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SINGLISM IN THE WORKPLACE: EXPERIENCES AND RESPONSES OF SINGLE PROFESSIONALS IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

In the Malaysian society, singlehood is becoming more evident with the increasing rates of delayed marriage and non-marriage. As marriage is considered a complete transition to adulthood, single people are often perceived as inferior and subjected to singlism, including in workplaces. This study explores single professional men's and women's experiences of workplace singlism and the ways they respond. Using qualitative in-depth interviews with 15 men and 15 women, recruited through purposive sampling, this study examines how these single professionals experience workplace expectations and treatment linked to their single status. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Findings indicate that both men and women are disadvantaged by workplace policies, particularly in relation to medical insurance coverage, working hours and leave applications. They are often assumed to be available and therefore given more workloads. The analysis also reveals gendered nuances, with women more frequently receiving negative remarks about their single status and men more likely to be perceived as immature and overlooked for promotions. In response to negative interactions, single women tend to respond with mild resistance. In terms of organisational policies, both men and women feel they have limited power to challenge or change these practices.

Keywords: Singlehood, Single Professionals, Workplace Singlism, Organisational Policies, Gender.

INTRODUCTION

Singlehood has become an increasingly visible global phenomenon as the number of single people continues to increase and the rate of new marriages declines. Singlehood has been traditionally viewed as a temporary transitional state before marriage, hence remaining single beyond the socially accepted age to marry is often regarded as unusual or problematic (Song, 2010). Singlehood is generally considered common in many Western societies (Apostolou et al., 2019) but the opposite applies to Asian societies where marriage remains strongly expected, particularly for single women (Azmawati et al., 2015). Even so, singlehood has become more prominent in many East Asian societies, with the age of first marriage rising steadily over the past 40 years (Jones & Yeung, 2014). Malaysia reflects these broader trends, with delayed marriage and non-marriage contributing to a growing number of single adults in the population (Jones & Tey, 2021).

At the same time, marriage continues to be seen as an important marker of adulthood and success. Married people are often perceived as happier, more mature and more responsible than those who are single (DePaulo & Morris, 2005). Completing certain milestones in life such as education, employment, home-leaving, marriage and parenthood is often equated to a

complete and successful transition to adulthood, usually in their early adulthood (Furstenberg, 2010). Within this framework, people who have not married by a certain age are stigmatised as they are seen as failing to achieve an important life goal (Gui, 2020). These norms shape not only how single people are perceived in social and familial contexts but also how they are viewed and treated in professional settings.

Singlism refers to the discrimination, prejudice and negative stereotyping towards single people (DePaulo & Morris, 2005). Simply defined, workplace singlism generally refers to the negative and discriminatory practices targeted at single people that are translated into organisational practices, expectations and everyday interactions at work. Single employees are seen as more readily available to take on extra tasks or work longer hours (Paynter, 2020). At the same time, married employees, especially those with children, are given more consideration and flexibility at work (Landgraf, 2021). In Malaysia, marriage remains a strong social expectation and this norm may shape workplace attitudes and practices. This study draws on the experiences of single professional men and women in Malaysia, who represent a group whose workplace experiences remain largely invisible in existing research despite their growing numbers. However, little is known about how single professionals experience or understand workplace singlism.

Within this context, existing research on singlehood reveals several important gaps that this study seeks to address. Most studies have focused primarily on single women, including in Malaysia (Azmawati et al., 2015), which leaves single men's experiences largely unexplored (Timonen & Doyle, 2014). Consequently, there is very little systematic comparison of how single men and women experience singlehood and singlism (Himawan et al., 2018), including in relation to work. Singlism is also often treated as a monolithic issue, even though it manifests in multiple domains, including the workplace environment (DePaulo, 2011). In Malaysia, workplace singlism remains particularly underexplored, despite indications that single people do encounter stigma and unequal treatment at work. This study argues that workplace singlism in Malaysia is not merely a reflection of individual bias. Rather, it is embedded in broader normative expectations around marriage and adulthood that systematically disadvantage single professionals, with gendered dimensions that differ between single men and women. In doing so, this study moves beyond documenting experiences of singlism towards examining how single professional navigate workplace norms tied to marriage and family life in a collectivist societal context. This study therefore aims to explore how single professionals experience and respond to workplace singlism in Malaysia. This study is guided by the research question: *How do single professional men and women in Malaysia experience and respond to workplace singlism within a marriage-normative organisational context?*

LITERATURE REVIEW

Trends of Singlehood and Non-marriage

Singlehood is well-documented as a growing global phenomenon, particularly in Western societies (Apostolou et al., 2019) and in East Asian countries such as China, South Korea, Taiwan and Japan (Esteve et al., 2020). The landscape of marriage and family formation in Malaysia has shifted considerably over recent decades. Post-industrialisation and rapid urbanisation have fundamentally altered the conditions under which Malaysians form families (Jones & Tey, 2021). The number of registered marriages has been declining with more Malaysians opting to stay single (Jones & Tey, 2021). Similarly, Lai (2021) also found that non-marriage among Malaysians aged 25 to 64 had almost doubled between 1982 and 2018, rising from 13.3% to 25.7% for men and from 8.2% to 16.4% for women. Non-marriage refers

to the condition of remaining unmarried (Li & Huang, 2023). The increasing trend of singlehood and non-marriage is particularly pronounced among highly educated people, suggesting that rising educational attainment is a contributing factor (Lai, 2021). The expansion of tertiary education, particularly among women, has created a generation of highly educated professionals whose life trajectories no longer conform to traditional marriage timelines (Abdullah et al., 2021).

These broader trends in singlehood and non-marriage are closely intertwined with gender. Improved access to higher education has led to better employment opportunities for women, resulting in reduced economic incentives to marry (Abdullah, et al., 2021). Financial independence also diminishes the need to rely on marriage as a mean of social security (Kalmijn, 2013). Additionally, highly educated women who are financially independent are more likely to reject traditional gender roles that position marriage as a socially expected life milestone (Sandström & Karlsson, 2019). While rising educational attainment is widely cited as a driver of singlehood (Lai, 2021), it remains debatable whether this reflects a genuine rejection of marriage or a pragmatic response to shifting economic conditions. Nonetheless, the rise in singlehood is not confined to women alone. Single men represent a growing segment of the Malaysian population (Ismail, 2022) though their experiences remain comparatively understudied in existing literature (Timonen & Doyle, 2014). These shifting patterns of marriage and singlehood in Malaysia must also be understood within the broader context of contemporary Asian societies, where rapid modernisation and changing gender expectations have collectively reshaped the meaning and timing of marriage (Jones & Yeung, 2014).

The Core of Singlism

Singlism is deeply embedded in everyday life and is also evident at the institutional level, including politics, religion, workplace and media (DePaulo, 2011). Singlism, an ideological framework developed by DePaulo and Morris (2005), is defined as the discrimination, prejudice and negative stereotyping targeted at single people. Unlike other more widely recognised forms of discrimination, this issue remains underexplored partly because it is seen as causing no physical harm and is therefore treated as "unproblematic and acceptable" (Morris, et al., 2008, p. 189). Paynter (2020) also noted singlism as a "non-violent, softer form of bigotry" (p. 226).

The ideology of singlism persists as it is rarely challenged (DePaulo, 2018). This is because society glorifies the idea of marriage, positioning marriage as the pinnacle of life achievement and the foundation of an ideal social status (Strong et al., 2011). Marriage also signifies a complete transition to adulthood, which Esara (2012) considers "a coveted social status which typically offer greater privileges" (p. 212). A central debate in singlism scholarship concerns the assumed inferiority of single people's well-being. Married people are often perceived to be better and happier than single people (Hsu & Barrett, 2020) but Moore and Radtke (2015) have called this "a dubious claim" (p. 305) as this inherently positions single people as lower-status. This is because well-being outcomes depend on the quality of the marriage rather than marital status per se, suggesting that marriage-happiness link is far less straightforward than popular discourse assumes. Marriage can indeed influence a person's well-being, but only a good marriage fosters positive outcomes whereas a bad marriage often leads to worse outcomes (DePaulo & Morris, 2005; Wadsworth, 2016; Nelson-Coffey, 2018).

In a marriage-normative society, traditional values and gender inequality have led single people, particularly women, to be more intensely marginalised (Bokek-Cohen, 2016). Single women, who have passed the ideal age for marriage, are considered culturally disrespectful and are seen as having a negative impact on their parents (Abeyasekera, 2017).

As marriage is considered the primary function of procreation, being married and having children are regarded as acts of filial piety that children must fulfil for their parents (Gui, 2020). While being less scrutinised, remaining single is also considered a disrespected status for men in society (Li et al., 2010).

An important tension within contemporary scholarship concerns whether the rise of singlehood represents a passive departure from marriage norms or an active participation in reshaping them. On one hand, highly educated single professionals may internalise marriage normativity and experience their singlehood as a deviation from expected life trajectories (Gui, 2020). On the other hand, financial independence and professional achievement among single individuals may gradually challenge the assumption that adulthood and social status are defined through marriage (Sandström & Karlsson, 2019). This tension between norm navigation and norm reshaping is particularly relevant in the Malaysian context, where modernisation and traditionalism coexist within professional spaces.

Workplace Singlism

Workplace singlism generally refers to discrimination, prejudice and negative stereotyping targeted at single people that are translated into organisational practices, expectations and everyday interactions at work. While singlism and marriage pressure have been examined at social and familial contexts, similar dynamics in the workplace suggest that single employees also encounter comparable expectations within professional settings (Rakesh, 2019). The perception of single employees as "having more flexibility, ability to contribute, and potentially fewer distractions from work or career responsibilities" (Paynter, 2020, p. 230) can result in more discrimination and subsequently more workload for single employees.

Workplace singlism manifests through organisational policies that implicitly privilege married employees. Access to more family-friendly initiatives such as childcare benefits, flexible work arrangements and work-family culture are often linked to marital status rather than employees' needs (Landgraf, 2021). Family-friendly workplace policies that are designed to support married employees can inadvertently disadvantage single employees as they are not entitled to these benefits based on marital status (Chen, 2020). In such contexts, single employees may contribute more to organisational goals yet receive fewer benefits, signalling that their lives outside work are less important (Paynter, 2020).

At the interpersonal level, workplace singlism often takes the form of assumptions about single employees' availability and flexibility. Because of this, single employees are often expected to work longer hours, perform short notice duties or cover for their married co-workers (Paynter, 2020). These expectations undermine single employees' work-life balance, rendering their time outside work more expendable (Culpepper et al., 2020). Akanji et al. (2020) called this "misconceived notions about singles' time" (p. 63). While single employees may be free from childcare responsibilities, many still provide care for their elderly parents or relatives (Casper et al., 2015). Additionally, single people are reportedly actively socialising to enrich their personal lives (Kim & Kim, 2017). However, negative perceptions towards single people, particularly female employees, have resulted in them being excluded from workplace gatherings and interactions (Song, 2010; Reilly et al., 2018).

Another dimension of workplace singlism concerns the perceptions of commitment and professional worth of single employees. In cultures where marriage is strongly associated with adulthood and responsibility, married employees with family responsibilities are perceived as more mature and serious (Akanji et al., 2020). Consequently, single employees are perceived as immature and "less worthy" (DePaulo, 2018. p.266), regardless of their actual performance. Married employees are also more likely to receive job promotions and higher salaries as

compared to their single co-workers (Denson & Szelényi, 2020), which is particularly evident among male employees (Casper et al., 2015). These negative perceptions and promotion decisions based on marital status may result in single employees feeling marginalised and undervalued in their workplace (Akanji et al., 2020).

A notable gap in workplace singlism scholarship is its tendency to position single employees primarily as recipients of discrimination. While studies document disadvantages in organisational policies (Chen, 2020) and interpersonal interactions (Paynter, 2020), less attention has been given to how single employees respond to or navigate these experiences within professional settings. The present study therefore seeks to address this gap by examining not only how single professionals experience workplace singlism but also how they respond to it as constrained agents within a marriage-normative organisational context.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on two theoretical perspectives, which are Risman's Gender Structure Theory and Swann and Bosson's Identity Negotiation Theory, to examine how single professional men and women in Malaysia experience and respond to workplace singlism. These frameworks were selected because they operate at complementary levels of analysis. Gender Structure Theory addresses the structural and interactional conditions that produce singlism while Identity Negotiation Theory addresses how individuals negotiate and navigate those conditions. Together, they allow for an examination of workplace singlism as both a structurally embedded phenomenon and a lived, negotiated experience.

Risman's (2004) Gender Structure Theory conceptualises gender as a social structure that operates at multiple levels simultaneously, including the individual level, the interactional level and the macro level. At the individual level, gender shapes the formation of selves and identities through repeated reinforcement of socially accepted gendered behaviours since birth (Risman & Davis, 2013). At the interactional level, individuals continuously adapt to fit into socially accepted roles based on their everyday encounters and expectations (Lorber, 2010). At the macro level, individuals continue to be segregated into organisationally accepted roles that are shaped by legislation and formal organisational regulations (Risman, 2018). In this study, workplace singlism operates at two levels, which are institutionally through policies and practices that favour married employees, and interactionally through assumptions and comments about single employees' availability, commitment and maturity. Crucially, this framework also helps to contextualise how marriage norms acquire institutional legitimacy within Malaysia's broader cultural and organisational landscape, where marital status and gender operate as intersecting rather than independent axes of inequality.

Swann and Bosson's (2008) Identity Negotiation Theory emphasises that individuals are motivated to maintain a coherent and valued sense of self in social interactions. When negative perceptions from others threaten that self-view, people are more likely to negotiate those perceptions through correcting, defending or reframing aspects of their identity (Swann, 1987). Applied to this study, this framework helps to explain the contrast between participants' responses to workplace singlism in terms of their interactions with co-workers and organisational policies. While participants would actively negotiate negative comments from co-workers, their responses towards discriminatory organisational policies were far more constrained, often characterised by acceptance. Importantly, Identity Negotiation Theory allows for an understanding of agency as constrained rather than absolute, recognising that single professionals may simultaneously resist certain expressions of singlism while accommodating others, depending on the professional and social context.

These two perspectives offer a multi-level analytical framework that is well-suited to the research question guiding this study. Gender structure theory highlights how workplace singlism is embedded in the macro and interactional levels of Malaysia's marriage-normative professional environment. Identity Negotiation Theory shows how single professionals manage their identities in response to workplace singlism, not as passive recipients of disadvantage, but as agents whose choices are shaped and constrained by the structural context in which they operate.

Existing scholarship on singlehood and singlism has largely focused on Western contexts (Apostolou et al., 2019). In Malaysia, singlehood and singlism have been extensively discussed in newspapers and magazines yet they are relatively underexamined in academic research (Azmawati et al., 2015). The literature has also predominantly focused on single women, with limited evidence addressing men's experiences and potential gender differences in this area (Himawan et al., 2018). Moreover, although studies related to work-family policies sometimes mention single people or advocate for single-friendly workplace policies (Casper et al., 2007), they generally do not theorise workplace singlism as a distinct phenomenon. These gaps point to the need for a study that explores how single professional men and women in Malaysia experience workplace singlism at both institutional and interpersonal levels, and how they respond to these experiences within their workplace environments.

Beyond the absence of Malaysian research, existing studies have largely treated workplace singlism as a static experience of disadvantage, without sufficiently accounting for the dynamic ways in which single professionals navigate, resist or accommodate these conditions. This study therefore addresses not only a geographical gap but also a theoretical one, by examining singlism as a site of constrained agency within a non-Western, marriage-normative professional context.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted with 30 single professionals, 15 males and 15 females, aged between 30 and 39 to explore their experiences and responses to workplace singlism. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were chosen because they allow participants to share detailed personal experiences through guided but flexible conversations (Roulston & Halpin, 2022). Participants were recruited using purposive sampling to ensure only those who met the study criteria were included.

To be eligible, participants had to be legally unmarried, childless, aged between 30 and 39, hold at least a bachelor's degree, hold a professional position, and reside in an urban area in Selangor, Malaysia. As part of a reflexive approach, the researcher acknowledged her shared background with participants in terms of age, educational level and nationality which helped to establish rapport and trust, and positioned her as an insider (Chammas, 2020). As an insider researcher, the research was mindful of the potential influence of this positionality on both data collection and interpretation, including the risk that participants' familiarity with the researcher may have shaped what they chose to disclose. To manage this, the researcher maintained a reflexive stance throughout the research process by seeking clarification from participants to ensure that participants' accounts were represented as accurately as possible. Pre-existing relationships, where the participants and researcher were known to each other beforehand, also contributed to a more relaxed and open communication. However, the researcher remained conscious that such familiarity could also introduce bias, particularly in terms of participants providing socially desirable responses. This was managed by assuring participants that their responses would be kept strictly confidential and would not affect their personal relationship with the researcher. All participants were Malaysians from a range of ethnic backgrounds as

the analysis centred on their shared national context and professional background rather than on ethnic distinctions. A number of participants were in romantic relationships but reported no intention to marry.

Interviews were conducted primarily in English with some code-switching into Bahasa Malaysia or Chinese where participants felt more comfortable. This conversational approach fostered openness and allowed participants to speak more freely about their experiences (Byrne, 2018). Each interview, lasting approximately 30 to 40 minutes, was audio-recorded with participants' permission and later transcribed by hand. Prior to participation, all participants received information about the study and provided informed consent, including consent to audio-record the interviews. Participants were also informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without consequences. All data were stored securely and were accessible only to the researcher to ensure confidentiality. This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the University of Malaya Research Ethics Committee (UMREC). The collected data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis, which includes the following steps: familiarisation with the data, developing initial codes, generating, reviewing and refining themes and producing a written account of the analysis. This method offers a flexible yet systematic framework for working with qualitative data (Clarke et al., 2015). Pseudonyms are used throughout this article, and all names have been changed to protect participants' identities.

FINDINGS

This study examines how single professional men and women in Malaysia experience singlism in the workplace and how they respond to it. Findings show that singlism is manifested through both organisational policies and interpersonal interactions with co-workers, impacting both genders in slightly different ways. Participants' responses when navigating these experiences were largely passive, with minimal resistance observed. However, it is important to note that the experiences were not uniform across participants, as variations were observed in terms of workplace culture and individual interpretation of singlism.

Forms of Workplace Singlism

Participants reported experiencing singlism in the workplace in two main aspects, which include inequalities embedded within organisational policies and interpersonal discrimination by co-workers. While these experiences were widely shared, the degree to which participants perceived them as discriminatory varied, with some normalising such practices as standard workplace culture.

In terms of organisational policies, a recurring concern was the discrepancy in employee benefits between married and single employees. Some of the widely discussed employee benefits include medical insurance coverage, working hours, leave application and job promotion. Firstly, married employees were entitled to make extended medical claims for their spouse, which is something single employees have no access to. Married employees were also entitled to a higher amount of medical claims as compared to single employees. Participants felt that this practice was unfair as they should have been given a chance to extend their medical claims to their parents or siblings, as some of them were still living with their parents and siblings and were responsible for caring for their elderly parents.

> "The only issue I have so far with my company is health claims. If you are married, you can extend it to your spouse and your children. But if I'm single, why can't I extend it to my parents? It doesn't make sense to me that I cannot extend it to my parents or siblings." (Priya, Manager, 33).

Besides that, single employees were found to have less flexibility in working hours as compared to their married co-workers. Married employees who needed to pick up their children from schools or childcare centres were usually allowed to enter the office at a later time and leave work at an earlier time. Married employees also enjoyed greater scheduling flexibility, especially for those whose roles are structured with timetables. Married employees were often given the options to select shifts or working hours that aligned with their children's routine, allowing them to avoid early morning or late afternoon slots. These slots were then assigned to their single co-workers.

> "In my workplace, they [the co-workers] actually prioritise people who are married and have children. For people who are single, they presume you have more time, so you can do more things. They also expect more from you. We have a teaching timetable. Mothers and married people don't get the 8.30am or 3.30pm classes because they have to pick up their kids or something like that. But for people who are single, we have to do it." (Jia Hui, Lecturer, 31).

Additionally, single employees were often tasked with extra workload which sometimes involved them working overtime or during weekends. This was because it was widely assumed that married people need to spend time with their children on weekends while single people had no familial commitments. Both instances showed that extra or unfulfilled tasks due to limited time at work were often passed to their single co-workers.

> "People [married co-workers] would just have an understanding that weekends are for their family. They are only working on Monday through Friday. But this single person doesn't have a baby to take care of and doesn't have to be answering to her husband. She is free and flexible, and she can arrange her own time. She can be expected to go and pick up a delivery or go for the signing of an agreement. Just to get things done when everybody else is busy. They don't have a mindset that a single person has a full schedule as well. What they're always thinking about is you don't have a spouse; you don't have kids, and therefore, you don't need to do anything. You're free." (Xin Yue, Manager, 34).

Furthermore, priorities were often given to married employees during leave applications. While prioritising leave applications for employees with children during mid-term or year-end school holidays is understandable, married employees were also often prioritised in leave-taking at other times, including non-festive seasons.

> "Of course, it's not really a big deal. If you want to look at it, there are certain situations, like let's say, during school holidays. There will be some days that you want to take leave. Some people would say, 'You don't even have children, why do you want to take leave? Let other people who have families do it. I'm like, 'What are you talking about?' That's very discriminatory and quite I would say, if there's a word for racists for single people, yes, I want to use the word singlism." (Nurin, Communication Practitioner, 32).

Moreover, single employees were often overlooked for job promotions as societal norms tend to equate maturity and commitment with marital status. Those who were single were consequently perceived as "immature" and "unserious" and were therefore, frequently deemed unfit for career advancement. This situation was counterintuitive considering that single employees often worked longer hours and shouldered heavier workloads yet had fewer opportunities for promotion.

> "When you're married, people have the perception that you are more stable and you are more ready to commit to a higher position. When you're single, people expect you to commit more time in doing overtime work instead. That's like, a very conflicting thing because when you're single, you're supposed to be able to pour more effort into your work. But they don't see it that way. People still think that married men are more stable." (Wei Jun, Animal Welfare Inspector, 34).

At the interpersonal level, participants also described that their co-workers generally perceived their singlehood negatively and reported having experienced being treated negatively at their workplace. Single employees were often asked to take on more tasks, complete last-minute requests, cover duties for their married co-workers and work during weekends based on the assumptions that they were freer due to lack of family commitments.

> "Yes, I get asked to do overtime all the time. It's like, because you are single, therefore you can work on weekends. In my last company, I stopped that kind of mentality. And I told them whether I'm married or not married, my weekend is my weekend. If needed, I can still come over. But yes, the perception of you being single means that you can just work overtime, or you can do extra chores on the weekend." (Aqilah, Manager, 34)

When applying for leave during festive seasons, many participants received negative remarks from their co-workers suggesting that it was more important for married people to return to their hometowns for festivities. This was based on general assumptions that married people need to spend time with their families during festivities. However, leave-taking during festive seasons was also equally important for single employees who were living away from their families and needed to return to their hometowns for celebrations.

> "In my previous department, there were quite a lot of Malay men. During Hari Raya, we would compete for leave, you know? They said, 'Eh, you're single, right? You don't have a husband, so why do you need such a long holiday? Your hometown is in Johor Bahru, right? Why do you need so many days off?' I said, 'My father is my family, okay? I have to do everything alone, you know. I need to do spring cleaning, buy things at the market, cook so I need a bit more leave.' But usually, I take leave before Raya. Yeah, only that part. They said it quite negatively." (Balqis, Engineer, 34).

Furthermore, their single status had led to some being perceived as less committed and therefore, given few opportunities for promotion, while married co-workers were seen to be more often being promoted.

> "I'm not sure what is the reason because they [employers] never actually reveal why a person gets the promotion or not. But you can actually see that most of the time, married people get promoted more often compared to the single ones.

> I haven't really questioned that before, but I do have it in mind that maybe the employers think that they [married co-workers] need more money because married people have children to support, to pay school fees, and whatnot." (Hakim, Lecturer, 31).

Although these experiences occurred at the interpersonal level, they were enabled and reinforced by organisational policies and practices that prioritised married employees' needs, resulting in an unfavourable workplace environment for single employees. It is worth nothing that the extent to which these practices were formalised varied across organisations, with some workplaces appearing more equitable than others.

Gender and Workplace Singlism

Both male and female participants reported experiencing singlism in their workplace but the experiences were slightly different for both genders. While findings showed that participants did not experience workplace singlism as a wholly gendered phenomenon, there were some subtle gender differences especially at the interpersonal level.

Both male and female participants were found to have experienced similar inequalities in organisational policies such as medical insurance coverage, working hours and leave application. This suggests that organisational policies place single employees at a disadvantaged position in the workplace based on of their marital status rather than gender, as married employees are entitled to better employee benefits as compared to single ones, irrespective of their gender.

However, both male and female participants experienced workplace singlism at an interpersonal level, albeit in different forms, with male participants encountering more discrimination in promotion contexts and female participants experiencing it through social remarks. Female participants were more likely to receive negative and dismissive remarks from their co-workers as they were often questioned whether they were busy at home given that they were not married and did not have children. Additionally, female participants who were in leadership roles were often perceived negatively and were more likely to be subjected to negative labelling.

> "For men, it always seems like, wow, the bachelor, the silver fox or the diamond bachelor, especially if they're successful and single. But for women who are successful and single, people always call them things like empress or dowager, trying to make us seem like some kind of black widow or something like that, especially if you're very strong at work. When men are strong at work, it's no problem. They're admired as successful bachelors. But when women are strong and single at work, people say, 'Oh, she must be a witch. Something must be wrong with her.'" (An Qi, Manager, 34).

Male participants, on the other hand, were less likely to receive such remarks but were more likely to be passed over for promotion due to being perceived as immature and uncommitted, which stems from the cultural assumption that marriage signifies success and maturity for men. While these manifestations differ in form, both suggest that singlehood, for both men and women, is treated as a deficiency within the professional setting.

> "One of my previous superiors mentioned this to me. I cannot give you this [promotion] because you're not married. I'm scared that you might just leave the

> job and go one day. Then I said, 'Then what if I'm married? And then he said, 'Oh, if you're married then you're committed. You need the money, so you have to work. You don't have a choice in life because you have to support your family.'" (Devindran, Lecturer, 38).

Responses to Workplace Singlism

Despite experiencing singlism in the workplace, which included inequalities in organisational policies and interpersonal discrimination from co-workers, participants largely did not actively address or speak out about their workplace singlism experiences. This suggests that participants likely perceived these occurrences as a normal part of their professional lives and not something within their power to change. Most participants accepted these occurrences as part of their professional lives. Rather than confronting the inequalities or discrimination that they had experienced, they appeared to internalise these experiences as part of being single professionals. This pattern of acceptance was consistent across both genders, though the degree of resignation varied among individuals.

> "In my company, we have this thing called family day. And unfortunately, family day is meant specifically for a person's spouse and children. My co-workers get to go enjoy family dates at Sunway Lagoon for free, for the whole day with their husbands or their wives and their children. Whereas I would only get an entrance for myself because I do not have a husband. I only get one ticket for myself. I mean, what am I going to do in Sunway Lagoon all alone? So, every year, almost every year, I give it a pass. I don't get to join because I feel that we are being sort of discriminated just because we're single." (Candice, Lecturer, 33)

However, some differences were observed between both genders. Female participants occasionally responded with mildly defensive, and at times slightly sarcastic, remarks when negative or dismissive remarks were made about their single status.

> "People would say, 'Why are you so busy? Do you have kids at home or something?' And I would respond, 'You just assume I'm completely free, which might be true to some extent. But you chose to get married; you chose to have kids, so don't complain.'" (Jia Hui, Lecturer, 31).

Male participants, in contrast, tended to provide shorter responses when asked about their experiences, which possibly suggests that they either completely ignored or were oblivious to these occurrences. They also tended to acknowledge inequalities with quiet resignation rather than resistance.

> "These people [the married co-workers] need to *balik kampung* (return to hometown) with their family. It's more important for them. Because I'm single anyway, I will stay at home. Even if I'm going back, I'm going back alone but my co-workers are going back with their whole family. So whole family comes first, sometimes." (Edward, Compliance Officer, 32)

Several participants also acknowledged awareness of workplace singlism, claiming that they had heard about similar occurrences happening to their peers but had not personally experienced it.

> "I have heard of it [workplace singlism] from my other friends. As for me, because of my working environment in the medical field, people don't look much into your marital status." (Jake, Pharmacist, 34)

This variation in experience points to the role of organisational culture in either mitigating or reinforcing singlism, as illustrated by participants who worked in more inclusive environments. These responses indicate that singlism is present in the workplace, yet it remains an issue that is seldom actively confronted or addressed by single employees.

> "I'm working in a multinational company. It's a US-based company. We treat our employees equally. It doesn't matter whether you're married or single, whatever status you are in, we treat everyone the same. So, it's very important that the company has such a culture, where we treat every employee the same. I know that some companies do not, but apparently, I'm lucky enough to be in a company that everyone has rights and everyone is treated equally. If they are not treated equally, we have a committee that will handle the case and it's called Guarantee Fair Treatment." (Naomi, Manager, 35).

DISCUSSION

This study examined how single professional men and women in Malaysia experience workplace singlism and how they respond to it. The analysis highlighted three interrelated patterns. Firstly, inequalities are embedded within organisational policies and interpersonal discrimination enacted by co-workers. Secondly, subtle gender differences in workplace singlism were found particularly at interpersonal level and in patterns of job promotion. Thirdly, both genders respond to workplace singlism similarly as they rarely address interpersonal remarks or directly challenge organisational policies. These findings are interpreted based on Risman's (2004) Gender Structure and Swann and Bosson's (2008) Identity Negotiation theories as well as existing work on family-friendly work culture (Casper et al., 2015).

In the workplace, both single men and women are equally disadvantaged in terms of organisational policies, including certain employee benefits such as medical insurance coverage, working hours and leave application. While some organisational policies may serve legitimate caregiving functions, the concern here is with policies that advantage employees primarily on the basis of marital status rather than caregiving responsibilities (Casper et al., 2015). This aligns with Chen's (2020) findings that organisations often implement family-friendly policies that are structured to favour married employees more than single ones. Family-friendly policies can lead to single employees feeling undervalued and neglected (Casper et al., 2015), resulting in them being demotivated (Akanji et al., 2020).

At interactional level, workplace singlism was enacted through regular assumptions about single employees' availability and commitment. Participants were often expected to take on additional tasks and longer hours because it was assumed that they could work overtime, which is consistent with Paynter's (2020) findings that single workers are treated as the default option when extra work needs to be covered. Because they did not have a spouse or children waiting for them, participants were often asked to cover weekend shifts or travel more frequently. This is consistent with Pan and Li's (2021) findings that married employees are given more favourable work arrangements, including fewer weekend duties and less work-related travel while single employees are expected to be flexible. Many participants also saw putting in more hours at work as an opportunity to prove themselves and secure promotion,

which corroborates Salamin's (2021) findings that singles accepted more workload as an opportunity for career progression. However, they still appear less likely to receive promotion or higher salaries than their married co-workers despite their effort (Horgan, 2020; Morris & Osburn, 2016).

A notable aspect of the findings is the relative symmetry observed in workplace singlism, affecting both male and female employees. Both genders described similar disadvantages in workplace policies in relation to medical insurance coverage, working hours and leave application. This symmetry is theoretically significant. It suggests that at institutional level, organisational policies and practices distinguish primarily between married and single employees rather than between men and women, positioning marital status as the primary axis of structural inequality in the workplace (Casper et al., 2015).

However, the manifestations of singlism are evident in co-workers' interactions and job promotions. Female participants reportedly received more negative verbal remarks about their singlehood, which mirrors Reilly et al.'s (2018) study when asked why they remain single is a common experience for women. Women are also judged negatively in the workplace and are often pressured by their co-workers to get married, reflecting the view that remaining single is unnatural (Song, 2010). Some female participants expressed being viewed with suspicion when they appear financially successful, particularly when they purchase luxury goods. A similar pattern was reported by Paynter's (2020) study that when single women buy luxury goods for themselves, they were often questioned for both their "ability" and "integrity" (p. 220) for the purchase.

Male participants, on the other hand, were more likely to be judged as less committed and immature and were therefore overlooked for promotions and salary increments. A similar pattern was observed in Morris et al.'s (2007) study where single men reportedly receive lower salaries and fewer opportunities for promotion than their married male co-workers even when they have the same level of capability. Casper et al. (2015) also reported that married men tend to be perceived as more employable than single men. Married employees with children are also generally perceived as more responsible than single employees (Akanji et al., 2020). These gendered patterns suggest that marriage normativity operates differently by gender. Single women are penalised through social stigma and scrutiny, while single men are penalised through diminished professional credibility. This reflects Risman's (2004) argument that gender operates as a social structure that shapes expectations and evaluations differently for men and women. Overall, these patterns suggest that singlehood is often viewed as inferior in a professional setting and workplace singlism negatively affects single employees, regardless of gender.

Another significant finding of this study is the lack of active negotiation strategies against singlism in the workplace. Despite experiencing singlism in organisational policies and interpersonal interactions with co-workers, participants generally accepted workplace singlism as "normal". This corroborates Paynter's (2020) findings that many singles are unaware that they are stigmatised and this stigmatisation has become "internalised and normalised" (p. 225). While the participants acknowledged that singlism is present, they also expressed that it is beyond their capabilities to change the situation. This reflects Morris et al.'s (2007) study that there are no laws to address single people's issues at the workplace and DePaulo's (2011) work which notes there are very few laws that provide protection for single people. Drawing on Swann and Bosson's (2008) Identity Negotiation framework, this pattern may be understood as a form of constrained agency. Participants strategically responded to workplace singlism with a degree of resignation, prioritising the maintenance of their professional identity within a marriage-normative environment rather than asserting their single identity. However, a lack of response may not necessarily mean that the participants felt powerless in those situations. Several participants felt that family-friendly policies are genuinely beneficial for their co-

workers and supported their implementation. Nonetheless, they also believed that the situation could be improved for single employees. This aligns with Casper et al.'s (2015) findings that educated employees tend to support family-friendly policies.

Some mild resistances were observed from female participants. While it is possible that single people can respond to such situations more freely or defensively in personal social contexts, for example, with their family members or friends, it is less likely for single professionals to respond in a similar manner in professional settings due to certain professional restrictions and potential ramifications. As a result, many singles may choose to remain silent or completely ignore the situation, to prioritise maintaining their professional identity rather than asserting their single identity.

Overall, these findings suggest that workplaces in Malaysia often operate as marriage-normative environments where single professionals are disadvantaged in organisational policies and interactions with co-workers. Marital status can be seen as an important source of inequality, and together with gender, shapes how single men and women are perceived, managed and expected to behave in professional settings. At the same time, a lack of active responses was observed in this study, highlighting the possible influence of organisational hierarchies and cultural norms in limiting single employees' capacity to negotiate workplace singlism. This also indicates a need to address workplace policies and practices in Malaysia that affect single employees.

CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings indicate that workplace singlism operates at policy and interpersonal levels. Participants reported organisational inequalities in areas such as medical insurance coverage, working hours, leave applications as well as regular assumptions that they were more available and flexible than their married co-workers to take on additional tasks at work. Although these patterns affected both men and women, their interpersonal experiences were slightly gendered, with female participants receiving more remarks about their single status whereas men were perceived as less serious and committed and were therefore passed over for job promotions.

The findings suggest that workplaces in Malaysia can systematically disadvantage single professionals due to their marriage-normative cultures. This study also shows that singlism is not confined to social settings but is embedded within organisational policies and everyday work practices. A lack of negotiation towards these policies and practices may also indicate that participants accepted these patterns as normal or unchangeable. The identified disparities, particularly in employee benefits such as medical coverage, working hours, leave application, and perceived promotion opportunities, should be critically reviewed to ensure single people's work experiences are aligned to their married co-workers'. By documenting these patterns, this study contributes to the limited literature in non-Western contexts and highlights marital status, together with gender, as an important form of workplace singlism and inequality.

This study has important implications for organisations, policymakers and human resources practitioners in Malaysia. The findings suggest that workplace policies and everyday practices should be reviewed to ensure they do not implicitly favour married employees. Organisations should also move towards more single-friendly workplace policies to ensure equal opportunities for all employees, regardless of their marital status (Casper & DePaulo, 2012). Employers should also apply clear and transparent criteria that offer equal work arrangements for all employees (Pan & Li, 2021).

This study has several limitations. Firstly, the participants were single professionals currently living and working in Selangor, Malaysia and the findings should not be used to

generalise the experiences of single professionals living and working in other Malaysian states. Secondly, this study relies on 30 participants recruited from purposive sampling, which is appropriate to explore their experiences but is not suitable for statistical generalisation of the wider population of single employees. Thirdly, the findings are based on self-reported accounts of workplace environments, which may be affected by participants' reluctance to disclose more negative incidents, given the sensitivity of discussing discrimination in relation to their current employment situation. Fourthly, while the sample includes participants from different ethnic and religious backgrounds, ethnicity and religion were outside the scope of this study. Future studies should examine whether these dimensions, along with age and class, moderate experiences of workplace singlism, particularly given Malaysia's diverse social context. Finally, this study reflects a specific organisational and cultural context at the time of data collection. Workplace policies, practices and social attitudes towards singlehood may change so future research can be conducted to capture these shifts. Despite these limitations, future research should extend this study by examining workplace singlism across different sectors, regions and occupational groups, and by exploring how gendered constructions of singlehood may vary across these settings (Lai et al., 2015).

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