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## Celebrating Singlehood in the Age of the Fourth Industrial Revolution

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**Abstract:** Singlehood has always carried with it an issue that is affecting lives, especially women. When a woman is single and is in her middle age, the question that a single woman must deal with is: “When are you getting married?” Along this line, familiar terms are also used to mean single women, such as spinster and old maid. Usually, they are portrayed to be hostile, ugly, grumpy, and depressed --a picture of negative undertones. Will women be more empowered in the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution(4IR), especially never-married women? This paper aims to put into discussion the life and struggles of never-married women in this age of digital possibilities. Through the optic of feminist liberation hermeneutics, this work will use as a framework in feminist reading the story of Miriam in the Bible. Thus, from a post-colonial feminist perspective, the story of Miriam is proposed to be read as a model to the single state of life of women whose response in the Fourth Industrial Revolution necessitates adaptability and creativity. As all are called to holiness no matter what state of life one should adopt, this hopes to bring a more decisive voice when it comes to valuing as persons those who are not married and those who cannot contribute to the procreation of offspring.

**Key Words:** Never-Married Women; Feminist Hermeneutics; Holiness; 4IR

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Society then and now seems to view singlehood as a kind of failure. The typical questions that constantly confront single women are: *When are you getting married? Who will take care of you when you get old? Is it not a lonely life?* These questions are somewhat expected, considering how the world perceives women, much more single women.

In a traditional social order, relationships flourish with the family being regarded as the foundation. But the post-modern age is opening an awareness towards another social reality - an emergence of a group called never-married women.

In the study conducted by Tan (2010) on never-married women, the average age of the respondents is between the age group of 40-44. This group is seen as part of the fundamental changes in what are perceived to be long-standing social institutions such as the family (Tan, 2010).



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Furthermore, these studies have shown that women have already redefined their societal relationships in their everyday lives (Tan, 2010), they enjoy “good quality life” especially in the psychological domain (Cruz and Ramiro, 2019), and are considered as “social mothers” (Peach, 1998). This responsibility is well-defined in the home or to a broader context, the community.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

In view of adequately understanding the various roles assumed by never-married women in the family, society and the church, as well as their struggles and triumph, the paper uses the narrative of Miriam in the Book of Exodus in the scriptures as a framework for feminist reading.

This is accomplished through discourse analysis and an attempt to do a historical-critical method to have a better grasp of the culture and context where the narrative is situated. It also identifies strategies in feminist liberation hermeneutics to articulate areas of oppression, especially in the age of the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *3.1. Never-Married Women and the Philippine Culture*

In identifying this group of never-married women vis-à-vis the long-established pattern of social relationships, which is the family, expectations that women should marry is somewhat assumed and single women continue to be regarded as an aberration rather than a significant change in how society should function.

Moreover, reports of a study state that women in the Philippines already had a significant presence in the professional occupations and many of these women lived with one or more persons who are members of their family (Tan, 2010). They described their role as “the provider” who gave financial support to the family. The responsibility appeared to be carried out with much willingness.

Another view that the study articulated was that of never-married women being the “provider in terms of abilities.” Someone whom the members of the family can rely upon. Also, apart from spending more time in work these never-married women rely on their friends as their source of support.

The report concluded with that of women having redefined their social relationships in their everyday lives: they get a higher education, they earn, they are empowered. Instead of succumbing to the usual dictate of marriage as an imperative path one should take, these women have broken the traditional patterns by not marrying. The study is suggestive of a more liberating notion for never-married women.

On the other hand, an article about singlehood and their perception of happiness also claim that family and friends are the primary sources of joy. The article further states that never-married women have “good quality life” especially in the psychological sphere albeit the levels of happiness may vary between those who personally opted to remain single by choice or circumstance (Cruz and Ramiro, 2019).

However, this still does not change the fact that a woman's existence is defined by the person whom she will marry, and the term “never-married” is loaded with negative connotations. *Previous studies on singleness (especially female singleness) were often premised on the implicit assumption that it is a deficit identity or that there are some pathological reasons why some women become single for life* (Reyes-laureano, 2012). Akin to the term “spinster,” unmarried women are depicted as undesirable or desperate anomalies—the target of whispers and the object of pity (Howe, 2015).

### *3.2. Women and the Fourth Industrial Revolution*

It is said that the Fourth Industrial Revolution can offer so much potential to people. Society can significantly utilize breakthroughs in technologies to further research agenda and improve the quality of life. How will women, more so never-married women fit into the 4IR?



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The 4IR is seen to radically change the economic landscape, mindsets, and lifestyles, and women are most likely to be under-represented when the industry starts to automate its work opportunities to boost productivity. Globally, the world is confronted with much more pressing issues. For instance, a "2016 United Nations study found that "sewbots" could soon replace up to 80% of garment factory jobs in Asia" and the vast majority of people who will likely to lose their jobs to "sewbots" will be women (Anderson, 2018).

Surrounded by the threats that can seemingly worsen the experience of inequality and exclusion, world leaders are called to adapt routes to recalibrate policies and address the deepening divides and reduce restrictions on gender roles. This may sound revolutionary to never-married women. It seems that endless possibilities are available for these women to explore without the pressure of having to get married and build a family as demanded by society.

Nevertheless, there is still the danger of stereotyping the women in general if the direction the various countries takes is just to tinker the edges and does not really confront the structural roots of gender discrimination (Cliff, 2018). The digital divides will be more pronounced as those who fare better in this emerging reality are those with relevant skills that are supposed to survive the digital age. Hence, despite the opportunities, there remains a persistent gender gap (Beitler, 2017).

### *3.3. Revisiting the State of Singlehood through the Church's Optic*

Is holiness achieved when one chooses a single state of life, especially in the era of the 4IR? To what extent do the Church's documents support this particular state? A survey of some of these documents allows one to see what singlehood means through the perspective of the Church.

The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, states that "all faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status, are called to the fullness and perfection of charity." It continues that the classes and duties are many, but the holiness is one –

that sanctity which is cultivated by all people who are moved by the Spirit of God (LG, 40, 41).

Similarly, the Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* of Pope John Paul II on the role of the Christian Family in the Modern World published in 1981, emphasizes that the family is "the first and vital cell of society" (FC, 42). With love as its point of departure, the family is expected to form a community of persons, to serve life, to participate in the development of the society, and share in the life and mission of the Church. From a small cell "that of a family" to a bigger community "that of the Church." As it is in her tendencies to be of excellent service to her family, it has also become a typical concept for a never-married woman to generously give and serve in the Church – the bigger "family" or "community."

Furthermore, the document also enumerated the classifications of women that somehow come as subordinate as opposed to having a family lauded by society: childless wives, widows, separated or divorced women, and unmarried mothers.

Likewise, the Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* of Pope John Paul II on the Dignity of Women published in 1988, speaks of the dignity and vocation of women: motherhood and virginity. The fiat that was humbly uttered signifies the woman's "yes" to that union with God. This union means offering oneself for service, and in view of the Messianic service, to serve means to reign. Hence, the call to motherhood and virginity are both states of lives that relate inherently to service, and through service to holiness (MD, 18). Furthermore, in this document, virginity is better understood as a call for women to be loved and to love (MD, 20).

As presented in the Church's documents, whether building a family or remaining single for life, holiness is achieved through love (*giving love and being loved*) and the offering of oneself to service, either for the immediately family or a bigger community: the society and the church. Though service here elevates a person to the highest order in view of the messianic service, a closer look at the documents reveal that never-married women are still far from its consciousness. The classification that *Familiaris Consortio* has enumerated is in view of marriage and the creation of a family.



### 3.4. *Miriam in the Book of Exodus*

In the Old Testament, it is apparent that singlehood was despised by God's people. The story of Adam and Eve attests to this. Barrenness was a sign of a cursed life, and to remain single seems to be a disobedience to the command of God to be fruitful and multiply.

Another character in the Old Testament speaks of Miriam. Her character is interwoven in the unfolding of the Exodus events, to a large extent, her story has been subsumed into the story of her brother Moses. In the early part of the narrative, Miriam was alluded as the unnamed sister who helped deliver Moses at the Nile River (Trible, 2009). She was further presented as the clever girl who stepped forward and offered to find a Hebrew woman to nurse the baby for the princess. She was then presented next as the one leading all women in their song of praise and jubilation using their tambourines (Ex. 15: 20-21) when the Egyptians drowned in pursuit of the fleeing Israelites. In the ensuing event, Miriam is seen as actively participating in the task of getting the Israelites out of slavery.

In all things alluded to her, Miriam was never mentioned as wife or mother, neither of having a husband nor children (Trible, 2009 & Reiss, 2010). Reiss (2010) added that this is a rare example in the bible of a woman notable as having no identification with that of someone's wife or mother.

### 3.5. *The Feminist Perspective*

Hugely known to be patriarchal, Dowling (2018) articulated that around the time of the Exile, rabbinical editing of the Hebrew scriptures began. The feminine presence, including Miriam, became hidden beneath the surface of the Hebrew scriptures. But given this suppression, she is "doubtless a dominant figure in early tradition" (NSRV note to Ex. 15: 19-21). Biblical experts can attest that when a woman's name is mention in the Bible, she must be important. In Exodus, Miriam's name is recorded thrice: first, when she was alluded as baby Moses' sister (Ex. 2:4), second, when she was first mentioned as a prophet (Ex. 15: 20-21), and third, when she led the women to a song of praise and jubilation (Ex. 15:

19-21). These roles that Miriam played rely heavily on her being available always for her family.

Tan's (2010) study that describes the "never-married" women as "provider in terms of abilities" is very much akin to that of Miriam in Exodus. She is seen present in the episodes that involve personal situations in the family. The study of Cruz and Ramiro (2009), reports a similar picture.

Conversely, one cannot ignore Miriam's zeal for leadership when she led the women in song and praise after gaining freedom from slavery. She is presented as well as having actively helped Moses and Aaron in the leadership roles (Ex. 15: 19-21). The never-married women can also actively participate in the ministry of the Church. Being single is then considered more of a blessing because there is greater freedom of decision. "They can more easily devote their entire selves to God alone with undivided heart" (Patrick, 1991).

But this invitation seems to attribute to the "canonically religious," another form of elitism in the Church over that of the lay people. The challenge, as Patrick (1991) cites, is more of "democratization of the Catholic understanding of holiness" and therefore to active service to the ministry of the Church.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

What does it mean to be a woman more so to be a never-married woman in the 4IR? Undoubtedly, this emerging environment opens boundless possibilities for women married or not.

Where it presupposes that automation can affect unique human values such as sensitivity, creativity, and inspiration (Koutroupi, 2019), women, with her ability to focus on people, can create a more effective and efficient atmosphere and can promote teamwork and collaboration.

On the other hand, a glimpse of the story of Miriam in the Book of Exodus allows one to see Miriam's active role in the patriarchal dominated culture. She used her ability to influence others and bring across a message of hope while working hand in hand with her brothers in the work of liberation.



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In her setting, she exhibited the same unique values of sensitivity, creativity, and inspiration.

Indeed, her life provides a basic framework for the women of today, especially the never-married women in the joy of taking care of the family and in the freedom to give oneself to higher service.

*Mulieris Dignitatem* is unequivocal in asserting that the "moral and spiritual strength of a woman is joined to her awareness that God entrusts the human being to her in a special way – from her comes birth and the flourishing of all that is created. The age of the Fourth Industrial Revolution still must contend to the issue of discrimination confronting women in general. But there remains the fervent call to use the interconnected world as a platform to shape a future that prioritizes the dignity of persons and allow the flourishing of one's well-being, never married or not.

On the other hand, apart from stereotyping women, there are also other factors that affect never-married women: *growing old alone and having no one to take care, becoming sick while still doing her "duty" as the provider to the family, and mid-life crisis* that could also cause depression. In this digital age, institutions such as schools, churches, or organizations could start rethinking programs that better address the well-being of never-married women: physically, emotionally, spiritually.

The biblical Miriam is raised to visibility. The never-married women are now raised to the consciousness of the people where better programs can be established to assist them to live a meaningful life. Miriam rose from the challenges of her time and refuse delimitation from their oppressive situation; the never-married women are challenged to adapt to the rapidly changing climate and use the vast opportunities to arm themselves not only with relevant skills but of lifelong competencies such as creativity, sensitivity, and inspiration that never-married women can employ to be of greater service to the Church and society.

All are called to holiness never married or not and the invitation is to allow oneself to give love and to be loved, to welcome opportunities for greater service, and the acceptance to whatever state of life one should live. In this way, genuine happiness and healthy well-being will be achieved. This then can be worth celebrating.

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