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**A Qualitative Analysis of Psychosocial Protective
Factors in the Lives of Single Women**

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Abstract

Single women are facing challenges in their daily lives, but some tend to overcome these challenges through some protective factors that help in positive adaptation in the face of adversities and help them to flourish in their lives. The present study aims to identify and explore the psychosocial protective factors among single women. Using a semi-structured interview schedule, individual in-depth interviews were conducted with 12 single women (i.e., widowed, divorced, or separated) from a mid-sized city in South India. All these semi-structured interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and coded. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the interviews. The themes that emerged represented the protective factors that promote the healthy adaptation of single women; having a positive attitude toward singlehood, having a secure attachment with children, adaptive coping strategies, and social support received were identified as protective factors among single women. The present study highlighted those factors that contribute to developing resilience among single women. Further research should focus on developing effective interventions that promote healthy adaptation and development in the face of adversity in single women.

Key words: Protective factors, semi-structured interview, positive adaptation, resilience, single women.

Single women is an umbrella term that refers to various categories of women, from unmarried women to widows, divorced and separated women, women with missing spouses to half-widows (Awasthi, 2020; Biswas & Mukhopadhyay, 2018). However, in this present study, the term “single women” was operationalized to refer to women who were widowed, divorced, or separated. An increase in the single women population has been witnessed in recent decades (Bharat, 2008; Schrader, 2019). Approximately, there are more than 258

million widows around the world (UN Women, 2021), and India is home to 55 million widows (Verma, 2020). Recent statistics by Nguyen (2022) revealed that Russia has the highest divorce rate (4.7 divorces per 1000 people), whereas Guatemala and Qatar have the lowest divorce rate (0.4 divorces per 1000 people). India also has the lowest divorce rate with less than 1% of the total married population, that is, only 13 out of 1000 marriages end up in divorce (Joseph, 2020; Nguyen, 2017).

Single women are more vulnerable to multiple challenges in a patriarchal society. Single women living in both rural and urban areas of India face a wide range of problems regarding providing food, shelter, safety, and education to their children; financial problems; unemployment; low wages; physical and mental health issues; inheritance of property; and maintenance issues following marital dissolution; protection from male-dominated society; stigmatic practices; and exclusion from participating in auspicious events (Mohindra et al., 2012; Singh, 2013; Stack & Meredith, 2017; Trivedi et al., 2009). Yet, some single women are able to overcome daily life challenges and lead successful lives with the help of protective factors.

Protective factors are those factors that decrease the likelihood of negative outcomes (Fraser, 1997) and these factors help single women face daily challenges and help them thrive. Personality (Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995; Deepak & Annalakshmi, 2022), character strengths and virtues (Deepak & Annalakshmi, 2021a; Shoshani & Slone, 2016; Van Dyke et al., 2009); religious and spiritual practises (Betancourt & Khan, 2008; Shoshani & Slone, 2016; Van Dyke et al., 2009); and coping styles (David & Suls, 1999; Pudrovska & Carr, 2008) are identified as internal protective factors. Job (Azar & Vasudeva, 2006; Moen, 1992; Trivedi et al., 2009); income (Lee et al., 2020); and social support provided by friends, family, religious organizations, community help centres, government policies, sometimes by the ex-spouse and their families (Bankoff, 1983; Cotten, 1999; Deepak & Annalakshmi, 2021b; de Vries et al., 2014; Duffy, 1993; Miller et al., 2004; Scott et al., 2007; Trivedi et al., 2009; Turner & Lloyd, 1998; Yarinassab & Shams, 2021) were identified as potential external protective factors that contribute to the well-being and positive adaptation of single women.

Though the research on the lives of single women is increasing, some of the areas need further exploration. Many qualitative studies have focused on the problems faced by single women after their divorce, highlighting how divorce has influenced their daily functioning and much focus is given to their children and areas of adjustment among children of single women. Some of the studies published in late 1980s and 1990s in India have listed out the problem areas for widows and divorced women and reported that many single women stayed inside their homes; however, in later years we witness a huge shift in the lifestyle of single women and the exposure they have unlike the restricted life style single women in older days had. Educated single women from metro and developed cities come out and interact in the society, are employed, financially independent, heads-of-household who lead and manage the family. These changes resulted in new problem areas posing different types

of challenges to positive adaptation among single women. Studies focusing on the factors that help in positive adaptation and resilience mechanisms of single women in the recent decade are scarce and are less explored in recent times in India. Hence, the present study aims to identify the protective factors that can nurture resilience in the lives of single women.

Method

Approach to data collection: This study aims to investigate how the protective factors contribute to positive adaptation among single women using a semi-structured interview that were analysed using the thematic analysis technique of Braun and Clarke (2006).

Ethical protocol: Before proceeding to the interview, all the participants were informed about the purpose of the interview, how and why they were selected for the interview, were assured of confidentiality and privacy, and were informed about their rights to decline or withdraw at any time. All the semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded, and the audio files were stored on a password-protected laptop belonging to the researcher.

Interview process: The qualitative data was collected using a semi-structured interview schedule containing the interview questions that focused on identifying protective factors. All the interviews were conducted at the residences of the participants. The duration of each interview ranged from 33 to 65 minutes ($M = 52.33$; $SD = 11.59$).

Measure: A semi-structured interview schedule used in this study consisted of 61 questions that aimed at identifying the risk and protective factors contributing to the positive adaptation in the lives of single women. The questions focused on various aspects of the lives of single women in terms of the life before and after marital dissolution; relationships; interactions, and support received from family and friends; interaction with neighbours and community; and interactions in the workplace environment of single women. The questions also included the physical and psychological problems experienced by the single women, social issues faced by them, coping strategies they use, and also how they coped with the challenges that was brought about by COVID 19 pandemic.

Participants: A sample of 300 single women (i.e., widowed, divorced, and separated) has completed a survey that included a measure of resilience for a larger study. Among these 300 single women, 12 single women (3 widowed, 4 divorced, and 5 separated) who had scored high scores in resilience were selected and interviewed, and the results are discussed in the present study. All the single women belonged to the age group of 33 to 60 years ($M = 43.58$; $SD = 8.74$). All these single women were recruited from a mid-sized city in South India and are able to speak Tamil or English fluently. The details of the participants are presented in the table below.

Table 1
Showing the details of participants involved in the semi-structured interview

Participant	Pseudoname	Age	Category	Children	Occupation
#P1	Gayathri	41	Widowed	Yes	Blue collar job

Participant	Pseudoname	Age	Category	Children	Occupation
#P2	Stella	34	Separated	No	Teacher
#P3	Rekha	52	Widowed	No	Own business
#P4	Pallavi	34	Separated	Yes	Blue collar job
#P5	Eshwari	39	Separated	Yes	Own business
#P6	Maheswari	47	Separated	Yes	Own business
#P7	Banu	37	Separated	Yes	Blue collar job
#P8	Sakthi	45	Divorced	Yes	White collar job
#P9	Neelofer	33	Divorced	Yes	Teacher
#P10	Leela	54	Widowed	Yes	Home maker
#P11	Madhavi	60	Divorced	Yes	Retired teacher
#P12	Lakshmi	48	Divorced	Yes	Own business

Data analysis: All the audio recordings were available in the regional language, Tamil and comprehensive notes were taken in English language hearing to the audio recorded interviews. The qualitative data collected was analyzed using the six-step inductive thematic analysis technique that provides flexible and potentially rich and detailed data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.78) to understand the protective factors among single women. Initially, codes were extracted after reading and re-reading the content of comprehensive notes. These codes were generated based on the reported experiences of single women related to protective factors. The coded data were categorized into sub-themes and further organized into a set of major themes.

Results: The interview data was analyzed to identify both common and distinct themes. The sub-themes and major themes were grouped to represent the protective factors in the lives of single women. The table represents the themes, subthemes, and codes of the semi-structured interviews conducted with single women.

Table 2

Showing the themes identified across the interview summaries of protective factors using inductive thematic analysis

Themes	Subthemes	Codes
Positive attitude towards singlehood	Increased positive self-identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifying oneself as single woman and being proud of it Being bold and courageous
	Increased autonomy and life satisfaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Living a happy, satisfied, and independent life after dissolution Not expecting sympathy from others and not relying on others for her survival Feeling content when others praise how single women reared their children Feeling happy when others feel proud and jealous of the achievements of single women
	Positive perception about	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Able to live the life they wanted to live

Themes	Subthemes	Codes
	present life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Present life is giving a positive hope towards future • Exploring more and travelling more • Feeling that the decision to separate is very late, must have been made earlier
	Positive aspirations for future	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being very optimistic about present and future life • Crying is a symbol of weakness, so face any situation boldly • Not compromising self-respect and self-esteem • Preferring to become financially independent; preferring to do any type of job except begging, robbery, or murder to earn money for survival • Wants be an inspiration and role model to her children and support their achievements • Anticipating that the future son- or daughter-in-law would accept and support their family situations
Secure attachment with children	Cohesive and positive relationship with children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Living peaceful life with their children • Having a cohesive, friendly relationship and close bonding between single women and children • Sharing problems only with children • Both mother and children have a mutual and empathetically understanding the situations of one another
	Teaching children about values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling proud on raising children with good education and character • Teaching their sons how to handle girls and women • Advising their sons not to play with/ spoil another girl's life in future
Adaptive coping strategies	Use of religious and spiritual coping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spiritual development is giving peace and is helping to get over extreme emotions • Spirituality is helping to focus more on themselves, accepting the problems of others and motivating to move on in their life

Themes	Subthemes	Codes
	Using relaxation techniques	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Believing only that God is reliable, not humans and surrendering to God helps in spiritual upliftment • Thanking God for the life changing moments, achievements, and for the peaceful life • Crying spells provide relaxation • Preferring to go somewhere and think over the issue because solitude provides peace and relaxation • Going to temples/ church; engaging in rituals and worship for relaxation • Doing yoga, fitness and meditation for relaxation • Feeling relaxed after directly dealing with the issue and solving it • Feeling relax by outing with friends and colleagues
	Identifying their inner strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accepting the problems and handling it by themselves not seeking help from others • Having courage and confidence to face anything and to prove their potential to others • Stopped arguing/ talking and left the place that created discomfort and asked for justice later • Not caring when there is any criticisms, gossips, ridicules • Prefer to stand, speak, fight against injustice caused by others • Managing to live after overcoming all the problems and struggles
	Using diversion to deal with stress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diverting the topic when there is an argument • Doing jobs to divert themselves from family issues • Making oneself busy with working to avoid unnecessary thoughts and situations • Diverting focus towards education, career and job, improving health, gardening, artwork, cooking
	Increased assertiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not lamenting over past events, focus only on

Themes	Subthemes	Codes
	Forgiveness	<p>the present and future</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facing and reacting boldly to those who raise unwanted questions • Not feeling bad, feeling that they haven't took any wrong decision and even has no guilt/ shame on their decision of divorce/separation • Not taking revenge against those who had harmed them • Not ready to forgive or forget, but didn't care or think about those who hurt the single women
Social support received	<p>Social support from parents</p> <p>Emotional and instrumental support from children</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents are taking care of food, dress, education, shelter, and finance • Parents are providing psychological, emotional, and financial support • Parents are completely supportive in handling the expenses during pandemic period • Single women hesitate to ask for help, but her parents want to help • Maternal family are taking care of the household chores and the needs of children when single women falls sick • Parents didn't force for re-marriage, gave the freedom to live as single women • Father of single women was strong and supportive to the decision of single women • Mother's courage had inspired and motivated the single women • Mother of single women had fear of society and to what others say, but supported the decision of single women • Mother of single women helps to rear the children particularly the girl child, considering its safety and protection • Children are supporting single mother to make important decisions • Children are consoling single mother during stressful situations; they understand mother's situation and are acting accordingly

Themes	Subthemes	Codes
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children are looking after the health of the single women, giving a hand in doing household chores • Children support the family by sharing the responsibilities among themselves • Children help in business to get extra pay • Children were longing for father's love, but later understood the situation and are supporting their mother
	Social networking support and emotional support from friends and colleagues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Friends are providing financial support • Friends are providing more emotional support than family • Earlier friends advised to reconsider the decision of separation, but later supported • Colleagues are helping to maintain the secret of single women
	Informational support from neighbours for domestic violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Neighbours would enquire about the personal issues in the marital life within couples and have provided useful advice before marital dissolution • Neighbours intervene and call for help or inform police during domestic violence
	Tangible support from Government/NGO and local vendors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Widows/divorced women receive monthly pension • Children are receiving scholarship for their education • Shopkeepers have lent goods and vegetables during pandemic times

Discussion: Following the thematic analysis, four key themes were identified: (i) positive attitude towards singlehood, (ii) secure attachment with children, (iii) adaptive coping strategies, and (iv) social support received by single women. *Positive attitude towards singlehood.* One of the themes that emerged from the analysis is positive attitude toward singlehood, and is comprised of four subthemes, namely, increased positive self-identity, increased autonomy and life satisfaction, positive perception of the present life, and positive aspirations for the future. All the divorced and separated single women in the present study introduced themselves with their single identity status and reported that they were bold and courageous and were 'proud' about their present life. Studies have attributed various reasons behind this positive attitude of single women, particularly to developing an identity (VanLuvem n.d.) and self-acceptance (Cheeseman, 2010; Novita & Siregar, 2019).

Developing a new identity after divorce is quintessential as it describes oneself and makes one unique from others, motivates one to move forward in their lives, reclaiming a more stable and proactive self, and helps the single women achieve their goals (VanLuvem n.d.). Self-acceptance helps the individual to be aware of and acknowledge their personal characteristics and use them for their survival (Helmi, 1998). People with self-acceptance tend to have a positive picture of themselves; are able to tolerate any situation, manage their emotional states, and can have healthy interaction with others (Novita & Siregar, 2019). In a qualitative study by Cheeseman (2010), divorced and separated single women reported self-discovery and started valuing themselves after the divorce, increasing their inner strengths, becoming more tolerant and assertive, becoming stronger, and described the life after the divorce as a whole new beginning. One of the participants introduced herself in a positive way,

"I am a proud single woman. I am very strong and stubborn, optimistic, religious, and blessed with parents who support me in every decision. I am enjoying my life after separation and I love this attitude of mine" (#P2, Stella, 34 years, separated).

Even one of the elderly divorced single women introduced herself positively saying, *"I am from a family of learned people, scientists, and bureaucrats. I got divorced at the age of 50 years... I live by myself alone here, not depending on others" (#P11, Madhavi, 60 years, divorced).*

Most of the divorced and separated single women in the present study reported that they lead a happy and satisfying life and are living independent life after marital dissolution. It is clear from their narrations that they are freed from a toxic marital relationship and can take care of their family and their children independently not depending on or relying on others for their survival. In one study (Novita & Siregar, 2019), a divorced woman with children said that she wants to raise her children to prove to others her capacity, not relying on her ex-husband for fulfilling the needs of their children. Similarly, one of the divorced women in the present study narrated her situation after getting the divorce saying,

"After the divorce, my friends and relatives asked how I will take care of my children who were minors, and advised me to ask for some monthly compensation, atleast for the house that I built for my family. Many, including my relatives were teasing me that I cannot survive, and were expecting that I might seek their support. Instead, I strongly decided not to step into any of their houses or seek their help for anything. I took it as a challenge to raise my children myself, make them graduates in front of those who teased us" (#P12, Srimathi, 48 years, divorced).

Another widowed woman whose relatives were planning to expropriate their properties narrated,

"...after my husband's death, all of our relatives planned to send us out and enjoy the properties. I along with two young daughters came out by ourselves and we started to build from scratch with nothing, worked very hard, did

whatever job I got, not depending on anyone, particularly not our relatives”
(#P1, Gayathri, 41 years, widowed).

Studies have identified that the social support, close relationship with someone, optimism, and resilience help the single women to reformulate their life, help them to pass through difficult times, bring positive hopes towards their future, and develop a positive attitude and acceptance toward self (Cheeseman, 2010; Keating-Lefler & Wilson, 2004; Novita & Siregar, 2019). In the study, a childless divorced woman who had a fear about the environment surrounding her received unexpected support received from others, which in turn developed her confidence and her belief to become a better person and she could solve all the issues in her lives by herself (Novita & Siregar, 2019). Some of the single women from the present study acknowledged that they developed a positive perception of their present life and have positive aspiration for their future after divorce or separation. Optimism after the marital dissolution helps the single women to re-evaluate their potentials, re-align their compatibleness with attaining current set goals, and make changes in the plan for their growth and development (Levinson, 1996). One of the divorced participants explained how she is handling her stressful situations with a smile,

“I always have a smile on my face. Even in most stressful conditions, I do not get stressed or worried about it, because I do not give it a thought, ...I take it easy, try to be positive in my thoughts, I am a jolly type” (#P7, Banu, 37 years, separated).

Marital dissolution provides a chance to single women to explore the world around them. Travelling and exploring more, and meeting new people tend to change perspective, and develop one's attitudes towards themselves and others. One of the elderly and learned divorced women narrated how travelling and exploring had helped her,

“I travel more, explore more. It helps in meeting various people, gets a chance to talk with them, had many life lessons, which helped me while writing my book” (#P11, Madhavi, 60 years, divorced).

Most of the single women repeatedly advised other single women not to lose their self-respect or self-esteem in any situation, not to depend more on anyone particularly relatives, and any males, and also advised them to do any jobs except begging, robbery, and murder to earn money for survival; and become financially independent, which is in line with earlier studies (Cheeseman, 2010; Novita & Siregar, 2019). Moreover, they stressed the importance of being an inspiration and role model for their children. Single women with children in the present study furthermore admitted that they had to do multiple roles to replace the role of a father in the lives of their children, particularly when they want their children to get married. Relatives and some of the family members influence the minds of children and single women emphasising the role of the ex-husband/ father of the children in conducting the marriages of their children.

One of the divorced single women narrated how her relatives were persuading her and her children regarding how the ex-spouse is missing them and stressing about the role of father in the future of the children by saying,

"My relatives did not care about me and my children after the divorce, did not volunteer to help during our toughest times, but now after my children's graduation, and after my children got into some jobs, slowly these relatives re-enter our lives.... they try to brainwash my children, narrating how their father is suffering from his new life there and how he is missing them, asking them to talk with him, and also stressing the role of a father in conducting important events in life like marriages of my children" (#P12, Srimathi, 48 years, divorced).

Every single women in the present study expressed that they were happy and content when others are praising them for their achievements, and when others feel jealous about the lives of single women.

Secure attachment with children. One of the themes that emerged from the analysis is secure bonding with children, and is comprised of two subthemes, namely, cohesive and positive relationships with children and teaching children about values. Most of the single women admitted that they are living a peaceful life, having a cohesive and positive relationship with children. In fact, in a study (Novita & Siregar, 2019), the divorced women with children said that she wants to bounce back from the stressful post-divorce life to raise their children and she strongly believed in her that she can also get them into reputed colleges and help them establish themselves well in their lives. Studies show that single women in addition to working and devising strategies and plans to achieve their goals, devote more time, effort, money, and high values to spending and caring for their children and families, and meeting their needs (Hodgson et al., 2001; Novita & Siregar, 2019). Most of the single women in the present study reported that they are friendly with their children and would like to share all their problems only with their children and even there exists a mutual and empathetic understanding the situations by mother and children. One of the separated single women praised her son who intervene in the fight and help both of his parents by saying,

"I will not share my personal problems with anyone, particularly with my colleagues as I have witnessed much harassment to fellow widowed or single women employees. I would share everything only with my son. Sometimes he will be the mediator intervening in between the fights and talk to both me and his father and finds solutions for the issue. He understands my situation so well and acts accordingly" (#P4, Pallavi, 34 years, separated).

Single women were happy and satisfied with their 'single' status because they had raised their children well. They are proud of raising children with good education and character. In the lives of single mothers, the role of a being a parent is said to be very significant, providing positive experiences with increased satisfaction to the single women than that of stress (Brodsky, 1999). Also, parenthood had provided intrinsic satisfaction and immunity from many negative influences in the lives of single women (Rudowicz, 2001). It is not unusual that most of the single mothers worldwide acknowledge and attribute their children to be a reason for their survival, which adds meaning to their life. Even in the present study,

one single woman described her relationship with her children and highlighted how she is being treated by her children,

"I am alive only for the sake of my children. Without them, my life is meaningless. I have raised them so well to be a better human beings and they also motivate me in difficult times and treat me like their queen and sometimes, they take care of me as if I am their baby" (#P12, Srimathi, 48 years, divorced).

Parenting enables single women to be motivated not just by meeting the basic requirements of their families and children, but also by instilling single women's values in their children and teaching them the difference between needs and wants (Brodsky, 1999). Most of the single women with children highlighted the importance of teaching children about values. Every single woman in the present study admitted that she had taught her sons the importance of women and how to treat girls and women, and also advised them not to play with/ spoil another girl's life in the future. One of the separated single women who had a son described how she had a conversation with her son regarding how girls should be treated,

"As my son was raised by his father, I didn't have a chance to have a conversation with him for years. Now he is living with me. Though he is not attached to me, sometimes he understands my situation and acts accordingly. Once I spoke to him about how to handle a girl and how that girl must be treated. I also requested him not to spoil another girl's life in future like how his father ruined my life" (#P7, Banu, 37 years, separated).

Use of adaptive coping strategies. One of the themes that emerged from the analysis is adaptive coping strategies and is comprised of six subthemes, namely, use of religious and spiritual coping, using relaxation techniques, identifying inner strengths, using diversion to deal with stress, increased assertiveness, and forgiveness. Studies have identified the significance of various coping strategies (task-focused and/ or emotion-focused) in having perceived control over the situations, dealing with the problems of daily lives of single women, and developing resilience (Campbell-Sills et al., 2006; Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004; Lindblad-Goldberg et al., 1988). Brodsky (1999) has identified spirituality as one of the protective factors along with personal characteristics and activities for single women. Religious and spiritual-based coping strategies are the most frequently used strategies as reported by many divorced, separated, and widowed single woman of all ages. The religious practices help to accept their traumatic past and how they survived it, providing a broader sense of meaning, converting their negative thoughts and emotions into positive, and increasing their coping skills during difficult times (Betancourt & Khan, 2008; Brodsky, 1999; Fernando, 2007; Shoshani & Slone, 2016). Studies on elderly widows reported that visiting temples, doing poojas and rituals, engaging in religious coping practices and daily spiritual experiences are associated with positive affect and increased life satisfaction (Van Dyke et al., 2009). Every single woman in the present study acknowledged that focusing on the spiritual areas of development gives them peace and helps them to get over extreme emotions. Furthermore, every single woman in the present study accepted that spirituality

helped them to focus more on themselves, accept the uncertainties of life and even the problems created by others to them, find the meaning/ purpose in life, and move on with their life. One of the separated single women described how spirituality has helped her,

"I believe only that God is reliable, trustworthy and not humans, surrendering to him helps me in spiritual upliftment, providing inner peace"
(#P5, Eshwari, 39 years, separated).

Many single women felt grateful and thanked God for putting an end to their toxic marital life, for the life-changing moments, and achievements, for the peaceful life, and for providing them an opportunity to grow.

Crying is one of the most crucial strategies, reported by the majority of the single women in the present study. Many single women has acknowledged that all their suppressed and deep emotions are expressed either in terms of anger outbursts or through tears. After crying, the burdens in their hearts get reduced and they felt relaxed. Though many of the single women in the present study accepted that they prefer to cry, one of the divorced women participants explained how crying is helping her,

"Crying is one of the easiest ways of handling my stress and emotions. The more I suppress my emotion; I am more prone to have migraines. So I cry a lot, ventilating all my emotions through tears and feel relaxed afterwards"
(#P9, Neelofer, 33 years, divorced).

Not every single woman who participated in the present study had revealed their single status; some of them hide their singlehood status from others, particularly with their co-workers to avoid issues in the workplace. Even when they go out with colleagues and friends after their working hours, they avoid talking about their personal problems or personal life. Rather, when a stressful situation pops up, single women in the present study said that they would go somewhere in solitude and think over the issue because solitude provides peace and relaxation. Some of the single women said that they go to temples/churches; engage in rituals and worship for relaxation. One of the single women stated that they deal directly with circumstances and difficulties, try to find solutions to the problems and feel relaxed after solving them effectively. One of the separated women narrated how she would relax herself,

"...when I get stressed out, I will go to my room, lock myself up, read Bible or cry and sleep. But I mostly turn my focus on maintaining my physical fitness through yoga and meditation for relaxation"(#P2, Stella, 34 years, separated).

Single women in the present study have acknowledged that they have started identifying their inner strengths after spending more time ruminating over the past stressful life. As discussed before, identifying their inner strengths helps in developing a new identity and enhances self-acceptance among single women. Single women, who had started accepting their problems, try to handle those problems by themselves without seeking help from others. As discussed before, single women who had accepted their present life had developed the courage and confidence to face anything and to prove their potential to others (Cheeseman, 2010; Novita & Siregar, 2019). The response to the problem situations differs

from one single woman to another. A few single women in the present study said that they stop talking to prevent further arguments and leave the place that creates discomfort and asks for justice later. Most of the single women acknowledged that they don't care for criticisms, gossip or ridicules, but when there is a need, they stand, speak, to fight against the injustice caused by others.

Another important coping strategy used by the majority of the single women in the present study is using diversion to deal with their stress. Most of the single women admitted that they used to divert the topic when there is an argument. Some working women said that they are going for a job as it helps to divert themselves from family issues and make them busy with working to avoid unnecessary thoughts and situations. Very few single women who got divorced or separated in their late 20s and early 30s said that they divert their focus towards education, job, improving health, gardening, artwork, and cooking which helps them to overcome the past stressful life and find meaning with their lives. Every single woman who took part in this study expressed a sense of pride in her because she had managed to survive despite all of the issues and struggles she had faced in her everyday life.

Every divorced or separated and widowed single woman has gone through a phase of denial, where they blame themselves and restrict themselves. Most of the single women have acknowledged that they have been through such a phase and later had developed assertiveness in their lives. Nearly half of the single women in the present study said that they do not lament over their past events, focus only on the present and future, and the remaining single women said that they would sometimes recall those life events, contemplate, cry and let the thoughts go. Despite, facing problems with the male colleagues and supervisors in the workplace, most of the working single women in the present study acknowledged that they have developed assertiveness, and started to face and react boldly to those who raise unwanted questions. Also, they admitted that they do not feel bad about their present condition; they did not take any wrong decision, and even have no guilt/ shame about their decision of divorce/ separation, but see it with pride. One of the divorced middle-aged single women who was worrying and protecting her ex-husband by hiding her single status to everyone earlier said that,

"Initially after divorce, I tell others that my ex-husband is abroad, thinking about what society would say. Later I felt it was not my fault to get divorced, when he got happily re-married without any guilt, why should I protect him, creating a good image about him with others. So I started to say openly that I am divorced and I must say we are so happy and at peace when someone sympathizes with us ..." (#P12, Srimathi, 48 years, divorced).

One of the coping strategies that not many single women are ready for is forgiveness. Half of the single women in the present study, particularly those who were divorced or got separated said that they are not ready to forgive or forget what had happened to them, but they did not want to care or think about those who hurt them. One of the divorced single women who was not ready to forgive and forget what had happened in her marital life said that,

"I am not ready to forgive or forget whatever happened to me. According to me, he (my ex-husband) is like a corpse. Attacking a corpse makes no use. I and my children do not care about him... for us he is like a third person, someone's husband, why should we care about him?" (#P12, Srimathi, 48 years, divorced).

Social support received. One of the themes that emerged from the analysis is social support received, and is comprised of five subthemes, namely, social support from parents, emotional and instrumental support from children, social networking support and emotional support from friends and colleagues, informational support from neighbors for domestic violence, and tangible support from government/ NGO and local vendors. Studies for decades have focused more on the types of support and sources of support received by single women. Several studies have identified and highlighted that the support received from the family like receiving food, shelter, and taking care of the children of single women, receiving financial assistance, and sharing a close relationship among the family members contribute to the well-being and positive adaptation in the lives of single women (de Vries et al., 2014; Cobo-Rendon et al., 2020; Keykhosravi-Beygzadeh et al., 2015; Ramalho et al., 2016; Sarriera et al., 2015). The majority of the single women in the present study acknowledged that after their divorce or separation, their parents took care of them and their children fulfilling their basic needs like taking care of food, shelter, and dress, providing education to their children, and providing financial support. Single women admitted that their parents provided every kind of support like psychological, emotional, and financial. Some single women who had lost their job due to the pandemic said that during the COVID-19 pandemic, it was their parents who completely supported them financially because of which they could handle their expenses. One of the single women in the present study who was constantly supported by her parents said that,

"... we hesitate to ask for help, but my parents understand that I am hesitating to ask for help and they volunteer to help. Sometimes I feel like I am a burden to them, asking for help every time, but they treat me just as their sweet daughter" (#P9, Neelofer, 33 years, divorced).

Some single women who got divorced at early age said that their parents did not force them to re-marry, and gave them enough freedom to live as single women. One of the divorced single women who was grateful to her parents for not forcing her to re-marry explained the problems associated with re-marriage in her community,

"In Muslim families, men could easily dissolve a marriage and enter into a new life, whereas women cannot. We cannot expect the new person to accept our past or accept my son from previous marriage. It ultimately affects my son too. Even my parent does not force me into re-marriage as they were so aware of the problems in re-marriages" (#P9, Neelofer, 33 years, divorced).

Another separated single woman who does not want to re-marry and was supported by her parents despite the pressure from the society said that,

"... my parents had never forced me into re-marriage. Though my mother is sad enough seeing all my cousins living with their families, who sometimes

persuade her to talk to me about re-marriage, she has never for once talked with me about re-marriage. My father was so positive and he helped my mother by explaining my situation and how to ignore criticisms and gossips from relatives and how to handle them. Both of them gave me full freedom to do whatever I wanted to in my life” (#P2, Stella, 34 years, separated).

Many single women from the present study attribute their decision to end their toxic marital relationship only because of the motivation and support provided by their parents. They said that their parents supported them completely in the divorce process and it was their fathers who were strong and supportive to the decision of single women. They added that the mothers of single women initially had fear of society and were overly concerned about how others would react and what they might say for the divorce, but later they too supported the decision of the single women to divorce.

A separated single woman said how she was supported by her father to take important decision of getting separated,

“I didn’t bring up the idea of divorce... it was my dad. I had a fear about what society would say, what my cousins would think, and even my mother had the same fear. My father was also sad, but he wanted me to be happy. He was very supportive and only when he asked if I would be able to continue living there (with my ex-husband), I boldly said I didn’t like to be there with him” (#P2, Stella, 34 years, separated).

Parents of single women play a prominent role in rearing children of single women. They take care of the household chores and the needs of children whenever single women fell sick. They take care of the children of single women, and helped with their homework, which reduced the burden of the single women, and left them with spare time to search for a job or to find some source of income (Sweet, 1972). One of the single women with a daughter from the present study was so grateful to her mother who have helped in raising her daughter,

“My mother is my role model; she raised all her daughters by herself after the death of my father. Now, she is helping me by raising my children, especially my daughter with a focus on her safety and protection” (#P7, Banu, 37 years, separated).

As discussed before, children also play a prominent role in the lives of single women, but not many studies are available to explain the support these women receive from their children. Many single women in the present study admitted that their children were the only reason for them to survive despite facing stressful situations. Single women have acknowledged the role and the support that their children provide them in dealing with their daily life problems. Children of single women provided emotional and instrumental support, where they help their family by sharing the family responsibilities. They also help the single women in their business to get extra pay/ profit, thereby reducing the burden on their mothers. Single women in the present study said that their children have also helped them in making important decisions. Children sometimes console their mothers during stressful

situations and act accordingly. One of the divorced middle-aged single women stated how her children had helped her in every difficult situations,

“... without my children’s support and help, I would be rotting in hell (marital life), they supported to my decision of divorce... my children are like pillars giving me strength, helping me psychologically and emotionally in every difficult situation. Without them, I would have passed away long back...” (#P12, Srimathi, 48 years, divorced).

Single women with daughters said that their daughters would help with the household chores whenever they fell sick, and looked after their health. Every single woman in the present study expressed their gratitude to their children, for understanding their situation, accepting their family without father, reducing their burden, and acting wisely. Though many of the single women described their children as empathetic and helping, one of the single mothers explained how empathetic and understanding her daughter is by saying,

“My son was living with his father for years and only my daughter lives with me... at times she may want to tell or ask for something, but seeing my facial expressions she will understand my situation and leave the place without asking anything. I am so blessed to have such an understanding daughter, she is my second mother” (#P7, Banu, 37 years, separated).

Studies have widely focused on the friends’ support available to single women (de Vries et al., 2014; Lerman-Ginzburg et al., 2021; Manzi et al., 2006; Miller et al., 2004; Ozbay et al., 2007; Scott et al., 2007; Trivedi et al., 2009; Yarinassab & Shams, 2021). Friends play a more significant role in emotional coping than family members, which is evident from early studies on widowed and divorced women. Friends help the single women to cope with the stressful events (de Vries et al., 2014; Dimond et al., 1987), cope with the loss of spouse, and provide emotional support during their mourning period (Bankoff, 1983; Lopata, 1996; Pinquart & Sörensen, 2000; Utz et al., 2002). Friendships are important for associating and engaging in pleasure activities, expanding supporting networks, accompanying them on outings, assisting with quality interactions, and assisting with life transitions (Bankoff, 1983; Felton & Berry, 1992; Wortman & Lehman, 1985). In the present study, all the participants have acknowledged the role of friends in improving their lives. One of the divorced single women emotionally explained how one of her friends have helped her,

“During my tough times, I was pushed to extreme conditions where I didn’t get even one meal per day. At that time, when all of my family, friends, and relatives left me, one of my friends, who is like a sister to me, also a divorcee, showed extra care and concern, provided me shelter in her house, and provided food for many days. I am so grateful to her till date” (#P8, Sakthi, 45 years, divorced).

Another divorced single women, who got benefitted by her friends after the divorce said,

“I came out of my house having trust in God alone. I did not ask for help from my parents or siblings. But many of my friends came forward to help.

They helped me in every difficult situation, and I am grateful to them for that timely help. They are more important to me than my mother and my siblings” (#P12, Srimathi, 48 years, divorced).

It was clear from previous studies, friends have provided social networking support and emotional support, financial support, and also helped single women take important life decisions. Though some single women hesitate to reveal their singlehood status to their work colleagues, there are some friends and colleagues who knew about the personal life of single women and help them to maintain their secret too.

Neighbors play a less prominent role in the lives of single women. Single women who were divorced and separated have acknowledged that though they would not prefer to discuss the problems with others, some neighbors show extra care and concern towards the single women, and so when emergency situations come up, they provide useful advice to both the ex-husband and single women. When they witness domestic violence, they immediately intervene and call for help from others, inform police and seek legal protection to the single women. One of the single women recalled an incident how neighbours have rescued the single women during a domestic violence incident,

“One morning, my ex-husband along with his brother, sisters and his new wedded wife came to my house. They damaged all the things in the house and started to attack me. Seeing their violent behaviour, our neighbors gathered there and some of them informed the police and saved us” (#P12, Srimathi, 48 years, divorced).

The role of Government/ NGOs and other agencies are less explored in early studies. In India, many schemes and benefits are provided by the Government concerning employment (NREGA), pension (IGNWPS), temporary shelter (STEP) that satisfies the needs of single women belonging to Below Poverty Line (BPL). However, many do not even have access to such schemes (Singh, 2013). Few single women in the present study had received the concessions and benefits available in the Government for widows and divorced women. Some single women admitted that the educational institutions after knowing that they were single parent provided their children fee concessions, scholarships, and extra time to pay the fees. One of the divorced single women narrated how the education institution helped her son by saying,

“My elder son did his graduation programme in one of the esteemed colleges in the city. Though his semester and exam fee was very less, I could not pay them. Some of his teachers helped at that time by paying all the fees. Without them his education would have been incomplete” (#P12, Srimathi, 48 years, divorced).

Also, the single women were grateful to the local vendors who helped by lending groceries and vegetables during the pandemic period and pay back later. One of the separated single women with young children gratefully recalled how the local shopkeepers and street vendors have helped her during pandemic,

“I closed my tailoring institute due to lockdown during COVID 19 pandemic, even the garment companies stopped giving us jobs that we usually and

regularly get. I was in a desperate situation and did not know where to go and who to ask for help. All my three kids were at home, I could not handle the expenses by myself alone. At that time, the local vendor lent us goods for many months, sometimes they even gave it for free”(#P5, Eshwari, 39 years, separated).

Conclusion: The purpose of the present study was to identify the protective factors in the lives of single women. As found in the present study, having a positive attitude towards singlehood, secure bonding with children, adaptive coping strategies, and social support received by single women were identified as protective factors in the lives of single women. Single women claimed that their ‘single’ identity makes them feel proud and happy, helps them to stay optimistic, and gives them hope for their future. They report that the marital dissolution has paved the way to a peaceful life and enabled them to have more intimate bonding with their children. Among the coping strategies, most of the single women stated that using religious and spirituality-based practices has helped them regain hope in their life. Relaxation techniques, identifying their inner strengths, being assertive and forgiving themselves and others have also helped them to deal with their stressful life situations. Single women have received social support from various sources that have supported them by helping them meet their basic needs, assisting them in making decisions, helping them cope with stressful situations, and also helping them financially. These protective factors might contribute to the positive adaptation of single women by strengthening them and helping them overcome challenging situations and flourish in their lives.

Limitations: The present study was restricted to examining the protective factors in the lives of single women as a whole. No comparison was made between different types of single women, viz., widows, divorced and separated single women with regard to the protective factors, which may contribute to resilience among each of the single women categories. Also, no comparison was made between single women and other cohorts like single men or unmarried single women, who may help in comparing their lives and problems faced by them and also help in identifying the most influential protective factors of single men or unmarried single women and how they contribute to resilience. The voices of children of single women, their family, friends, colleagues, and neighbors were not included in the present study, which would have contributed to a better understanding of how the single women would have dealt with challenges they confront within their day-to-day life and how they flourished. The challenges and risk factors of single women were not explored in this present study. The comparison of risk and protective factors could provide a different viewpoint on single women.

Implications: Carrying out quantitative and/or mixed methods in future research may provide an empirical evidence for the qualitative findings obtained here and also provides a holistic understanding of how each of the protective factors contributes to the resilience among single women. The present study highlighted how having a positive attitude towards their singlehood might help the single women to have hope in their lives and have aspirations for the future. But not all the single women have a positive attitude towards their

singlehood due to the severe discrimination in the society and challenges in their daily lives. So, single women can be provided psychological support like counseling, training, psycho-education/ intervention focusing on coping strategies, and other management skills that contribute to positive adaptation among single women. The present study also highlighted the types of social support received from various sources like family, friends, children, colleagues, neighbors, Government, and NGOs. Many schemes and benefits concerning pension (IGNWPS), employment (NREGA), and temporary shelter (STEP) are made available only to single women belonging to the Below Poverty Line (BPL), and single women belonging to other socioeconomic classes in the country do not have access to such schemes. This could be changed by bringing awareness to single women about various schemes available in their locality and also awareness about the lives of single women are to be made to the general public, Government, and NGOs which might help in reducing the stigma against single women and also helps in bringing various opportunities to single women.

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