant said her limitations are related to a decline in physical health. This decline has constrained her ability to care for her grandchildren and maintain her productivity through working, as stated by Dahlia in Extract 10. Therefore, Dahlia decided to reduce her other activities and focus more on her current work.

Extract 10

Back pain...He (the grandson) does not want to sit still, very active. So, I get exhausted. What a shame, sad isn't it? Besides back pain? I got easily tired, especially while working. [...] I don't want to take on too much work. If I rest, I feel worse because I used to work. For now, I just want to focus on selling (Dahlia, 66 years old).

Moreover, unmarried older women prioritise their health and family more than anything, as Anggrek revealed in Extract 11. Anggrek's extract shows her wish to be healthy. Good health allows her to stay active and productive in old age. She navigates her limitations and needs to maintain financial productivity by pig farming, which she can do at home.

Extract 11

That is my only hope. I want to have a pig's farm, be healthy. So that I can work nearby. My age limits my mobility. I have been experiencing this for around five years (Anggrek, 71 years old).

Unlike Anggrek, Kamboja's wish emphasises her need to be independent and healthy despite her limitations and inability to work. Extract 12 shows how becoming healthy is an unmarried older woman's dream that stems from a self-reluctance to be a burden to their family.

Extract 12

...my family always provides my needs. However, even though only for a cup of coffee, I do feel hesitant, I do not want to be a burden. That's why I pray for good health (Kamboja, 78 years old).

b. External factors of self-acceptance as an older person

External factors affecting self-acceptance as an older person includes activities, work, household chores, stress management, financial security, and safety. Living as unmarried older women requires participants to fulfil their financial needs independently, as shown Extract 13 in what Lily said about her decision to keep working to cover her medical expenses and post-surgery treatments:

Extract 13

No... Sometimes I get 5,000, sometimes I don't work, I rarely work. The money is used to buy balm and eye drops. [...] I feel annoyed, when I keep myself busy, it gets better. [...] if I keep myself busy with the offering, the pain diminishes (Lily, 80 years old).

Lily realises that her health condition has limited her visual and motoric abilities, so she is no longer able to do jobs that require physical fitness. Profit from selling items was used to buy medicine to relieve her pain. Moreover, working becomes a coping mechanism that helps Lily to ignore her pain. The pains itself still exists, however the extract shows how an activity can help her detach from the emotional discomfort caused by pain.

Additionally, working in old age provides financial security and savings for unmarried older women. Extract 14 describes the importance of assets

and savings in old age. Kamboja has exceeded her productive age, however, working provides security in terms of financial resources and enables savings. This leads to optimism and reduces anxiety towards uncertainty and scarce resources in old age.

Extract 14

But sometimes it never bothered me. It is similar to someone who does not have anything or is bankrupt. Because I am working, I still have some assets and savings. So that I could finance myself once I am no longer working (Anggrek, 71 years old).

In contrast to Kamboja, Dahlia talked about loans in old age. Even though she works as a seller, her income is limited to her daily expenses, so savings are not possible. In fact, she had to apply for a bank loan to cover her expenses.

Extract 15

No, I don't. I don't have any savings. Savings like that? I don't have any. I never save my money. I just borrow for some loan (Dahlia, 66 years old).

Having loans in old age is a complex problem for unmarried older women. Dahlia's job as a seller is inadequate to support her needs, so she decided to apply for a loan from microfinance institution with monthly instalments. Consequently, Dahlia must manage her income to cover the instalment.

For Balinese women, caring for the family is part of their domestic roles. For example, Mawar becomes a caregiver for her mother who lives with cataracts. Mawar and her sister are taking care of their mother together. In Extract 16, she shares how they negotiated their activities and role in providing care. Here, they applied a shift system that enabled them to care for their mother while also allowing flexibility to do other activities.

Extract 16

I am taking care of my mom, if I am away, my sister is at home. If my sister is away, I am the one who stays at home. [...] I dare to go out until 10 o'clock, but together with my sister. I am afraid to go out alone, there are many people, there are many migrants. I don't dare to go out alone. Mr. Teratai (a neighbour who lives with schizophrenia) often relapse and gets tantrums (Mawar, 59 years old).

In addition, the physical and cognitive decline in older people has made them more vulnerable to crime and harassment in their neighbourhoods. For example, Mawar associates crime with migrants and neglected people with mental health issues who often pose a threat to her safety. Therefore, she sometimes needs a carer or lifeguard when doing activities outside until late.

Mawar is aware that her decline makes her an ideal target of crime, and at the same time, this decline limits her ability to protect herself.

Besides challenges related to late adulthood, unmarried older women also face challenges around their status as unmarried women. Therefore, to achieve a meaningful life, self-acceptance as older people should be followed by self-acceptance towards singleness. The following section will discuss how unmarried older women navigate their singleness in everyday life.

4.1.5 Self-acceptance as an unmarried person

Accepting status as an unmarried woman is challenging for individuals due to stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination attached to singlehood. This often leads to the marginalisation of unmarried older women. Prior to self-acceptance, individuals strive for personal adjustment, which comes from internal and external factors.

a. Internal factors of self-acceptance as an unmarried person

Internal factors of self-acceptance as an unmarried person include self-stigma of singleness, isolation, and loneliness. Most participants chose to be unmarried due to personal reasons, so they did not perceive being unmarried as a negative life experience.

Extract 17

Yes, I could go wherever I want to go, it is freedom. When I want to go to the temple, no one prohibits me. Unlike other people who are forbidden by their family, [...] I never (Dahlia, 66 years old).

In Extract 17, Dahlia mentioned that being unmarried provides a sense of freedom in doing activities and travelling, which she loves. Dahlia has full control over herself without being hindered by others. Dahlia has never felt any burden or regret due to her status because it is indeed a personal choice.

Although being unmarried is perceived positively, it cannot be denied that regret and sadness sometimes arise. This can be seen in Extract 18:

Extract 18

It's okay... If I remember myself there is a sense of regret. I get upset when I remember myself. [...] I don't have children... sometimes when I think about it, I'm sad too 'Oh God, how will I someday have no children, no siblings?' I want to cry, my tears come out too. but sometimes "ah don't think about it, it's like people don't have anything at all later (Anggrek, 71 years old).

Moreover, Anggrek regrets her situation and pities herself due to her status who does not have biological children and siblings. Sometimes she

worries about the future because she does not have anyone to look after her, especially when she gets older. Family members, especially biological children, are primary caregivers for most Balinese older people. However, through gratitude, Anggrek has successfully coped with her sadness and regret. She compensates for being unmarried by working, which provides income for a living and enables her to become autonomous in old age.

Living alone without a spouse and children sometimes results in loneliness among unmarried older women. Similar to Anggrek who perceives her marital status as facilitating her autonomy, Kamboja also reveals that living alone results in independence instead of loneliness, by saying: *"I have to fight, I can't be dependent and I have no one"*. Kamboja, who easily gets tired after surgery, has realised that living alone makes it very difficult for her when she is sick. Therefore, Kamboja developed independence as a coping strategy to survive as an unmarried woman. For Kamboja, *"I have to fight"* represents a mindset that shows her strength, but at the time discloses her vulnerability as she does not have anyone to rely on. Loneliness among older people affects mental and emotional well-being, as reported by most participants. However, they also showed various coping strategies to overcome loneliness, such as finding other activities to keep them busy, working, and even sleeping.

Extract 19

It is usually like this ... After I finish in the kitchen, I pray and then help my sister with her freelance, which is installing the buttons to the kebaya. [...] so, I never felt lonely (Mawar, 59 years old).

Extract 19 demonstrates some daily activities unmarried older women do to keep them busy and diminish loneliness. The activities are mostly domestic tasks, like cooking and praying. Moreover, Mawar's extract also reveals older people's ability to contribute to household income by supporting the jobs of their family members.

b. External factors of self-acceptance as an unmarried person

External factors refer to things that come from outside older people that affect self-acceptance as an unmarried, namely social stigma towards unmarried older women and the societal emphasis on having children for childless women. However, this study found that most participants felt less stigmatised and less marginalised in their social lives. In fact, their social environment tended to offer empathy to them, especially in the context of financial support.

Extract 20

I have never been marginalised, in fact, everyone loves me... Everyone said 'Here is for you, Kamboja', when they gave me money. When they buy something in

my shop, they never ask for change. [...] However, I avoid receiving too many, for example, I often refused support from the owner of Toko Sentra (Kamboja, 78 years old).

Extract 20 shows how Kamboja was cared for by her surroundings, including her customers who deliberately paid more when shopping. However, not all gifts from others are accepted. Kamboja thinks that accepting too much support becomes a source of burden. Even though participants are supported by their social environment in the context of financial support, when it comes to their marital status, stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination still exist, especially from those who have negative attitudes towards being unmarried women.

Extract 21

[...] There was a time when in a rice field I was looking for Gusti. He said 'Let me take you once' so I replied 'What do you want to take? Very strange... Why do you spread gossip? Do you think I like what you say?' I said (Lily, 80 years old).

In Extract 21, Lily revealed that she received verbal sexual harassment due to her single status. In this instance, unmarried women are positioned as objects of sexual desire since they are sometimes constructed as less-committed persons who easily engage in casual sexual relationships. This social construction results in marginalisation and a negative image of unmarried older women in society. For Balinese people, parental care is the children's responsibility. Therefore, getting married and producing offspring becomes a source of support during old age. It can be seen from Extract 22 that Mawar has a desire to be cared for by her biological children. By taking care of the grandchildren from her relatives, she could overcome the emptiness due to being childless.

Extract 22

There is (a feeling and need of being cared for by children) [...] it is normal (voice shrinks). [...] here what I do is taking care of grandchildren of my relatives (laughs) (Mawar, 59 years old).

4.2 Discussion

A meaningful life for unmarried older Balinese women is understood as the interaction between *Others*, *Self*, and *God*. As an individual gets older, spiritual activities become a more dominant tool to gain peace by establishing a good relationship with God (Simbolon & Simbolon, 2023). Accordingly, themes related to spirituality consistently appear in the findings. This aligns with the Balinese concept of happiness, namely *Tri Hita Karana* (Parmajaya, 2018). This

local knowledge emphasises harmony between God and Self (*parahyangan*), Others and Self (*palemahan*), and Self and Self (*parwongan*). The three findings are interrelated to support a meaningful life for unmarried older women.

4.2.1 Others - Meaningful social relationship

Building and maintaining social relationships with family and community members are imperative for older people (Ramadhani et al., 2020; Nuraini et al., 2018). This study found that culture plays an important role in encouraging unmarried older women to engage in community activities through *mebanjar* and *ngayah* (see Picture 2). *Ngayah* provides a space for unmarried older women to participate and contribute as role models for their community (Sena, 2017; Pitriani, 2020). In detail, Sena (2020) mentioned that the unwritten customary law governing *ngayah* traditions inadvertently cultivates social support which is characterised by mutual care (*asah*), compassion (*asih*), and nurturing (*asuh*).



Picture 2. *Ngayah* to prepare offerings for religious ceremonies (Source: Authors, 2024).

Here, unmarried older women are positioned as teachers who actively share their traditional local knowledge with the younger generation. This role incorporates Havighurst's (1972) concept of older people's developmental tasks, which emphasises pursuing and adopting new social roles. *Ngayah* facilitates unmarried older women's needs for self-esteem and self-actualisation that leads

sense of confidence and worth for the community (Ramadhani et al., 2020). In other words, *ngayah* develops a sense of safety and comfort, supporting the dignity, independence, and self-management of unmarried older women. Moreover, social inclusiveness is evident in *ngayah* and it is considered a social system that supports an age-friendly community which allows individuals to age, thrive, and meaningfully contribute to the community (WHO, 2023). In this context, *ngayah* could be utilised as physical, social, and autobiographical insideness to facilitate ageing in place (Rowles, 1983).

4.2.2 Self - Being grateful in life

Gratitude is defined as an expression of thankfulness for one's circumstances, involving a conscious recognition of all that occurs within oneself, and acknowledging both positive and negative aspects of their lives (Haryanto & Kertamuda, 2016; Muna et al., 2020). Gratitude is sometimes associated with religious beliefs. In Hinduism, speaking, moving, and thinking are a set of abilities possessed by humans. Therefore, human is believed to be the most perfect beings created by God (Negara, 2021; Singarsa, 2023).

This study revealed that gratitude comes from the recognition of this highest ability. In this context, older people utilise their abilities to overcome the challenges around old age and singlehood. Challenges are interpreted through logical thinking and religious beliefs. When logical thinking provides guidance, a balanced religious approach provides gratitude, which ultimately leads to resilience (Haryanto & Kertamuda, 2016). Aligning with Muna et al. (2020), research indicates gratitude significantly correlates with mental health. Unmarried older adults exhibiting gratitude demonstrate enhanced life appreciation and optimism (Utami et al., 2015).

4.2.3 God - Believing in God

This study indicates that older adults articulate their faith by consistently involving God in their activities, for example preparing daily offerings for God through *yadnya*. In this context, God is perceived as omnipresent (*wyapi wyapaka*) and provides life guidance (Parmajaya, 2018; Fahmi, 2015). This study confirms faith and spirituality are significant for unmarried older women in choosing and conducting their activities which focus more on religious activities.

Bastaman (2007) conceptualised God as a virtue, therefore, to achieve a meaningful life, individuals use their religion and faith to approach God. A meaningful life is often demonstrated as a devotion to God through worship. Previous research indicated faith and gratitude are intertwined, in which older people find solace in religious expression. In other words, the ultimate happiness is achieved when an individual is satisfied and finds peace through

religious activities (Haryanto & Kertamuda, 2016; Ayuningtias, 2019). Religious beliefs significantly influence individuals' lives and offer profound impacts. Previous studies found that engaging in religious practices enhances hope and optimism among vulnerable populations, including older people and those with disabilities (Utami et al., 2015; Arrieta et al., 2017; Baysal, 2021; Krause, 2003). Moreover, gratitude and faith play pivotal roles in facilitating successful ageing (Permatasari & Ajisuksmo, 2021).

A meaningful life requires self-acceptance, both as an older and unmarried person. Self-acceptance involves being self-aware of one's strengths and weaknesses, as well as social acceptance (Maulidhea & Syafiq, 2022). Ageing is an inevitable process, so older people who accept their ageing process are more likely to focus on personal growth and self-actualisation in later life rather than dwelling on their limitations and decline (Uraningsari & Djalali, 2016; Maulidhea & Syafiq, 2022). In contrast, individuals who reject the ageing process may feel useless, abandoned, and demotivated (Uraningsari & Djalali, 2016; Afrizal, 2018). Self-acceptance in old age is closely linked to Erikson's psychosocial development theory, particularly the stage of ego integrity versus despair. Older adults who achieve a sense of integrity tend to have positive perceptions towards their past, present, and future life. In contrast, those who resist the ageing process are more likely to experience despair which emphasises negative perceptions towards life (Auliya et al., 2023). However, the ageing process poses significant challenges for certain individuals, with depression, loneliness, and anxiety emerging as prominent psychological problems due to life uncertainty. Research indicates that adaptive coping strategies and acceptance facilitate mental health and well-being (Permatasari & Ajisuksmo, 2021; Amalia et al., 2017).

Social acceptance eradicates stigma, prejudice, and marginalisation that are experienced by unmarried older people. Social acceptance can be found in social support and inclusivity (Marni & Yuniawati, 2015). Social support promotes trust and equality among community members, regardless of their age and marital status (Mami & Suharnan, 2015; Marni & Yuniawati, 2015). In Indonesia, particularly Bali, family members (including extended family) serve as primary providers of social support for older people. Family members play significant roles in mitigating loneliness, facilitating hope, and ensuring financial and caregiving security (Yuselda & Wardani, 2016; Lestari et al., 2022; Lestari et al., 2023).

A previous study found that social perceptions of singlehood, social acceptance, and adequate interpersonal relationships are factors that facilitate adjustment among unmarried older people (Tandino & Sudagijono, 2016). Those who accept their unmarried status tend to demonstrate a sense of responsibility,

valuing their decisions and embracing the consequences of their choice to remain unmarried (Nanik & Hendriani, 2016; Natasha & Desiningrum, 2020). Moreover, social equity enables unmarried older women to receive unconditional positive regard from their environment, discouraging social isolation and withdrawal, and facilitating successful ageing (Permatasari & Ajisuksmo, 2021).

This study found some constraints that hinder the self-acceptance of singleness, including feelings of helplessness and scarce financial and social resources. It is noteworthy that, in the Indonesian context, many older people continue to make significant economic contributions as primary breadwinners for their families (see Picture 3), with majority employed in the informal sectors (Adioetomo et al., 2018).



Picture 3. Unmarried older Balinese women work as sellers (Source: Authors, 2024).

Moreover, Pratama and Masykur (2018) argued that a lack of self-acceptance leads to feelings of discomfort, shame, and withdrawal from the community. Over time, a lack of self-acceptance can diminish the quality of life among unmarried older women due to the stress and burdens related to their status.

5. Conclusion

A meaningful life for unmarried older Balinese women can be achieved through meaningful social relationships, both with family and within their broader community. Gratitude plays a crucial role in navigating their lives positively. This perspective is closely linked to their faith in God, who is believed to provide guidance and opportunities for a fulfilling life during their old age.

Having a meaningful life is closely tied to self-acceptance as older adults, particularly concerning their health, physical, and financial decline. Similarly, self-acceptance as an unmarried older person is significantly shaped by the social attitude towards singlehood. A positive social attitude or perception prevents unmarried older women from isolation and encourages them to engage in social activities.

These findings inform policy development addressing social problems and issues around ageing, women, and poverty. Recommendations include: a) developing an age-friendly community to facilitate social equity among older people, b) establishing community hubs (e.g., *banjar* in Bali) that provide social activities and prevent isolation in unmarried older women. Social activities aim to increase gratitude, faith, social and self-acceptance towards ageing and singleness, c) recruiting *banjar members* as caregivers for unmarried older women without family support, and d) implementing prevention programs (e.g., financial and health literacies) targeting unmarried adult women for better ageing experiences.

This study expands the literature on singleness and provides a nuanced perspective on unmarried older women. By emphasising meaningful life experiences, this study counters dominant narratives and recognises the potential and resilience of unmarried older women despite vulnerabilities. However, this study acknowledges several limitations. The findings are limited to participants who were recruited from two regencies in Bali. Therefore, generalization at the national or global levels is avoided. Additionally, during data collection, the researchers did not fully utilize the interview duration that had been planned. Therefore, to obtain more insights, further studies could conduct extended observations alongside interviews. The anticipated increase in unmarried older women warrants further investigation across varied cultural settings, cohorts, theoretical frameworks, and disciplines (e.g., health, law, economics, sociology).

6. Ethical clearance

This study was approved by The Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Medicine, Udayana University (No. 2657/UN14.2.2.VII.14/LT/2023).

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