

Single Women are not Wanted Here: Unmarried Women's Struggle for Private Rental Accommodation in a Nigerian City

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This article examined gendered relations in urban housing market as it affect women of marriageable age who choose to stay unmarried. Drawing upon patriarchal theoretical framework, the author start from the assumption that heterosexual normative values and deep-rooted stereotypes upon which single women are constructed compound their access to urban vacant accommodation. A qualitative approach to data collection was adopted to elicit information from purposively selected 12 single female accommodation seekers and 45 estate agents/landlords in Osogbo. Result showed that discrimination against single female accommodation seekers is pervasive in this market. It also shows that discrimination against this group was due to (1) perceived behavioural deficiency of singletons and (2) the Yoruba normative system which frowns at unmarried women living alone. Based on this, the article concludes that many single women find themselves in struggling position with deep rooted stereotype which expose them to discriminatory practices in their bid to secure decent accommodation.

Keywords: Private rental market, unmarried women, housing, gender discrimination, Osogbo, Nigeria

Introduction

Marriage ideology is a strong and pervasive idea in Nigeria. This is especially true for all the Nigerian ethnic groups such that both recent and dated studies have examined the desirability and functionality of marriage among Nigerians (Schwartz, Nowak, Orazulike and Keshinro, 2015; Izugbara and Ezeh, 2010; Imamura, 1986; Mann, 1985). It highlighted the age at first marriage among different ethnic groups (Garenne, 2004; Isiugo-Abanihe, 2000) and discussed the social and parental concerns when marriage is delayed or not forthcoming (Essien and Bassey, 2012; Smith, 2007). Although, choosing to remain single is not considered as out-right taboo, the fact remain that voluntary singlism is a social status considered to be against the normative expectations in Nigeria (Essien and Bassey, 2012; Otite, 2006). The flip side of this widespread

expectation, however, is that it often leads many to conclude that women that remain single after crossing a certain age may have been "undesirable marriage partners" (Siegel, 1995) or that they are under some kind of cursed spirit. Hence, women of marriage-age that are unmarried are at the extreme, either pitied or sometimes blamed for their single status (Ntiomo and Isiugo-Abanihe, 2014).

But, while being single beyond the expected age in a traditional culture-intense society like Nigeria leads to parental and social concerns, it also exposes women to discriminatory and unjust practices (Abara, 2012; Lewu, 2011; Ibrahim and Hassan, 2009). Although, in many societies, particularly African societies, women are generally subjected to abysmal treatments based on their gender, "women who do not comply with the marriage and maternity mandate" to borrow Shoe

bridge's (2014) words, are often constructed as losers and face unfair treatment. Despite current demographic transition which shows increasing number of women outside coupling relationship for longer period (Okoli, 2014) "living outside the institution of marriage" is largely stigmatized and socially abhorrent among Nigerian (Ntiomo and Isiugo-Abanihe, 2014). In other words, women's marital status still influences how 'others' view and relate with an individual woman of 'marriage-age' who 'chose' to remain single – without a husband – her crown (*oko n'ade ori obirin*) as the Yoruba would say. Standing on this base, this paper examines the unsavory (discriminatory) experiences of single women in search of private accommodation in Osogbo as a result of their marital status.

Gender Discrimination in Urban Housing Market

Scholars have long been interested in examining the prevalent gender discrimination and stereotypical bias against women in various aspects of society. To a large extent, empirical findings in employment (Boot and Leigh, 2010; Drydakis, 2009; Yang and Li, 2009; Davison and Burke, 2000), marriage (Oakley, 2015; Rainer, 2008; Wolfinger, Mason and Goulden, 2008), finances and loan (Muravyev, Talavera and Schafer, 2009; Wilson, Carter, Tagg, Shaw and Lam, 2007; Blake, 2006), have established that large number of women today are still subject of discriminatory practices which limit their rights and privilege. Most of these studies demonstrate that despite modernity and fundamental changes in family life, most historically noted stereotypes of women are still relevant today (Lahad, 2013). In employment as in other sectors, gender discrimination, defined as, "the systematic, unfavourable treatment of individuals on the basis of their gender, which denies them rights, opportunities or resources" (Reeves and Baden, 2000: 7) is evidence in many ways including "hiring practice, limited opportunities for promotion... and various forms of harassments" (Yang and Li, 2009: 297).

In the case of urban housing, a number of studies

have focused on structural biases and inequality against women (Bonnastia, 2015; Bengtsson, Iverman and Hinnerich, 2012; Gabriel, 2008; Sullivan, 1994; Klak and Hey, 1992). David Hulchanski (1993) for instance examined the role of discrimination on the basis of race and gender in housing market and identified three primary factors that contribute to the disadvantage experienced by women to include: women position in segmented labour markets (resulting in lower incomes); women position in family structure (with unequal division of labour and their primary responsibilities for care and maintenance of other family members); and sexist and racist discriminatory practices against women. Of these, discrimination based on sexist disposition which in itself is an extension of deep rooted stereotype against women is the norms and practices. Scholarly efforts have further identified the causative factors of discrimination against women in housing (UN, 2012, 2009; Sala Pala, 2010). The 2009 World Survey on the Role of Women in Development, for example, mentioned "discriminatory laws, policies and social norms" as constraining factors against women access to securing and maintaining adequate housing.

In addition, Pager and Shepherd (2008) conducted a thorough literature review on discrimination with an emphasis on what they called "four domains" of discriminations: employment, housing, credit and consumer markers. They offered an overview of major findings from studies on discrimination in each of the four domains and conclude that unlike in the pre-civil right America when racial prejudice and discrimination were overt and widespread, today discrimination is less readily identifiable. In the case of gender discrimination in housing, the authors argued that residential segregation by race and gender remains a salient feature of contemporary American cities. Tester's (2008) work show that women who scale discrimination hurdles contemporary American cities. Tester's (2008) work show that women who scale discrimination hurdles in access to housing face sexual harassment from "institutional authority" such as

landlord to sustain their tenancy. Her study reveals a pattern of discrimination which is less visible and has escaped the radar of scholars since harassment often occurred after accepting to let a house out. Her most vivid contribution is in demonstrating the intersections of race, gender, and class in understanding the nuances of discriminations in urban housing.

In contrast to the intense scholarly discussion and concern about gender discrimination in the housing sector, limited attention has been given to the differential treatment experienced by single adult women in search of quality accommodation in cities, especially in Nigerian cities (Asiyanbola, 2013; Ajiboye, 2011). Yet, demographic shift in Nigeria makes the housing needs and experiences of this group increasingly important. While Nigeria remains a strong pro-marriage society, national census suggests a demographic transition; presenting a picture which depicts an increase in the number of single women that is well over the years of marriage, especially in our cities (Reed and Mberu, 2015). The latest national figure, the 2006 head counts, for example, shows that among women aged 30 to 34 years, the percentage of "never married" increased from 5.2% in 1991 to 11.8% in 2006, and the most likely group to remain permanently single (women aged 45-49 years) increased from 2.2% in 1991 to 3.7% in 2006 (Ntiomo and Isiugo-Abanihe, 2014; FGN, 2006). This is besides the numbers of divorcees and the widowed whose alimony and inheritance does not include houses and thus would require personal accommodation.

Thus, a better understanding of the experiences of single adult women seeking urban private accommodation is required to inform good public housing policies that address the housing needs and behaviour of this group (Kenna, 2008). Of course, there is a national policy (see the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, section 17, paragraph 3a-e) against differential treatment of persons in public and private sectors of the Nigerian society. However, the policy appears to be silent on aspects of

discrimination against women based on their marital status. The nation's housing policy is even worse as it does not explicitly discuss the issue of gender discrimination nor addresses differential treatment based on marital status in housing. Consequently, single women's vulnerability in securing adequate rental accommodation is especially heightened by inadequate protection by government legal frameworks. Summarizing the gender-blindness in Nigeria's housing policy framework, Oruwari (2000: 212) concludes thus:

There is nowhere in the housing policies proposed and programmes implemented in Nigeria that the problems of gender were tackled. All the programmes proposed are gender-blind especially in terms of defining needs for housing rather than income has been the dominant factor. The result is that most of the units benefited men that have economic power and a few women that benefited are the very aggressive ones that scaled through different forms of discrimination to get their units.

While the government has an obligation to prevent actions of landlords and urban estate managers on the basis of sex, gender, or race that exclude women from access to adequate housing and provide adequate remedies for victims of such action (UN-HABITAT, 2014; Saugere, 2011; Pager and Shepherd, 2008; IWHR, 2005; Novac, Brown, Bourbonnais, 1996), strong gender-based practices continued to exist in the Nigerian housing sector. For example, landlords, house agents and estate managers still find it particularly problematic to release the key to an apartment to 'unattached' women due to negative stereotypes and patriarchal orientation of many of the gate-keepers in the industry. The "deep rooted belief" (Oyewole, 1997) among landlords and house agents exposes unmarried women to 'unnecessary' and harsh circumstances in the struggle to create and maintain private



accommodation by themselves. As Lauster and Easterbrook (2011) argued focusing on prejudicial ignorance, landlords, apartment managers, and other rental authorities choosing tenants may reject applicants based on their own prejudice. Unfortunately, the widespread bias among the groups that have the power of decision making as regards letting or renting out vacant spaces in the Nigerian urban rental markets leads to discriminatory practices against women in general and single adult women in particular.

This goes to show that one of the important areas where women marital status becomes an issue and intervenes against them is in urban private accommodation market. Hence, the study of single women and housing access has been on the research agenda of scholars in Western nations for quite a while (Oliver and Cheff, 2014; Byrne, 2008; Jill and Margaret, 2003; Ross, 1995). For instance, in a study of one-parent family in Tasmania, Australia, Lee (1977) found the position of single mother to be unequivocal both in terms of their ability to compete with other social groups for accommodation, and in control over their housing circumstances exercised by a gatekeeper group. He argued that differential access, and “the concept of a continuum from complete choice to complete constraints, are appropriate frameworks within which to view the position of single mothers. In a comparative study of never married women, single mother and single men, Galster and Constantine (1991) found that both the never married women living alone and single mothers are likely to encounter discriminatory treatment relative to men. They also observed that single mothers ran into no more incidences of discrimination than single women living alone as the two groups faced structural discriminations against landlords.

Nevertheless, in Nigeria the emergent social, economic and demographic changes have inevitably started to redefine women’s position in housing, including changes in household formation such as a decline in conventional households; increase in mean

age of first marriage; women’s increased education and labour market participation; which coincides with destabilised male employment and income (Intiomo and Isiugo-Abanihe, 2014; Hirayama and Izuhara, 2008). While they may still be in minority, the increasing number of educated, employed and higher income earning single adult women in our cities requires scholarly peep into the accommodation search experiences of this group to expand the discuss on social and economic discrimination in the twenty-first century Nigeria. Using data from Osogbo urban rental market, the paper thus focused on three questions: 1) why are unmarried women discriminated against in Osogbo private rental market? 2) What challenges are single adult women private accommodation seekers are faced with in this market? 3) How do they negotiate to surmount the challenges placed in their ways?

Theoretical Framework: Patriarchy

The study was conceived within the patriarchal theoretical framework that is cognizant of the central roles of male-dominant value and gendered patterned relations in social process of access to urban resources. Culture of patriarchy defines the conventions governing social and economic engagements between men and women and the pattern of relations that developed therefrom. It reflects the pattern of power relations between women and men which point to subordination of women by men with the implications of constriction of women’s rights based on “naturalistic assumptions about the social roles of men and women” (Knox and Pinch, 2006: 94). Patriarchy theoretical framework is thus applicable to studies on gender which is a socially constructed identity that determines not only the relations between men and women but also the entitlements of men and women within both the household and in the wider socio-economy (Manyire, 2000).

Many feminist scholars have thus conceptualized patriarchy in light of the debilitating consequences it has on power relations in social context. For example,

Walby (1996) defines patriarchy as a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women. Kenny (2006) added that patriarchy allow women to be controlled, repressed and alienated in society, and has a deforming effect on the relationship between sexes. Chowdhury (2009: 605) identified two types of patriarchy as she defines the term as a "system in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women through private and public patriarchy". By and large, the gendered system characteristics of patriarchal culture is largely grounded in constraints such as economic dependence, gendered power relations, fear of harassment, sexism and violence, norms of caring, cooperation and appearance and shared group assumption appropriate behaviour for female as they grow (Sumerau, Padavic and Schrock, 2014; Van Roosmalen, 2000).

Following from the above, it is pertinent to mention that patriarchal theoretical framework focuses on women domination; the constraint experienced in women daily existence and the contestations engendered by the struggle to survive under depressing condition of inequality. The theory subsequently allows for the examination of patriarchal forms of control over women which include the institutionalization of extremely restrictive codes of behaviour for women as well as a practice of rigid gender-role segregations (Moghadam, 1992).

These codes of behaviour define the expected behaviour of women with regards to personal aspirations, entitlements and properties rights (including the rights to choose to stay alone, occupy a vacant accommodation and acquire landed properties on their own). For example, patriarchal theoretical framework accounts for the difficult challenges experienced by single women seeking for accommodation in urban space as a result of the seeming negation of the heterosexual normative code of behaviour under which young boys and girls come of age. In other words, while men (irrespective of their marital status) are free to explore the rental housing market, rent/acquire

personal accommodation with little or no restrains, women, single or married, are encumbered with patriarchal cultural conventions that frown at, if not limit, their right to it. On their own women unlike men are hardly expected to want a personal accommodation except under a male-father/husband figure, pointing to traditionally rooted stereotypical practice aiding the production of gender inequality. It is important therefore to understand that within urban areas, gendered power relations play significant roles in perpetuating structures of inequality; revealing the multiple, but differential, restrains placed upon men and woman (Fildes, 1997).

Hence, central to patriarchal framework of gendered access to urban housing is an examination of the cultural constraint experienced by women as a result of gendered social system in male-value dominant housing market. Indeed, urban housing market is a tough, aggressive, male-dominated sector (Knox and Pinch, 2006) with traditional stereotype about women. But, if one of the essential features of feminism is that gendered relationships are power-structured relationship (Van Roosmalen, 2000; DeBeauvoir and Millet, 1970), the power dynamics of the struggle for ease accessibility to urban housing by adult single women is essential. Feminist scholarship on urban housing market has thus highlighted private rental sector as a site for the production of radicalized, sexualized and gendered relations (Chong, 2006). Patriarchal ideology in urban housing market affects gender relations by skewing the power of allocation of housing in the domain of men leaving women to struggle for access. Women seekers of accommodation either abide by the dominant "masculine heterosexual norms" (Knox and Pinch, 2006) which provides the context for access or face denial/exclusion by the men who serve as gatekeepers in urban space.

Method of Data Collection

Data for this study was collected in Osogbo metropolis in Osun state, Nigeria. This city is chosen because since the dawn of democratic era in 1999, Osogbo has



been expanding into modern city with sprawling infrastructure and facilities which attract both skilled and unskilled migrants. Yet it is also reflecting a trado-modern environment where there appears to be struggle between modern and traditional tendencies with complexities and contradictions in people daily lived experiences. This has intensified pressure on the people behaviour and world-views as shown in the area of access to housing by women with single status. A qualitative research approach was adopted for the study. Purposive and snowballing techniques were used for the recruitment of study participants. The data for the study come from in-depth interviews with 12 single status women, 30 landlords/landladies, 15 estate management agents all in Osogbo metropolis in Osun State, Nigeria. Most of the interviewees were between the ages of 30 and 70 and either single women, landlords or house agents. The purpose of the interviews was to elicit responses on: a) The problematic of marital status as a factor of discrimination in private rental market, b) The preference for married couples in urban private accommodation, and c) The challenges faced by unmarried women in this market and how they surmount these challenges.

The respondents were selected purposively through the help of members of landlords' and house-agents' association meetings and by request to landlords and agents who have accommodated single woman in their properties.

Results and Discussions

Marital Status as a Factor of Discrimination in Private Rental Market

Experiencing discrimination in access to quality urban housing may be a result of many factors. Nevertheless, most participants cited a woman's marital status as an important factor limiting unmarried women access to urban rental accommodation in Osogbo. While it is a fact that the womenfolk, generally, face difficult challenges in this sector, being single appear to further contribute to women's discriminatory experiences in

private rental accommodation. Indeed, our findings show that singleton has a great impact on access to rental accommodation as landlords and house agents base decision to let out a particular space on this factor. The narratives garnered from unmarried women participants suggest that they considered their single status as a hindrance to unfetter access to urban private rental accommodations. Although, she is presently occupying a space of her own, one single lady participant described how she feels about discrimination against single ladies in urban housing sector:

It is very difficult for single persons to find accommodation in this city especially if you are not from this part of the country. My case was a case of not giving-in to challenges if not I may not have succeeded in securing my own personal space. I cannot now recall how many house agents I visited in my search for a space in this town. I combed many streets and visited many house agents and I was always told the same thing: "we do not give accommodation to single women." (Unmarried woman/self-employed/40years)

Another unmarried female participant who happened to be an accountant in a privately owned firm in the city shares her experience of how she was treated when she was searching for an accommodation in Osogbo:

In my search for a decent accommodation in Osogbo, I visited many house agents and I was rejected as many times as I was asked about my marital status. I think once I mentioned that I am single a lot of them are immediately put off. They seem to have a standard way of responding "I

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do not think the landlords will accept any one that is unmarried in their houses". This is their standard way of responding to enquiry about vacant accommodation with them. (Unmarried woman/secretary/35years)

Yet a single woman working as a civil servant in the state has this to say:

When I got a job with the State Secretariat I had to move to Osogbo from Ilesa where I was living with my parents. For several months, I was shuttling between the two towns because of the difficulty in securing a suitable accommodation for myself. All the agents I visited were polite in the way they told me they do not have a suitable space that can suit my status. At first I did not read any meaning to it because I thought they were nice and that they were trying to find me a very good house. It was much later that a colleague of mine told me her experience with Osogbo house agents and offered an advice on how I should go about the whole issue. (unmarried woman/civil servant/31years)

The above data create the impression of an unfair treatment of unmarried women in urban housing market. The data illustrates a pattern of discrimination which is not only gendered oriented but seems targeted to a specific group in our urban rental market. Implicitly, therefore, it exposes the general patriarchal character of a society which sees women's identity, social status (Al-Adili, Shaheen, Bergstrom and Johansson, 2008), access to property, power and prestige to be gained almost exclusively through links with male relatives (Allen, 1990). It is safe to say that for a single woman, the process of access to urban

accommodation in Osogbo, like every other resource, is laced with an age-long stereotypical (rooted in traditional norms and practices of male-values) notions connecting every aspect of a woman's life to a male.

Besides, conventional economic theory presupposes that rental markets are perfectly competitive and that the law of demand and supply governs urban actors' behaviours (Gilderbloom and Appaelbaum, 1988). However, the above data excerpts suggest that urban property owners in Osogbo consider other factors alongside tenants' ability to pay. A woman's marital status, for example, attracts the attention of urban property owners/managers and is unwittingly used as a basis for unequal treatment of female accommodation seekers. As one house agent bluntly said: "I do not deal with unmarried women, they have to bring their husband before I can attend to them" marital status is as important as ability to pay for a rental space in the city. In affirmation of the pervasiveness of the agent's view, one landlord offers further insight into this issue by stating thus:

If a lady comes looking for accommodation in my house, the first question I will ask her is, are you married? Where is your husband? If her answer shows that she is unmarried, I will say I am sorry I cannot give you my property. (Landlord/civil servant/52years)

Consequently, there appears no other conclusion but to suggest that in this market marital status especially of women matters a lot to those in charge of properties letting. In what appears to be furtherance of patriarchal value most landlords and agents expressed preference for married couples over single individuals with no male affiliation. Although, urban property owners are expected to be pushed by economic rationality (for example, the potential return on investments on their properties) with little attention to the gender and marital status of those who offer to pay to occupy their

properties, in this market this is not to be. Securing a space for a woman is exclusively through a male-link. This is suggestive of the fact that secondary factors including marital status is a prime factor in accessing accommodation for women in the city. Thus, woman that is above the expected age of marriage that is not in marriage or in coupling relationship faces discrimination through denial of a space even when she possesses the wherewithal to sustain rental obligations. Naturally therefore there is need to understand especially from the agents and landlords' view why they seem to discriminate against single ladies and preferred married couples in this market. To this we now briefly turn.

The Preference for Married Couples in Urban Private Accommodation

According to Trimmer (2002) single women are perceived as often deprived and always lonely, pathetic and in moral and physical danger in the city. Data from this study reflect Trimmer's thought as virtually all the house-agents and landlords encountered in the course of this study expressed overt preference for married couples, particularly married people that live together with their children. Many of them are averse to the idea of a live-alone woman who is by herself. In showing his preference for married-couple tenants, one landlord invoked the Yoruba culture to support his thought:

I prefer someone who is married, with a wife and children. You know married individuals are also two types, first someone who is married but rents an accommodation for his mistress, so at any time the lady can come and pack out without anyone knowing. Then there are married couples that are with their children. These ones cannot just pack out without us knowing. I prefer the second type because they are better behaved. Because the Yoruba culture

says "a needle that has thread at its bottom is easier to find than a needle without thread" i.e. a married individual with a wife and child, as I have said cannot wake up in the middle of the night and start packing out because he has a wagon to pull. But a needle without thread, she (the unmarried) can pack out without anyone knowing. (Landlord interview/male/67years)

Another landlord supports the above posture by explaining thus:

Personally, I prefer a married couple because anytime you want to go and collect their rent, if I do not meet the husband, I will meet the wife. That is the reason why I prefer married couple. But, I can still take-in (accept) a male who is single, because I am a man and it is possible for me to go to his house at 5am to ask for anything. But for a lady who may be another person's wife, there might be problem between you and she will go and be saying another thing.

Throughout the period of my interaction with landlords and house agents, it became very clear that these two groups prefer married couples to singles. The married-couple-bias of the group with the power to let an accommodation space is the recipe for an unfair treatment represented by denial to let to single women. Landlords and agents articulate a strong sentiment and perhaps resentment towards the idea of single women tenancy. The general perception of landlords and agents show that single women are unfavourably viewed as tenants. For example, virtually all landlords and house agents interviewed described single women seeking private accommodation as glorified prostitute who only want a personal space to engage in prostitution:

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If you offer a single woman an accommodation before you know it, you will start meeting different men with her. For her defense, she may tell you that she is in the process of selecting a spouse to marry. But she may end up becoming a prostitute and no individual wants to give his house to a prostitute. That is why many landlords would warn their agents not to offer their houses to single women. (House agent/ Male-IDI/55years)

This respondent offered an anecdote to further explain his thoughts:

A lady came recently seeking for accommodation in one of the properties in my care, she dressed flamboyantly and I asked her where her husband was. She responded by saying that she has no husband. I then asked where she works. She said she was not working. I said to her "you are not working and you are with no husband. Then how will you manage to pay your rent?" She said "that is not going to be a problem". I later found out that she was living on men, i.e. directly or indirectly a prostitute. So I decided not to give her accommodation. (House Agent, 55yrs)

Yet another one said:

Whether divorcee or never married, I cannot accommodate an unmarried women in my house. This is because we see different things. Some ladies will be divorced and then they start bringing different people to the house and you will not be able to talk to her. It's easy to accommodate someone but it's not easy to tell them to leave the house.

This situation is not because of the culture, but because of what is going on nowadays. If you look at many of the unmarried women, out of 100, it's difficult for you to see 10 who are responsible. Most of them are wayward and you cannot control them and they will feel that they have already got accommodation. (House Agent, 61 years)

As indicated by the responses above, aside the excuse of prostitution by potential single female tenants, interviewees reveal other reasons for their preference for married couples as tenants. Many landlords and agents believe there is a link between being married and being responsible. To them, any woman that is under the control of a man will understand how to care for the property and its surroundings. This trait is vital to urban property owners and is believed to be lacking in many female singles. Thus, one landlord said:

I do not accept single women to take up a space in my house because of the fact that they do not know how to care for the property. Some will tell you that they have to wake up early to go to their work places and they will not be able to clean the surroundings. This is why I prefer people that are married to clean and take care of the property, especially when I am not around. Most single female occupants are usually very uncontrollable; they misbehave a lot. (Landlord/Male-IDI/62years)

By and large, these data excerpts draw attention to landlords' (and house agents') power as gatekeepers in the process of accessing urban private housing. As property owners/managers, landlords and house agents, subtly exert their power to let or deny access to vacant accommodation base not only on gender preference

but also on perceived skill to tell which tenants are responsible from those that are not. In the case of women, every landlord and agent interviewed seem to emphasise that to be married is to be a responsible person. In their conceptions, marriage forces women to behave true to the expectation of married status. Indeed, sociologists believe that every status comes with a role-set. In a traditional culture-valued society like Nigeria, married women are saddled with house chores including cleaning of the surroundings of her household. This is, according to one house-agent, the source of respect accord married women:

In our culture there is no one that we cannot give respect but unmarried women are not always given much regard. You see, a woman that is married is no more single and the society looks at them as being responsible because of their marital status. Someone that is under a man's control is believed to understand basic issues of interactions and, are not expected to misbehave to co-tenants or landlord/landladies. (House Agent/IDI/age-40years)

Many male-property owners (landlords) also consider single women as naturally 'irresponsible' and uncontrollable. What is meant by irresponsibility is usually unclear even after several follow-up questions to probe for the exact idea held by the interviewees. Nevertheless, the basis of the term irresponsible appears to be on prejudiced notion that unmarried women behave in 'controllable' manner compare to their married counterparts. This can be understood from the way one landlord captured it: "unmarried women are always troublesome, living a wayward life involving visits from different men; keeping late nights and always involved in a fight." Obviously this is suggestive of a formed social prejudice about the unmarried women as a group even as this notion

appears to have coalesced from experiences of property owners and house agents. In any case, our findings support Okewole (1997) observation that the often deep rooted beliefs among landlords that single women are potential source of conflicts, crime and indecent living produces a strong bias against this group in private accommodation sector.

However, justifying the general attitude and discriminatory treatment meted by landlords and agents towards single women based on the above accounts may be a little problematic. While one may agree with the fact that every property owner would want the best for his/her property and thus needs to subject every applicant to a rigorous initial investigation, it sound a little far-fetched to pigeon-hole every single woman accommodation seeker or tenant as irresponsible. In fact, such will be prejudicial and feels more like selective target if an entire social group is unfavourably treated as a result of suspicion of bad character. True, every individual of a society is a product of the cultural system of that society. Yet, considering different background, socialization process, exposure and personal need, there is a danger in lumping everyone together. This much is said by one single woman interviewee:

I think many people feel that if a woman is not married she will constitute nuisance by bringing different kind of men into the house and be doing different kind of things. But to me, this is nonsense because you cannot discriminate against a group and treat them differently based on the attitude of a few of them. It is not all single women that are irresponsible, just as not all the married women behave maturely. So people should discard this biased view of single people because it does not work like that. (unmarried woman/self-employed/37years)

Another single lady interviewee has this to say:

In my opinion I see that a lot of people still think and behave in traditional ways when it comes to dealing with single women. We are never free to possess personal space without them thinking of a negative reason why we want what we want. I will advocate for a change in the ways we train our children in this regard because no matter how you look at this issue, our culture makes everyone to question why an unmarried woman wants a personal accommodation.

Several single women participants expressed the above sentiment. They argued that marital status of a woman should not be an issue in the process of accessing vacant accommodation. Being single is believed to be unimportant in terms of criteria for letting. Factoring it in, to them, would only make the unmarried more visible and a subject for discrimination among agents and landlords. In fact one lady commented that being confronted with questions on their marital status could only make them experience what Sharp and Ganong (2011: 965) refer to as "heightened visibility of their single status."

Surmounting the Challenge

Notwithstanding the general suspicion by landlords and house agents, their deep rooted discriminatory practices, and the averseness towards single women tenancy, it is clear that some women still scale the structural and organizational hindrances placed in their ways to secure themselves personal abodes. Most of the 'lucky' single women described the various methods they adopted to surmount the challenges faced by them. During the interview, one of the single ladies commented that "after the agents denied me, I later went through my brother. It was my brother that signed the agreement and collected the keys to the house" (unmarried woman/self-employed/37years).

She further says:

He (the house-agent) later gave me the house because I called my brother, who is a man into the matter. He decided to give me a house through him but he added some conditions that I should not bring men into the house, obey the rules of the house and that I should not cause trouble to those I met in the house. (unmarried woman/self-employed/37years)

Yet another said:

My uncle rented the apartment and moved in. He later handed the house over to me after a few weeks. When I packed-in the landlord got angry and threatened to eject me unless my uncle shows himself. We later settled but this is not after he collected extra money from my uncle for being deceived.

From the responses above, there is a seeming similarity in the experiences of the interviewees. Although all the single women that participated in the study have a secured source of finances, those that secured private accommodation got them through a male relative. Obviously faced with the challenge of serial denial of what should ordinarily be stress-less access to private accommodation since all of them could financially afford it; many single women sought and took alternative route to achieve and satisfy their housing need. As mentioned earlier, it became the responsibility of a male relative to approach and secure a space on behalf of their daughters, nieces or even spouses. Nevertheless, success of moving into a private abode does not seem to eradicate all problems for the single women. Single women tenant have little security particularly if they live alone with no friends or relatives with them. Of the 12 women interviewed who were successful in securing tenancy one way or the other,



only one was able to stay in her home without any form of harassment. Many reported that:

Sometimes the agent might make advances to me especially when towards the time my rent is getting due. He once said that I do not have to worry if I cannot pay on time but that I will have to return his favour. When he saw my countenance he quickly said something like I do not mean it like that. (Unmarried woman IDI/hairdresser/35 years)

Another single lady shared her experience:

When I packed into the house I experienced some kind of sexual threat from the landlord. He was always making advances to me and when I was not yielding he threatened to throw me out. (Unmarried woman IDI/secretary/30 years)

Sexual advances/harassment especially is the most reported challenges single women accommodation seekers face from both landlords and the house agents. This occurs when an unmarried woman seeks for accommodation and they are being confronted with sexual advances. And since most of them don't have a choice they fall victim to sexual harassments from either the house agents or the landlord.

Conclusions

In this article, I have shown that women marital status is a causative factor in urban housing discrimination in Osogbo. Many single women seeking urban rental accommodation find themselves in struggling position with deep rooted stereotype which is used by men who serve as gatekeepers to urban housing. The research finding showed that power relations in urban housing is structured and skewed against women in general and single women in particular. The process of access to

letting/acquiring a vacant urban accommodation space is fraught with heterosexual behavioural codes, gender-bias stereotypes and discriminatory practices which wittingly or unwittingly undermine single ladies chances of acquiring accommodation of their choices.

Emanating from the above is the cognitive deficiency in landlords and house-agents construction of singlehood. Landlords erroneously view any woman free of marriage mandate who desire to live alone as trading in commercial sex work and perhaps irresponsible. This was found to be untrue because most of the women in the study vehemently rejected and debunked such stereotypical idea. Nevertheless, the landlords' representation of single women seekers of urban accommodation does not exist in vacuum. It is a by-product of patriarchal ideology rooted in male-dominated values. Indeed, a single woman above marriageable age transgresses well-established systems of meaning (Lahad, 2013) and what Knox and Pinch (2006) termed "hetero-patriarchal environment" where process of access to accommodation is laced with male-values.

Thus based upon the observation of this study, the following conclusions are drawn. Gendered relations between men (the gatekeepers of urban accommodation) and single women (seekers of accommodation) exist and shape process of access to urban accommodation. It consists, for the most part, landlords and house-agents representation of single women as deficient in behaviour, irresponsible or wayward and is used to deny single women the right and privilege to urban accommodation. This typecast, usually by male landlords and agents, probably stem from the deep rooted stereotypical view of women in general. Thus, it is noteworthy to state that in spite of modernity, socio-economic progress and the global advocacy against women repression and unequal treatment to men, much has not changed. The research has thus reinforced the earlier findings by demonstrating that the attitude of men in a male-value dominated urban space is still one of prejudice and discriminatory

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practices against the women.

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