

Trends and Patterns of Voluntary and Involuntary Single Women in Nepal

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ABSTRACT

The analysis of single women in Nepal, using census data, plays an important role in understanding the country's demographic and socio-economic context. The study explored the demographic and socio-economic conditions of single women at both national and sub-national levels. Singlehood – whether by choice (voluntary) or due to circumstances (involuntary) – was found to shape the structure of society. The research focused on women aged 10 years and above (N=12,439,247) as recorded in the 2021 National Population and Housing Census (NPHC). Women were grouped into five categories based on their marital status. Data from NSO, 2024, to analyze the trends and patterns of single women. Findings of the study revealed that there is a rise in both voluntary and involuntary singlehood since 2001. The increase in singlehood by choice is largely driven by women's empowerment, while involuntary singlehood is linked to demographic and socio-economic vulnerabilities. The study highlights the need for policies that address the challenges faced by involuntary single women, particularly social protection programs.

Keywords: single women, voluntary singlehood, involuntary singlehood, literacy

INTRODUCTION

The concept of single women in Nepal is deeply embedded in the country's patriarchal social structure and marital status and carries significant social, economic, and cultural implications (Bista, 2019). Single women in Nepal include widows, divorced, separated, and never-married women, particularly those aged 35 and above. The concept is further explained as singlehood which goes beyond simply being unmarried or not in a relationship, it is deeply shaped by cultural norms and societal expectations, around marriage and

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traditional gender roles (Mukherjee et al., 2025). In addition, arranged marriages remain the norm, and individual choices, particularly those that cross caste or cultural lines, are often discouraged. Women, in particular, face limited autonomy in choosing to remain single or in selecting partners, and dating is largely restricted to across the country. Being single is often met with familial pressure, societal scrutiny, and moral judgment, making singlehood a complex and often constrained experience (Lamb, 2022). Understanding this context is essential to grasp the deep-rooted realities of being single in Nepal.

Single women in Nepal represent a substantial and rapidly growing population that faces intense multidimensional challenges within the country's patriarchal structure. According to the 2021 National Population and Housing Census, the proportion of single women has increased dramatically from 5.5 percent in 2011 to 8.0 percent of the total aged 10 years and above, an extensive population of over two million women (NSO, 2024). This category includes widows, divorced women, separated women and never-married women aged 35 and above. About 3.5 percent of males fall in the same category of singlehood among the total male population aged 10 years and above in the same category. The gender differences in singlehood are found in the changing social landscape of Nepal.

The growing body of literature highlights the socio-economic vulnerability of single women in developing countries, particularly within family and households (ADB, 2010; MoL, 2015; NSO, 2024). Development strategies emphasize women's empowerment as essential for household welfare and poverty reduction. Both government and non-government organizations have prioritized reducing the vulnerability for single women, which seems from discriminatory and neglectful social behavior. Gender focused approaches link this vulnerability to deep rooted gender discrimination reinforced by traditional norms and values, causing psychological and socio-economic trauma (UNW, 2017). In patriarchal societies, widowed women are often devalued and seen inauspicious, further exacerbating their marginalization.

The socio-economic dimensions of single women in Nepal, especially widows, is poor have been facing widespread discrimination, abuse, and denial of basic rights, including property rights (Tiwari & Bhattarai, 2017). Additionally, young widows are particularly vulnerable to sexual and emotional exploitation within their families and communities. Deep-rooted religious, cultural, and social norms further isolate them from public and family life (UNV, 2017; Bista, 2019; Tiwari & Bhattarai, 2017). There is a need for government policies to protect their rights, promote ownership, and support their right to remarriage. It was suggested that government and society must work together to empower single women through rights, equality, participation, and freedom.

The aim of this study is to assess the trends and patterns associated with single women in Nepal, with a particular focus on understanding their demographic and socio-economic characteristics. In the context of this study, the category of single women is defined on the basis of marital status and includes all women aged 10 years and above who are identified as single at both the national and sub-national levels. By adopting this framework, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive examination of the trends and patterns of single women across different regions and social groups within the country.

Understanding Singlehood

Single women in Nepal represent a considerable and rapidly growing number and percentage that face reflective multidimensional challenges within the country's patriarchal social structure. The single women in Nepal are defined as women with widows, divorce, separated, and never-married status aged 35 years and above status (NSO, 2024). Singlehood has been explored in previous research with various typologies proposed over time. One of the most influential classifications comes from Stein (1978), who distinguishes between voluntary and involuntary singlehood based on his earlier research involving 20 individuals (Stein, 1975). In that study, many participants highlighted "choice" as a key factor in how they became single. Later, Stein (1978) expanded this framework by introducing a second subsequent literature (Tessler, 2023), Stein ultimately proposed that singlehood can be categorized into four main types: voluntary temporary, voluntary stable, involuntary temporary, and involuntary stable.

More recently, researchers have reverted back to the concept of "choice" as a central lens for understanding singlehood, emphasizing the distinction between those who are "single by choice" and those who are "single by circumstances" (Council et al., 2023; Slonim et al., 2015; Slonim & Schütz, 2015). The category of singles by choice refers to individuals who consciously and intentionally decide to remain single. This decision may be permanent, reflecting a long-term lifestyle preference, or temporary, representing a particular phase of life in which autonomy, career development, self-exploration, or personal freedom is prioritized over romantic involvement. In many cases, being single by choice is associated with positive self-concepts such as independence, agency, and life satisfaction, as individuals perceive their singlehood as an empowering decision rather than a social deficiency.

By contrast, singles by circumstances are individuals who are currently not in a romantic relationship but do not perceive this status as the outcome of an intentional decision. Rather, their singlehood is shaped by external or situational factors beyond their immediate control. These individuals often express a desire to be in a partnership but identify various life circumstances that have hindered their ability to form or maintain romantic connections. Such circumstances may include demanding family obligations, such as the need to care for elderly or ill parents; negative relational histories, such as experiences of betrayal, conflict, or divorce; or broader structural constraints, such as limited opportunities for partner selection within specific cultural or social contexts (Frazier et al., 1996; Jadvā et al., 2009). In this sense, singles by circumstance experience their relationship status as involuntary, situational, and at times even burdensome, as it contrasts with their personal aspirations for companionship or long-term commitment. This conceptual distinction between choice and circumstances is significant because it highlights the diverse meanings, motivations, and life experiences attached to singlehood. It allows researchers to move beyond simplistic categorizations of singles as a homogeneous group and instead recognize the nuanced ways in which agency, context, and lived experience interact to shape people's relationship status.

Yet, the conceptualisation of these categories has left some researchers doubtful about the clarity and rigidity of the distinctions between voluntary and involuntary singlehood.

While the dichotomy between being single “by choice” and “by circumstances” offers a useful starting point, it risks oversimplifying the lived realities of individuals whose experiences of singlehood are often fluid, situational, and continuously evolving. Later studies have demonstrated that voluntary and involuntary singlehood should not be understood as fixed or mutually exclusive categories; rather, they exist on a continuum that is constantly negotiated by individuals in relation to their changing personal circumstances, social contexts, and cultural expectations.

Bernard-Allan (2016), for instance, highlighted this complexity by describing women’s negotiation of singlehood as a dialectical process. She argued that women often navigate singlehood not through a definitive decision or a clear external imposition, but through what she termed “improvisations.” These improvisations involve a series of adaptive strategies, meaning-making practices, and everyday negotiations that allow women to reconcile the tensions between societal expectations of partnership and their own shifting desires, needs, and life circumstances. For some, this may mean reframing singlehood as a temporary phase while investing in self-development; for others, it may involve redefining singlehood as a positive identity that resists dominant cultural narratives privileging marriage and coupledness.

Such findings underscore the dynamic and contested nature of singlehood, suggesting that individuals may oscillate between perceiving their status as voluntary and involuntary depending on life stage, relational histories, emotional needs, and structural conditions. For example, a woman may identify as single by choice during a period of career advancement but later experience her singlehood as involuntary when confronted with loneliness or social pressures to partner. Conversely, those who initially frame their singlehood as circumstantial may, over time, reinterpret it as a deliberate choice aligned with personal growth and independence.

This perspective challenges static categorizations and instead emphasizes the fluid, dialectical, and performative dimensions of singlehood. It highlights that singlehood is not merely a status but an ongoing process of negotiation, one shaped by improvisations, resilience, and the complex interplay between individual agency and structural constraints.

Furthermore, although the terms *choice* and *circumstances* reflect the language some singles use to account for their relationship or marital status, they do not fully capture the broader ways individuals perceive themselves. These terms primarily emphasize the decision-making processes and the narratives people construct about how they became single, rather than offering an accurate portrayal of their current identity or lived experience. Put differently, the distinctions between voluntary and involuntary singlehood, or between singlehood by choice and by circumstances, are more concerned with the pathway through which singlehood was reached than with the present positionality of those who are single. In a similar vein, Stein’s (1978) categories of stability versus temporality also focus on whether and how these decision-making narratives are sustained over time, rather than describing singlehood as a lived and ongoing condition.

Recent research has begun to explore the lives of singles in greater depth through the use of latent profile analysis (LPA). For instance, Park et al. (2023) sought to classify singles into distinct subgroups based on their underlying motives. Their study identified three profiles: singles characterized by strong independence, socially oriented singles, and what they described as “low safety” singles, who show little concern about social exclusion while still pursuing affiliation. Importantly, those in the independence-focused group consistently reported higher levels of satisfaction with singlehood compared to the other profiles. Similarly, Walsh et al. (2022) distinguished ten profiles of singles by examining factors such as friendship satisfaction, self-esteem, neuroticism, extraversion, and overall life satisfaction. Together, these findings underscore the diversity within the single population and shed light on the complex demographic and social dynamics that shape their well-being.

In examining typologies of singlehood, the role of intersectionality cannot be overlooked (Girme et al., 2022; Kislev & Marsh, 2023; Lavender-Stott, 2023). It is essential to acknowledge the influence of multiple, overlapping identities when considering the experiences of single individuals. Studies suggest that these intersecting identities shape people’s lives in complex and nonlinear ways (Ramarajan, 2014; Settles, 2004).

It is crucial to recognize the significance of gender differences when analyzing singles’ identities, as these distinctions shape both societal perceptions and personal experiences of singlehood. Research consistently demonstrates that negative stereotypes surrounding singlehood are disproportionately applied to women compared to men. Single women are frequently portrayed, often in stark contrast to their male counterparts, as leading unfulfilled, sexless, and meaningless lives. They are also depicted as morally deficient or positioned as challengers to patriarchal norms and expectations (Lahad, 2017; Luke & Poulin, 2023; Moore & Radtke, 2015). Such depictions not only stigmatize single women but also reinforce traditional gender ideologies that privilege marriage and family life as the ultimate markers of women’s worth.

This pattern of unequal stereotyping carries a profound cultural dimension. Societal norms and cultural frameworks strongly influence how gender differences are constructed, as well as the ways in which single women, in particular, are perceived (Gargan, 1986; Ochnik & Slonim, 2020). For instance, in cultures where marriage is considered essential for social legitimacy and stability, single women may be judged more harshly than men, who are often allowed greater freedom to delay or even reject marriage without facing comparable stigma.

Furthermore, it is not only perceptions of single men and women that diverge, but also the subjective experiences shaped by normative ideas about marriage, family, and acceptable life trajectories. Such norms place unequal pressure on men and women, reinforcing the belief that women’s value is tied to their roles as wives and mothers (Bernard-Allan, 2016). As a result, women are more likely than men to interpret their singlehood in negative or unstable terms, often internalizing societal expectations that equate their unmarried status with failure, incompleteness, or a lack of social legitimacy. Men, while not entirely free from stigma, generally experience greater social tolerance of singlehood and are less likely to frame their status in terms of personal deficiency.

DATA AND METHODS

The primary source of data for this study is the National Population and Housing Census (NPHC) 2021, which provides a comprehensive and nationally representative dataset highly suitable for examining the status of single women in Nepal. The census records demographic information for the entire population, and for the purpose of this analysis, attention is given to women aged 10 years and above, totaling 12,439,247 individuals. These women are classified into five broad marital-status categories: married, widowed, divorced, separated, and never married. Furthermore, within the category of never married, a distinction is made between women aged 35 years and above and those below 35 years, thereby providing a more nuanced picture of singlehood.

For analytical purposes, the study places particular emphasis on two major categories: **widows** and **single women**, the latter comprising widowed, divorced, separated, and never-married women aged 35 years and above. This categorization allows the study to highlight groups of women who, due to their marital status, may face heightened social and economic vulnerabilities as well as distinct cultural stigmas.

The analysis not only examines the demographic dimensions such as age distribution, literacy levels, and regional variations but also extends to the social and economic characteristics of these groups. Employment status, household roles, living arrangements, and economic participation are assessed in relation to women's singlehood status. This approach provides a multidimensional understanding of how being single interacts with broader structural factors, thereby shaping the lives of women in Nepal.

By situating single women within these demographic, social, and economic contexts, the study seeks to offer an in-depth examination of their realities. This enables a clearer understanding of the challenges they face, as well as their potential contributions to society, which are often overlooked in mainstream policy discussions.

In this study, widows are classified under the category of *involuntary singles* (those single due to circumstances), while divorced, separated, and never-married women aged 35 years and above are grouped as *voluntary singles* (those single by choice). Although there are instances where these categories may overlap, the analysis primarily focuses on widows as representatives of the involuntary single group.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Singlehood Population

The distribution of the population aged 10 years and above by sex, including classifications of voluntary and involuntary singlehood, is presented in Table 1. The NPHC 2021 revealed a clear gender disparity, showing that females significantly outnumber males within the singlehood category. Nepal's total population aged 10 years and above is 23,958,868. Within this group, the proportion of single women, defined as widows, divorced, separated, and never-married women aged 35 years and above accounts for approximately 8 percent of the total female population.

A closer look at the voluntary and involuntary dimensions of singlehood reveals further gender differences. In both categories, the proportion of single females is consistently higher than that of males. This trend is particularly evident in the case of widows, divorced, and separated women, where cultural norms, gender roles, and life expectancy contribute to the disproportionate representation of women in the involuntary single group. The only exception to this pattern is found among the never-married population aged 35 years and above, where men constitute a relatively larger share compared to women

Table 1

Percent distribution of marital/singlehood population by sex, NPHC 2021

Gender	Married		Widow/Widower (Involuntary)		Divorced (Voluntary)		Separated (Voluntary)		Never Married below age 35		Never Married above age 35 years (Voluntary)		Total population 10 year and above
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Male	6810042	59.1	255008	2.2	15852	0.1	35757	0.3	4303752	37.4	99210	0.9	11519621
Female	7999252	64.3	826147	6.6	21287	0.2	59525	0.5	3442333	27.7	90703	0.7	12439247
Total	14809294	61.8	1081155	4.5	37139	0.2	95282	0.4	7746085	32.3	189913	0.8	23958868

Source: Table 4.1, NSO, 2024

Trends of Single Women

The proportion of single women in Nepal has shown a general increase since 2001 across all categories of singlehood, although the trends over time reveal important fluctuations. Data on women aged 10 years and above, disaggregated by marital status, has been systematically documented in national censuses since 1961, providing a valuable long-term perspective on the dynamics of singlehood. Table 2 presents these trends, illustrating that the pattern is neither one of steady increase nor continuous decline but rather a non-linear trajectory shaped by shifting demographic, social, and cultural factors.

In 1961, the proportion of widows was remarkably high, accounting for 14.3 percent of the total female population aged 10 years and above. This figure gradually declined over the subsequent decades, reaching 7.3 percent by 1991. Such a decline may be associated with improvements in life expectancy, changing marriage practices, and gradual social transformations that reduced widowhood at younger ages. However, the trend did not continue in a linear manner. The 2001 census recorded a sharp decline, with widows constituting only 3.7 percent of women aged 10 years and above—a historic low in the recorded census data.

Yet, this trend reversed in the subsequent two decades. By 2021, the proportion of widows had nearly doubled compared to 2001, rising to 6.6 percent. This resurgence indicates that widowhood remains a significant demographic and social reality for women in Nepal. Contributing factors may include gender differences in life expectancy, patterns

of remarriage, and the persistence of cultural norms that often discourage widowed women from remarrying, in contrast to widowed men, who are more socially permitted to do so.

Overall, the facts stress the complex and fluctuating nature of women’s singlehood in Nepal over the past six decades. Rather than following a predictable linear pattern, the proportion of widows and other categories of single women has reflected broader demographic shifts, health outcomes, and cultural attitudes toward marriage and remarriage. The increase since 2001 highlights the continued importance of addressing widowhood as a key dimension of women’s social and economic vulnerability in Nepal.

Table 2

Percent distribution of women aged 10 years and above by marital status, 1961-2021 Nepal censuses

Marital/ Single women status	Nepal Censuses, 1961-2021						
	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001	2011	2021
Married	69.2	70.3	70.8	65.7	65.5	63.9	64.3
Widowed (Involuntary)	14.3	10.1	5.5	7.2	3.7	4.6	6.6
Divorce/Separated (Voluntary)	0.3	0.3	0.4	0.7	0.3	0.4	0.7
Unmarried 35+ years (Voluntary)	-	-	-	-	0.5	0.6	0.7
Total 10+ years female population					8,439,703	10,822,774	12,439,247

Source: Table 19, CBS, 2014 Population Monograph Vol. I, Table 4.5, Table Annex:4.1, Table Annex:4.2, Table Annex:4.3,, NSO, 2023 Nepal Population and Housing Census 2021(National Report), Table 21, NSO, 2024.

The findings from the National Population and Housing Census (NPHC) 2021 reveal a clear decline in the proportion of married women over the last four decades. In 1981, nearly 71 percent of women aged 10 years and above were reported as married, whereas by 2021 this figure had dropped to around 64 percent. This reduction of seven percentage points over forty years is significant, as it reflects not only demographic changes but also shifting social and cultural patterns in relation to marriage and family formation.

This decline in the proportion of married women is directly linked to the rising share of single women across different categories. The data indicates a growing trend in both involuntary singlehood (widows), and voluntary singlehood (divorced, and separated women), particularly among never-married women aged below 35 years. This suggests that a larger segment of the female population is either delaying marriage, choosing to remain single, or experiencing circumstances that place them outside of traditional marital unions.

When the size and proportion of single women are examined over six decades of census data, important structural transformations become evident. The expansion of education, especially among girls, the gradual increase in women’s participation in the labor force, changing aspirations, and exposure to global cultural shifts have all contributed to altering the age and likelihood of marriage. Moreover, demographic factors such as declining fertility, changes in life expectancy, and patterns of migration have also played a role in reshaping the marital structure of the female population.

The share of never-married women aged 35 years and older (voluntary) rose from 0.5 percent in 2001 to 0.7 percent in 2021. The steady decline in married women and the simultaneous increase in single women highlight the fact that singlehood is no longer a marginal phenomenon but an emerging demographic reality in Nepal. This long-term trend emphasizes the need to pay greater scholarly and policy attention to single women as a distinct social category. Their growing visibility in census records over six decades reflects not just demographic shifts but also broader changes in social norms, gender roles, and individual choices within Nepalese society.

Single women by provinces, ecological zones, and urban-rural place of residence

The proportion of single women in Nepal varies considerably across provinces, ecological zones, and urban-rural places of residence. According to the NPHC 2021, Lumbini Province recorded the highest proportion of widows (8.4%), followed by Sudurpashchim (7.3%), Koshi (7.0%), and Madhesh (5.5%) among women aged 10 years and above. Gandaki Province was found to have the highest proportion of single women overall (10.5%), whereas Madhesh reported the lowest proportion (5.9%) of single women among all provinces (Table 3).

When the data is examined by ecological zone, women in the Tarai were more likely to be married (65.2%) compared to those in the Hill (63.5%) and Mountain regions (62.1%). A similar pattern is observed when comparing women by their place of residence. Marriage rates were slightly lower in urban areas (63.0%) compared to peri-urban (65.6%) and rural areas (64.2%). Widowhood, however, was found to be more prevalent in rural (7.3%) and peri-urban areas (6.5%) than in urban areas (6.0%). On the other hand, divorce and separation were relatively higher in urban areas (0.3% and 0.6% respectively) compared to rural and peri-urban settings, suggesting possible links between urban lifestyles, changing social norms, and marital instability (Table 3).

Across provinces, the share of currently married women also shows notable differences. In Madhesh, nearly 67 percent of women aged 10 years and above were married, the highest among all provinces, followed by Gandaki (65.1%) and Sudurpashchim (61.7%). In contrast, the proportion of divorced and separated women was lowest in Madhesh (0.0% divorced and 0.2% separated) compared to other provinces, pointing towards strong cultural or societal influences in marital stability within the province.

Overall, these findings highlight that women's marital and single status in Nepal is shaped by a combination of geographic, cultural, and socio-economic factors (Frazier et al., 1996; Jadva et al., 2009). Higher proportions of widows in Lumbini and Sudurpashchim may reflect demographic structures, migration patterns, and life expectancy differences, while the relatively higher rates of divorce and separation in urban areas indicate a gradual shift in marital behaviors in more urbanized contexts.

Table 3

Percent distribution of women by marital status according to provinces, ecological zone and place of residence, NPHC, 2021

Areas	Marital status						Total women 10 year and above
	Married	Widow (Involuntary)	Divorce (Voluntary)	Separated (Voluntary)	Never married women age 35+ years (Voluntary)	Never married women below 35 years.	
Nepal	64.3	6.6	0.2	0.5	0.7	27.7	12439247
Provinces							
Koshi	64.2	7.0	0.2	0.8	1.2	26.5	2139959
Madhesh	66.7	5.5	0.0	0.1	0.2	27.4	2414905
Bagmati	63.3	6.4	0.2	0.6	1.2	28.2	2665603
Gandaki	65.1	8.4	0.3	0.7	1.1	24.4	1122075
Lumbini	64.3	6.8	0.2	0.4	0.5	27.9	2220519
Karnali	64.2	5.8	0.2	0.4	0.4	30.0	696035
Sudurpashchim	61.7	7.3	0.1	0.2	0.2	30.4	1180151
Ecological Zone							
Mountain	62.1	6.9	0.1	0.4	1.0	29.6	737394
Hill	63.5	7.0	0.2	0.6	1.1	27.6	5146389
Tarai	65.2	6.3	0.1	0.4	0.4	27.5	6555464
Urban-rural residence							
Urban	62.7	6.0	0.3	0.6	0.1	30.4	3415283
Peri-urban	65.6	6.5	0.1	0.4	0.4	27.0	4840273
Rural	64.2	7.3	0.1	0.5	0.8	27.0	4183691

Source: NSO, 2024

Overall, these findings highlight that women's marital and single status in Nepal is shaped by a combination of geographic, cultural, and socio-economic factors. Higher proportions of widows in Lumbini and Sudurpashchim may reflect demographic structures, migration patterns, and life expectancy differences, while the relatively higher rates of divorce and separation in urban areas indicate a gradual shift in marital behaviors in more urbanized contexts.

Distribution of single women by districts

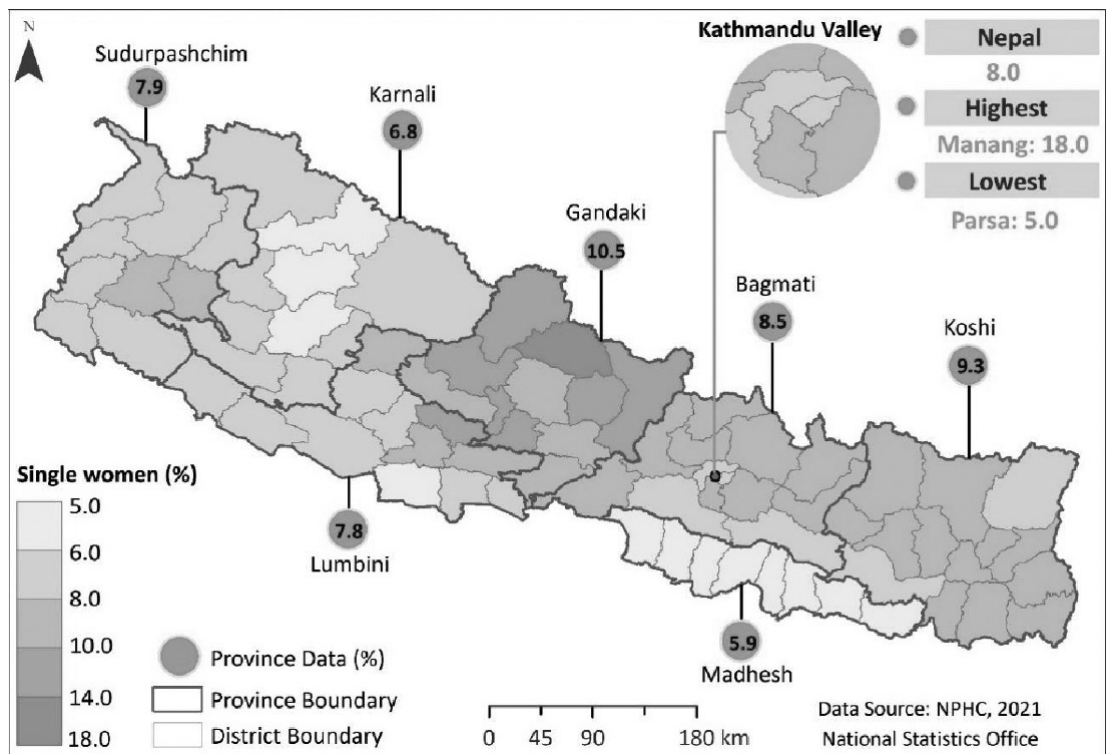
According to NSO (2024), notable variations are observed in the proportion of single women across districts in Nepal. Among women aged 10 years and above, Manang district reported the highest proportion of single women, with nearly 18 percent of the female population identified as single—both voluntary and involuntary. In contrast, Parsa district recorded only 5 percent, the lowest share among all districts (Map 1). A number of other districts also show significant levels, with between 10 to 14 percent of women living as single.

This wide variation across districts reflects not only demographic differences but also broader socio-economic and cultural contexts that shape women’s life choices and circumstances. Districts like Manang, with high out-migration, lower population density, and unique ecological conditions, tend to have a greater proportion of single women, possibly due to delayed marriage, widowhood, or separation linked to men’s labor migration abroad. In contrast, districts such as Parsa, situated in the Tarai region with stronger adherence to traditional family structures and higher fertility norms, show comparatively lower rates of singlehood.

The diversity in single women’s prevalence across districts suggests that Nepal’s changing socio-economic and cultural landscape is deeply influencing marital and family patterns. Rising education levels, urbanization, shifts in gender roles, and increased mobility are creating spaces for voluntary singlehood, while structural challenges such as poverty, conflict, migration, and health vulnerabilities also contribute to involuntary singlehood. Thus, the district-level variations highlight not only demographic realities but also the intersection of tradition, modernity, and socio-economic transformation in shaping women’s life trajectories across Nepal.

Map 1

Percent distribution of single women by districts, NPHC 2021



Source: NSO, 2024

Living alone

In this report, *living alone* is defined as the condition in which an individual resides as the sole member of a household, without the presence of any other family or non-family members. This phenomenon is particularly significant in understanding the vulnerability of single women in Nepal, as it is closely intertwined with the country’s social, cultural, and demographic context. Living alone often reflects broader structural issues such as migration, demographic aging, marital dissolution, and changing family norms, all of which shape women’s everyday lives.

When marital status trends are compared with the situation of women living alone, a noticeable shift can be observed over the last two decades. In 2001, about 53 percent of married women were recorded as living alone, which slightly decreased to 49 percent in 2011 and further declined to 33 percent in 2021. This gradual decline may be linked to improved household integration, rising opportunities for family cohabitation, and possibly reduced abandonment or spousal separation among married women. Similar declining patterns are observed consistently across all ecological zones of Nepal, suggesting that changes in household composition are not confined to a single geographic area but represent a nationwide trend.

In contrast, the trend of single women living alone presents a different and more concerning picture. At the national level, 37.9 percent of single women lived alone in 2001. This proportion rose to 41 percent in 2011 and further escalated to 55 percent by 2021. Such a steep rise clearly illustrates the growing phenomenon of single women becoming isolated within households, regardless of ecological zones. The data reveals that while married women living alone are decreasing, the incidence of single women living alone is steadily increasing, pointing toward widening gaps in household support structures for this demographic group.

A similar trend is also evident among widows, who represent a significant share of single women in Nepal. Increasing widowhood combined with the breakdown of extended family support systems, particularly in rural areas, has contributed to more widows living alone. Factors such as out-migration of children for employment, urbanization, and changing values regarding intergenerational care further exacerbate the situation.

Table 4

Proportion of single women and widows among women living alone in the households by ecological zones, NPHC 2001-2021

Areas	2001				2011				2021			
	Married	Single women	Widow	Women living alone in the household	Married	Single women	Widow	Women living alone in the household	Married	Single women	Widow	Women living alone in the household
Mountain	48.6	45.5	31.8	1907	41.6	45.9	34.9	12594	40.4	62.4	50.9	18735

Hill	55.0	35.9	28.7	8981	44.5	39.7	31.1	82420	43.5	54.3	43.2	122293
Tarai	27.3	38.7	34.2	5729	49.7	42.5	37.0	44644	23.5	55.1	47.1	71522
Nepal	53.2	37.9	31.0	16617	49.4	41.2	33.3	139658	45.1	55.3	45.2	212550

Source: NSO, 2024

Single women by caste/ethnicity

Caste and ethnicity remain among the most influential social indicators in understanding the position of women in Nepal's socio-economic and demographic context. These categories shape women's life experiences, access to resources, and social recognition, often determining the opportunities and constraints they encounter across different stages of life. The NPHC 2021 provides important insights into how women's marital and single status differ across caste and ethnic groups, revealing deep-rooted inequalities and social patterns that continue to persist.

As shown in Table 5, widowhood is particularly prominent among Hill caste groups, where 7.5 percent of women are widows. Hill Dalits also exhibit a high share of widows (7.2%), reflecting the intersection of social disadvantage and vulnerability. In contrast, religious and linguistic minority groups have comparatively lower widowhood rates (4.3%), possibly indicating differences in demographic composition, life expectancy, or migration patterns. The data also highlight that divorce and separation are not evenly distributed across caste and ethnic categories. Mountain/Hill Janajati women show relatively higher proportions of divorce (0.3%) and separation (0.7%), whereas Madhesh/Tarai Dalit women have much lower figures (0.1% divorced and 0.2% separated). This suggests that cultural norms and social sanctions surrounding marriage dissolution vary across communities, with some groups showing greater tolerance or higher exposure to marital instability than others.

Marriage continues to dominate women's lives across all caste and ethnic groups, but the prevalence varies significantly. Among Hill caste women, almost two-thirds (64.3%) are married. In comparison, the share of married women is much higher among the "others, foreigners, and not stated" category (76.1%), followed by Madhesh/Tarai Dalits (66.6%) and Tarai Janajati (66.2%). Hill Dalits, however, report relatively lower levels of marriage, indicating potential barriers such as poverty, discrimination, or social exclusion that may delay or limit marriage opportunities.

Patterns of never-married women aged 35 years and above also reveal important contrasts. Mountain/Hill Janajati women show comparatively higher proportions (1.5%) of never-married status than Madhesh/Tarai Dalit women (0.1%), suggesting regional, cultural, and perhaps economic influences on marriage timing and family formation. Similarly, women belonging to the "others, foreigners, and not stated" group also record higher levels (1.5%) of single status compared to Madhesh/Tarai caste groups (0.2%). These variations reflect how caste/ethnic hierarchies intersect with women's personal and family lives, shaping decisions or constraints around marriage and singlehood.

When considering all categories of single women, including widows, Mountain/Hill Janajati groups register the highest share (9%), whereas women from linguistic and religious groups show the lowest (5%) (Table 5). This demonstrates how some communities face a greater burden of singlehood, often influenced by factors such as migration of male members, higher risks of widowhood, or socio-cultural practices that influence marital stability Lahad, 2017; Luke & Poulin, 2023; Moore & Radtke, 2015).

Overall, the caste and ethnic dimensions of women’s marital and single status highlight the persistence of structural inequalities in Nepalese society. Women from marginalized groups such as Dalits and Janajatis often face compounded disadvantages, not only social and economic exclusion but also greater exposure to marital vulnerability (NSO, 2024). Conversely, groups with relatively higher social or economic standing display different patterns of marital stability, widowhood, or voluntary singlehood (Frazier et al., 1996; Jadva et al., 2009). These differences underline the need to view women’s marital and demographic experiences not as uniform but as deeply embedded within the diverse cultural, regional, and caste/ethnic landscapes of Nepal.

Table 5
Percent distribution of women aged 10 years and above by caste/ethnicity and marital status, Nepal, NPHC 2021

Caste/ethnicity	Marital women status						Total number of women 10 years and above
	Married	Widow	Divorced	Separated	Never married 35+ years	Never Married below 35 years	
Nepal	64.3	6.6	0.2	0.5	0.7	27.7	12439247
Hill Castes	64.3	7.5	0.2	0.5	0.6	26.9	3883717
Madhesh/Tarai Caste	65.9	5.5	0.1	0.2	0.2	28.3	1820625
Mountain/Hill Janajati	63.2	6.9	0.3	0.7	1.5	27.5	3375156
Tarai Janajati	66.2	6.0	0.1	0.3	0.3	27.0	1137991
Hill Dalits	62.4	7.2	0.2	0.7	0.5	28.9	1083784
Madhesh/Tarai Dalit	66.6	5.7	0.1	0.2	0.1	27.3	535159
Religious/Linguistic groups	62.8	4.3	0.1	0.3	0.3	32.3	543875
Others, Foreigners & Not stated	76.1	5.5	0.1	0.2	1.5	16.6	58940

Source: NSO, 2024

Literacy trends of single women

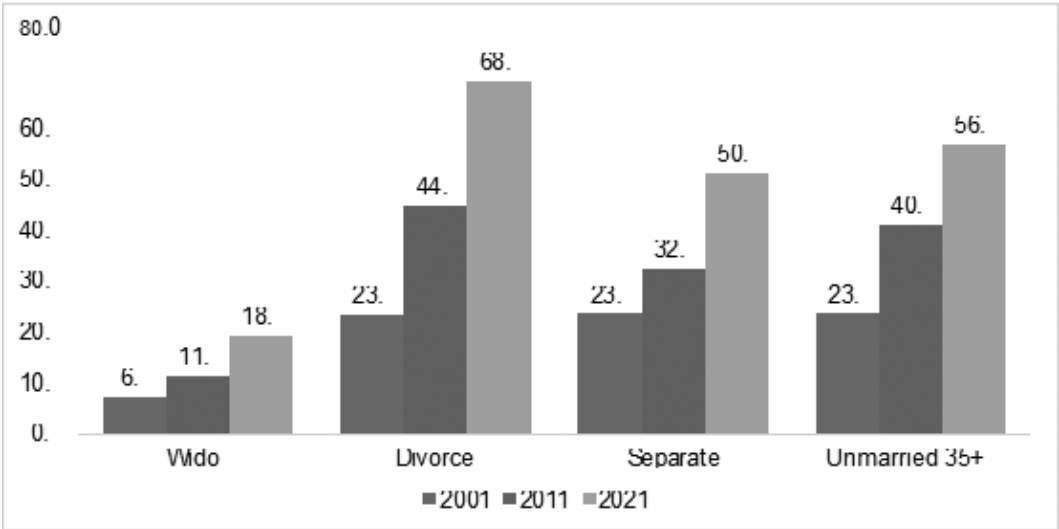
An increasing trend of literacy has been observed among all marital categories of single women in Nepal over the past two decades, reflecting both the gradual expansion of educational opportunities and the broader socio-economic changes that have taken place in the country. Education, which was once largely inaccessible to women—especially those who were widowed, divorced, or separated has steadily improved, though disparities still remain.

According to national data, the literacy rate among divorced women has shown the most remarkable progress. In 2001, only about 23 percent of divorced women were literate; by 2021, this figure had risen to 68.9 percent. This sharp increase suggests that women who are divorced are now more likely to have benefited from the expansion of formal education and adult literacy programs, as well as from changing societal attitudes that value women’s education as a tool for empowerment and resilience.

A similar upward trend is evident among separated women. In 2001, their literacy rate stood at only 23 percent, but by 2021, it had more than doubled to 51 percent. While this represents a significant achievement, it also highlights the gap that still exists compared to divorced women. Separated women often face unique social and economic vulnerabilities, including limited household support and stigmatization, which may restrict their opportunities to access or continue education. Nonetheless, the progress made over the two decades demonstrates that structural improvements in educational access are reaching this group, albeit at a slower pace.

Figure 1

Literacy trends of single women



Source: NSO, 2024

Widows, historically among the most disadvantaged groups of women in Nepal, also show an improvement in literacy, though the levels remain very low compared to other categories. In 2001, only 7 percent of widows were literate—a reflection of past systemic exclusion, limited access to education for women in older generations, and deep-rooted cultural restrictions. By 2021, this figure had increased to 19 percent. Although the growth is modest compared to divorced and separated women, the upward trend signals gradual

but important progress in breaking the cycle of illiteracy among widows, who often remain among the most vulnerable in society.

Overall, the trends depicted in Figure 5.4 illustrate that while literacy among single women is improving across all categories, the pace of progress is uneven. Divorced women are emerging as a comparatively more empowered group in terms of education, while widows continue to lag far behind. These disparities highlight the need for targeted literacy and lifelong learning programs tailored specifically to the most marginalized groups, particularly widows and older women in rural areas (Bista, 2019). Addressing these gaps is critical not only for enhancing their individual well-being but also for ensuring their active participation in social, economic, and political life.

Labour Force Participation

The NPHC 2021 provides a comprehensive picture of women's labour force participation in Nepal by marital status, highlighting both progress and persistent disparities. Among the total female population aged 10 years and above (12,439,247), nearly 60 percent were economically active, a category that includes women who were usually employed, usually unemployed, or not usually active but available for work (Table 6.3). Within this group, 34 percent were classified as "*usually employed*" that is, they were engaged in income-generating activities to produce goods or provide services for pay or profit. This category is defined as women who had a job for at least six months or had worked three to five months during the last 12 months.

When the figures are disaggregated by marital status, significant variations emerge. Among married women, about 44.5 percent were usually employed. This suggests that nearly half of married women balance household responsibilities with formal or informal economic activities, reflecting both the necessity of dual-income households and the gradual integration of women into Nepal's labor market. However, the rates are much higher for divorced and separated women. More than half of all divorced women (53.6%) and separated women (51.9%) were usually employed in 2021. This comparatively higher engagement in employment may reflect both opportunity and necessity: many divorced and separated women are compelled to work to sustain themselves and their dependents due to the absence of a spouse as a primary economic provider. Their higher participation rates, therefore, can be understood as a survival strategy as well as a sign of resilience.

In contrast, widows exhibit a markedly different trend. Only about one-fourth (24.6%) of widows were usually employed, while more than half (52.5%) of widows were recorded as economically inactive. This reflects both age structure—since widowhood is more common among older women—and systemic barriers that limit widows' access to labor markets. Social stigmas, lack of education, limited mobility, and the erosion of traditional support systems also contribute to widows' exclusion from productive economic life. Their economic vulnerability is further compounded by dependency on remittances, family support, or

irregular and low-paying informal activities.

Table 6

Proportion of women 10 years and above by marital status and economic activity status, NPHC 2021

Economic activity status	Marital status						Total women
	Married	Widow	Divorced	Separated	Never married 35+ years	Never Married below 35 years	
Usually Employed	44.5	24.6	53.6	51.9	41.7	11.1	34.0
Usually, Unemployed	3.1	1.3	4.8	3.5	3.0	3.1	2.9
Not Usually Active	22.8	21.3	17.4	19.0	18.4	25.2	23.3
Not Economically Active	29.3	52.5	23.8	25.2	36.5	60.5	39.5
Economic activity not stated	0.3	0.3	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.2	0.3
Total female population	7999252	826147	21287	59525	90703	3442333	12439247

Source: NSO, 2024

Taken together, these figures highlight that women's economic participation in Nepal is not uniform but closely linked to marital status. Divorced and separated women appear to be more active in the labor market, driven by necessity and perhaps a degree of social independence, while widows remain marginalized and disproportionately inactive. Married women, although moderately engaged, often face dual burdens of care and work that limit their opportunities for more secure or profitable employment (Tiwari & Bhattarai, 2017).

CONCLUSION

The trends and patterns of voluntary and involuntary single women in Nepal reflect the profound demographic and socio-economic transformations that the country has been experiencing over the past decades. Singlehood, once considered a marginal demographic phenomenon in Nepalese society, is now emerging as a significant social reality that illustrates the intersection of modernization, migration, cultural shifts, and persistent structural inequalities.

This demographic shift indicates that the growing number of single women brings both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, the rise of **voluntary single women**—those who remain unmarried by choice, delay marriage, or prioritize education, careers, and personal autonomy—demonstrates a gradual but important shift in women's empowerment. This group represents changing aspirations, increasing access to education, and greater participation in the workforce. Their presence signals progress toward gender equality,

individual choice, and the breaking away from rigid cultural expectations around marriage as the sole defining role for women.

On the other hand, the growth of **involuntary single women**—including widows, divorced, and separated women, as well as those unable to marry due to poverty, social exclusion, or structural barriers—highlights ongoing vulnerabilities in Nepalese society. Factors such as rising poverty, the longer life expectancy of women compared to men, the large-scale outmigration of men for foreign labor, and deeply embedded socio-cultural restrictions contribute to the increase in this category. For many involuntary single women, singlehood is not a choice but rather a consequence of structural and demographic forces that leave them economically insecure and socially marginalized.

The coexistence of these two categories of single women underscores the dual nature of Nepal's demographic reality, one driven by empowerment, opportunity, and modern values, and the other by hardship, dependency, and exclusion. This duality requires careful and nuanced understanding by policymakers. While voluntary singlehood may be celebrated as a marker of progress, involuntary singlehood calls for urgent social protection, economic support, and destigmatization measures.

The increasing prevalence of single women therefore demands a policy shift. The government should recognize single women as a diverse and growing demographic group with distinct needs rather than a homogenous category. Specific policies are needed to:

- **Empower voluntary single women** through greater access to higher education, skill development, and equal employment opportunities so that their choices are supported and sustained.
- **Protect involuntary single women** through targeted welfare programs, widow pensions, social security schemes, and affordable healthcare to reduce their vulnerability.
- **Address structural causes** of involuntary singlehood, including poverty reduction, gender-sensitive labor migration policies, and interventions to dismantle discriminatory socio-cultural norms.
- **Promote social acceptance** by combating stigma and prejudice associated with singlehood, ensuring that women—regardless of marital status—are valued and included in community life.

In conclusion, the growing presence of single women in Nepal is both a sign of empowerment and a reminder of persistent inequalities. Recognizing this complexity is essential for crafting inclusive policies that not only respond to vulnerabilities but also harness the transformative potential of women's independence in shaping Nepal's social and economic future.

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