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Social engagement, social networks, and well-being of older adults by gender and marital status

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ROSA Research
Brief Series
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**SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT, SOCIAL
NETWORKS, AND WELL-BEING OF
OLDER ADULTS BY GENDER AND
MARITAL STATUS**

Social engagement, social networks, and well-being of older adults by gender and marital status

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Key findings

1. Overall, single men have significantly lower social engagement scores (defined as an individual's social and emotional connection with people and their community through social interactions and activities) than married men and married women, while scores of social engagements for single women do not differ significantly from married men and women.
 - a. Over 1 in 5 single men (21.62%) do not engage in any of the social activities more than once a week, compared to about 13% of single women, 9% of married men, and 8% of married women.
 - b. About 9 in 10 married men (89.87%), married women (91.35%) and single women (88.43%) contact people via digital technology at least once a week, compared to slightly over 3 in 4 single men (77.30%).

2. In terms of network size and strength, married men, married women, and single women generally have more close contacts (relatives and friends) and stronger networks (more frequent contact, feel closer and more satisfied) compared to single men.
 - a. Single men have fewer close relatives than married men and women and single women. Over 1 in 3 single men (35.87%) reported having only one or no close relatives, compared to less than 1 in 4 for married men (23.02%) and single women (24.61%), and less than 1 in 5 for married women (19.22%).
 - b. Single women have significantly greater number of close friends than married individuals, with about 1 in 4 single women (24.23%) who reported 5 or more close friends, compared to less than 1 in 5 married women (16.63%) and married men (18.18%).
 - c. Married individuals contact their five close contacts more frequently on average than single individuals. 4 in 5 married women (80.89%) and 3 in 4 married men (74.01%) contact two or more of their close contacts at least weekly, while the proportion of single individuals who do so is lower at about 70% in women and 60% in men.
 - d. Married women feel significantly closer and more satisfied with their closest contacts than all other groups. Single women and married men feel significantly closer and more satisfied with their closest contacts compared to single men.

3. Overall, married men and married women experience significantly greater social support than their single counterparts. Single women experience significantly greater social support than single men.
 - a. Married men experience significantly greater instrumental support than all other groups.
 - b. Single men experience significantly less instrumental and emotional support than all other groups. Only about 3 in 5 single men reported receiving emotional support (61.62%) and instrumental support (57.30%) at least some of the time on average, compared to over 3 in 4 single women and over 4 in 5 married individuals.

4. Single men experience significantly lower overall life satisfaction, physical health satisfaction, mental health satisfaction, economic situation satisfaction, social well-being scores, feelings of social isolation and perceived helpfulness than all other groups.
 - a. At least 1 in 2 married men (52.60%), married women (54.21%), and single women (50.90%) are satisfied with their life as a whole, while only over 1 in 3 single men (37.84%) reported being satisfied.

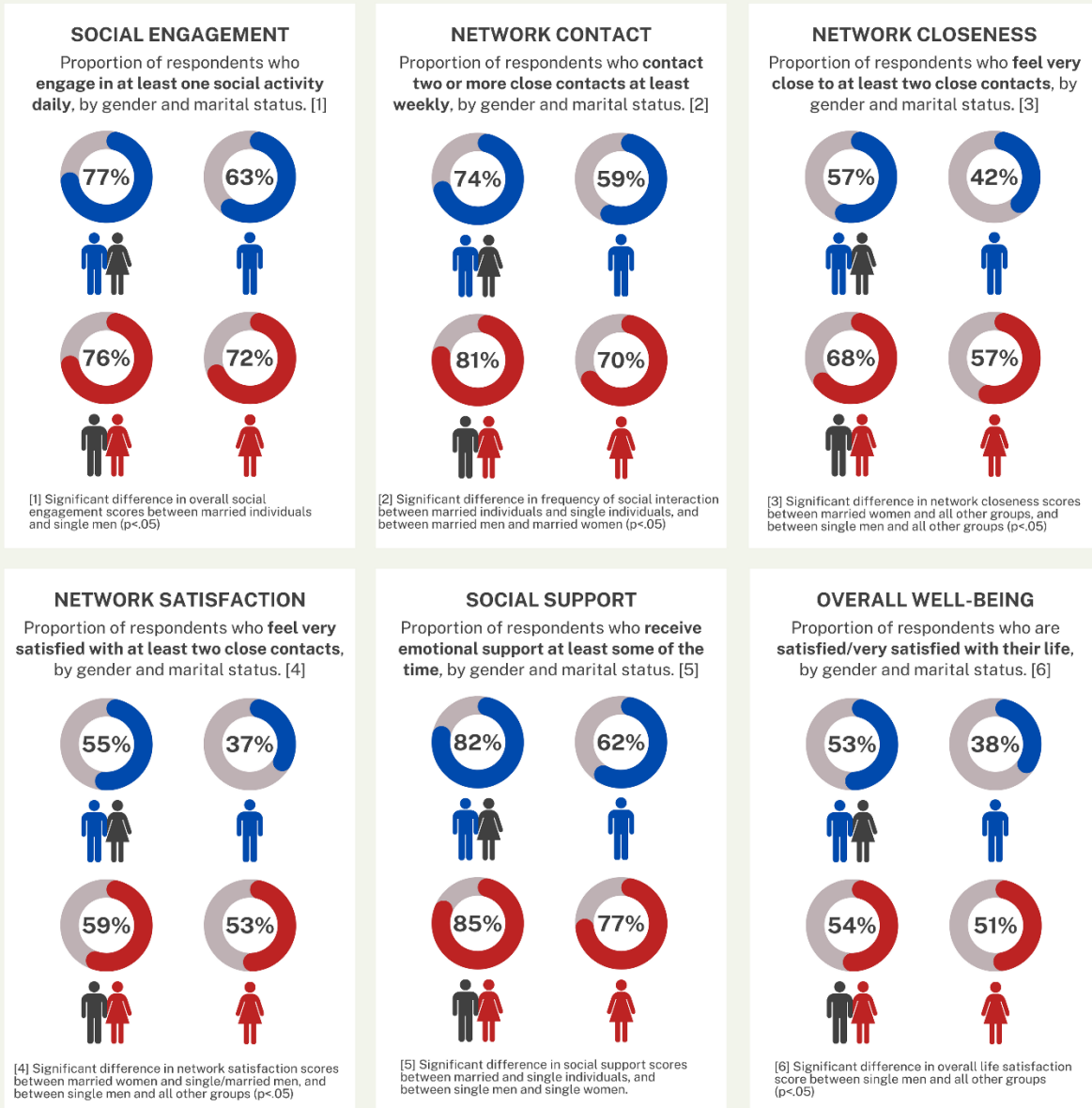
Policy implications

1. Increase community efforts to engage men, especially single men, in social activities such as the more recent all-male interest groups run by some of the Active Ageing Centres (AACs) (Ang, 2023). There could be specific outreach efforts for single men, or gender-based activities that may be co-facilitated with older adults. This may address the inertia faced by some single men to participate in such activities.
2. In accordance with our past work, increasing perceived helpfulness may result in a lower sense of social isolation (Nuqoba et al., 2024). Promoting social participation through volunteerism through initiatives like the National Health Group (NHG) Network for Senior Volunteers, or other community-based engagements like Project Silverlight, may facilitate social engagement.
3. With the demographic shift and increasing trend of rising singlehood and delayed marriages, addressing policy narratives about gender norms may be important to promote greater inclusivity. Policymakers may want to consider addressing societal attitudes toward singlehood, especially for single men, to create positive shifts away from stereotypes to support the well-being of all individuals. Further studies on this segment of society are needed to better understand their aspirations as well as identify effective interventions to address the well-being of different marital groups of men and women.

A COMPARISON BY GENDER AND MARITAL STATUS

Social Engagement, Social Networks, and Social Support of Older Adults

Using data from the Singapore Life Panel® (SLP), with a sample of 5,611 married or single (never married) individuals from survey data collected in August 2023.



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INTRODUCTION

Singapore is experiencing a significant demographic transition, with almost 27% of the population aged 65 and above by 2030 (Ng et al., 2022). This shift is accompanied by declining fertility rates, later marriages, and a growing number of singles (Straughan, 2012), potentially leading to increased instances of social isolation. Studies also broadly indicate that singlehood is linked to poorer health outcomes, highlighting the importance of supporting the well-being of singles (Kim, 2023; Shapiro & Keyes, 2008). Recent local reports highlight gender disparity in activities organised by voluntary welfare organizations, with a predominance of female participants and challenges in engaging male attendees (Lau, 2023; V. Lee, 2023). Therefore, this brief aims to provide a comprehensive examination of the differences in well-being, social engagement, and social networks for groups of married and unmarried males and females. This may provide more detailed insight to policymakers about gender disparity for organised activities, or related policies that address social integration.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social engagement

Social engagement, defined as an individual's social and emotional connection with people and their community through social interactions and activities (Park, 2009; Wang et al., 2021), has been proposed as a core component of active ageing (WHO, 2002). Studies have linked social activities like physical exercise or volunteering with positive health and well-being outcomes, such as decreased frailty (Andrew et al., 2008) and better mental health (Litwin, 2012; Nelson et al., 2013). According to activity theory, individuals who participate in social activities as they age are more likely to remain satisfied with life and maintain positive attitudes, contributing to better health perceptions (Park, 2009). Married older adults tend to have a higher degree of social engagement and social support (Kim, 2023), where marriage itself potentially serving as an instrument to which older adults can foster engagement with a wider range of social activities (Shapiro & Keyes, 2008).

Social networks and social support

As individuals age, social networks often change in size and composition. For older adults, this frequently results in a shrinking and a less diverse social network due to retirement, relocation, or the loss of friends and family (Cornwell et al., 2008). This may result in a greater sense of isolation, which is typically associated with unfavourable physical health and well-being outcomes (Sohn et al., 2017). Having a larger social network typically provides more social support, which may benefit their sense of agency, self-efficacy and resilience (Berkman et al., 2000; Zhang et al., 2019). However, the quality of social networks also has bearing on subjective well-being. Small but high-quality social networks (i.e., degree of closeness, etc.) positively correlates with well-being compared to low quality networks (Bruine de Bruin et al., 2020; Pinqart & Sørensen, 2000). Furthermore, older adults who formed consistent relationships with a wider range of individuals usually demonstrated higher levels of physical and emotional well-being (Fingerman et al., 2020).

The role of gender and marital status

Gender and marital status often shape the social engagement, well-being and network patterns of older adults. For instance, some single or widowed older women with more restrictive social networks, may experience lower social support compared to their married counterparts (Harling et al., 2020). In contrast to this, theories of gender roles often describe women as being more relationally oriented

(Rivera & Scholar, 2020). They are more willing to form stronger social ties and support, potentially benefitting overall well-being or life satisfaction. The consequences of social engagement may also differ by gender. For instance, the development of friendships was found to be beneficial for cognitive functioning for women but not men (Zunzunegui et al., 2003). According to gender stereotypes, men's approach to forming relations and social connections is also likely more functional in nature, focusing on problem solving approaches (Eagly & Wood, 1999). As for marital status, the literature tends to evidence that married individuals often report better social well-being (Kim, 2023). Married couples may double their social resources as social networks can stem from both partners, and that spouses might be an additional source of social support (Shapiro & Keyes, 2008). These imply that social policy and interventions should target specific needs of different groups of married and unmarried individuals and consider gender differences in how relations are formed.

STUDY

Considering the growing number of singles and differential patterns of social engagements and well-being between married and unmarried individuals, it is important to provide nuanced understanding of the well-being of these groups. This would help policymakers identify vulnerable groups and offer targeted suggestions about policy development for social isolation, or social policies to support the growing number of singles. As there appears to be a lack of male representation in social activities for older adults, our brief therefore compares the differences in social engagements, well-being, and social networks among married men, married women, single men, and single women.

Data

This study uses data from the Singapore Life Panel® (SLP), a population-representative online panel survey that has been administered monthly since 2015 (see Vaithianathan et al. (2021) for more details on the sampling and recruitment methodology). The SLP had close to 8,000 active monthly respondents as of January 2024, with an average monthly response rate of about 6,500 to 7,000 respondents. Respondents are older Singapore residents aged between 53 and 79 in 2024 along with their spouses. For this study, we included respondents who were either married or single (never married), resulting in a sample size of 5,611 respondents based on survey data collected in August 2023.

Analytical strategy

Respondents were categorised into four groups: married men, married women, single men, and single women. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to test for differences in the means of social engagement, social networks, social support, and well-being variables. We then report Tukey's HSD pairwise comparison post-hoc to ascertain mean differences score between four groups, if the one-way ANOVA reach statistical significance at the 0.05 confidence level. Thereafter, we provide descriptive statistics comparing the proportions of responses for individual items where appropriate.

Demographic description

A greater proportion of respondents are married (89.77%), and singles comprised 10.23% of our study sample (see Table 1). In our study sample, a larger majority of male respondents were married (93.61%) compared to female respondents (85.68%). A greater proportion of married men attained post-secondary education, while a larger proportion of married women only attained primary or secondary education. A greater proportion of single women have at least post-secondary education compared to single men. Most single men and women live in smaller housing types, with almost half of them living in 1-3 room HDBs, compared to less than 1 in 5 for married men and women. Among single men and women, about half of them reported living alone while the other half reported living with others.

Table 1. Demographic percentage breakdown of respondents by gender and marital status in August 2023.

Characteristic	Marital status	
	Married	Single
<i>Men</i>	n=2,709	n=185
Age, years	66.58 (SD=5.28)	64.56 (SD=5.00)
Education level		
Primary/no education	16.34	22.16
Secondary education	38.24	40.54
Post-secondary w/o university	23.98	17.84
University	21.44	19.46
Housing type		
HDB 1-3 room	13.50	48.65
HDB 4-5 room	66.44	39.46
Private apartment/property	20.05	11.89
Living arrangement		
Living alone	0.00	50.27
Living with others	100.00	49.73
<i>Women</i>	n=2,328	n=389
Age, years	65.49 (SD=5.25)	66.12 (SD=5.17)
Education level		
Primary/no education	26.09	13.65
Secondary education	45.26	44.88
Post-secondary w/o university	18.04	22.57
University	10.60	18.90
Housing type		
HDB 1-3 room	16.01	47.16
HDB 4-5 room	64.52	41.75
Private apartment/property	19.46	11.08
Living arrangement		
Living alone	0.00	52.19
Living with others	100.00	47.81

FINDINGS

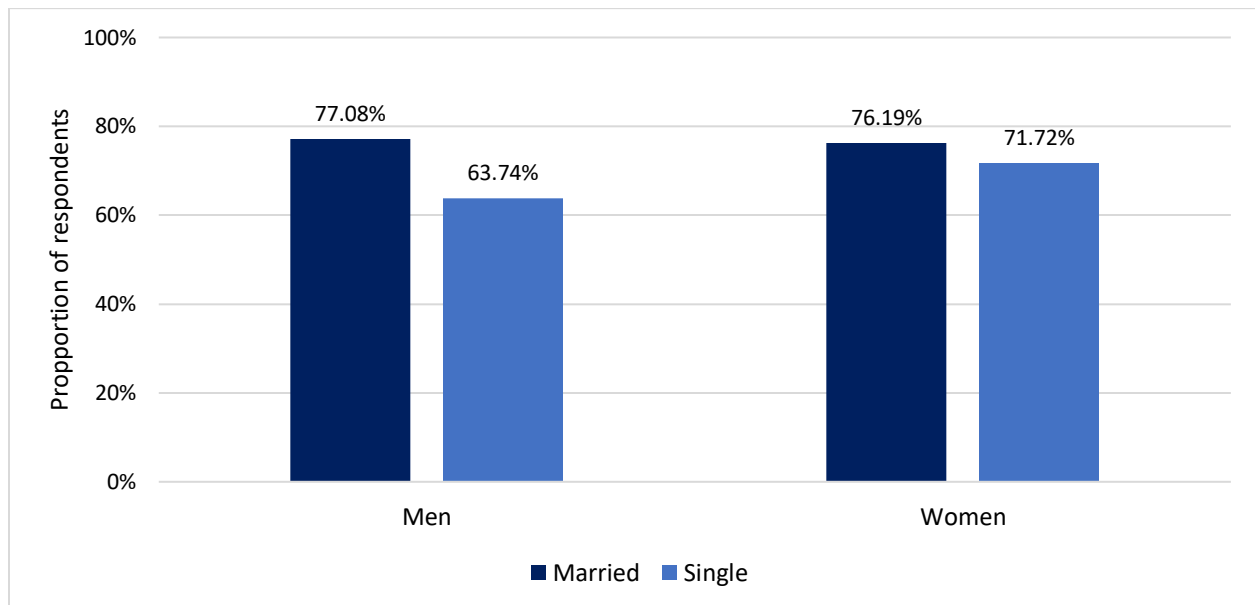
Social engagement

This was measured by the frequency of engaging in eight of the following activities in the previous month: visiting friends or family, religious activities (including attending church, mosque, temple or other place of worship), group activities (including going to clubs, Community Centres or Senior Activity Centres, playing cards or mahjong), physical activities (including exercises, swimming, going for a walk), hobbies (including shopping, gardening, attending courses, arts and craft), spending time outdoors in parks, greenspaces and nature, volunteering, and contacting people via digital technology (including phone calls, video calls, text messages or email). Responses were on a 5-point scale (1 “Daily” to 5 “Never”). Total social engagement score was summed from the reverse code of all eight items (min=8, max=40).

Post-hoc analyses showed that married men ($M=20.24$, $SD=5.43$) and married women ($M=20.07$, $SD=5.45$) have significantly greater overall social engagement scores than single men ($M=18.10$, $SD=6.06$) ($p<.05$), but did not differ significantly from single women ($M=19.45$, $SD=5.86$).

By proportions, over 3 in 4 married men (77.08%) and married women (76.19%) engage in at least one of the eight social activities, and these are higher compared to single women (71.72%) and single men (63.24%). Further, over 1 in 5 single men (21.62%) do not engage in any of the social activities more than once a week, compared to 12.63% of single women, 9.29% of married men and 7.92% of married women.

Figure 1. Proportion of respondents who engage in at least one social activity daily, by gender and marital status.



Performing one-way ANOVAs for each of 8 items, significant differences in mean frequency of each activity between groups ($p<.05$) are visiting friends or family, religious activities, physical activities,

spending time outdoors, and contacting people via digital technology. Post-hoc analyses compared the means of each group for five activities below.

Visiting friends and family

Married men (M=2.56, SD=1.16) and women (M=2.64, SD=1.17) have significantly greater frequencies of social visits with friends and family than single men (M=2.29, SD=1.25) and women (M=2.29, SD=1.14).

Religious activities

The frequency of religious activity was significantly different between single men (M=1.66, SD=1.09) and single women (M=2.03, SD=1.14). No significant differences were observed when comparing all other groups; married men (M=1.88, SD=1.00) and women (1.91, SD=0.99).

Physical activities

Married men (M=3.21, SD=1.44) have significantly greater frequencies of engaging in physical activities than married women (M=2.99, SD=1.46), single men (M=2.91, SD=1.62), and single women (M=2.90, SD=1.53).

Spending time outdoors

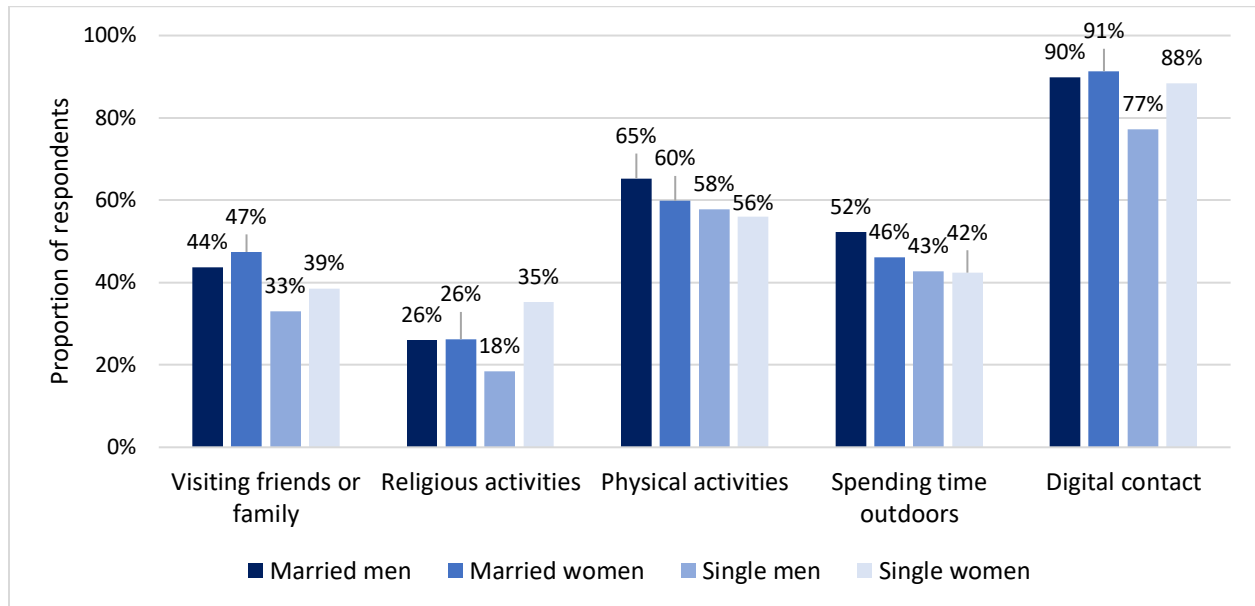
Married men (M=2.77, SD=1.43) have significantly greater frequencies of spending time outdoors than married women (M=2.58, SD=1.41) and single women (M=2.46, SD=1.42). No significant difference was found between single men (M=2.50, SD=1.50) and all other groups.

Digital contact

Married women (M=4.45, SD=1.04) and men (M=4.42, SD=1.09), have significantly greater frequencies of digital contact than single women (M=4.29, SD=1.18) and single men (M=3.84, SD=1.51), while single women have significantly greater frequencies of digital contact than single men.

We further summarise the proportions of each group who engaged in each of the five activities at least weekly in Figure 2. Close to 1 in 2 married men (43.77%) and married women (47.44%) visit friends and family at least weekly, compared to only 1 in 3 of single men (32.97%) and close to 2 in 5 of single women (38.56%). Over 1 in 3 single women (35.22%) participated in religious activities at least weekly compared to under 1 in 5 single men (18.38%). Slightly more than half of married men engage in physical or outdoor activities (65.32% and 52.57% respectively) at least weekly compared to other groups with lower proportions who engage in such activities weekly. About 9 in 10 married men (89.87%), married women (91.35%), and single women (88.43%) contact people digitally, compared to slightly over 3 in 4 single men (77.30%).

Figure 2. Proportion of respondents who engage in the following activities at least weekly, by gender and marital status.



Social networks

Respondents were asked about their network size (number of close relatives, neighbours, coworkers, and friends) and network strength (measured by their feelings of closeness, satisfaction, and frequency of interaction with their five closest contacts).

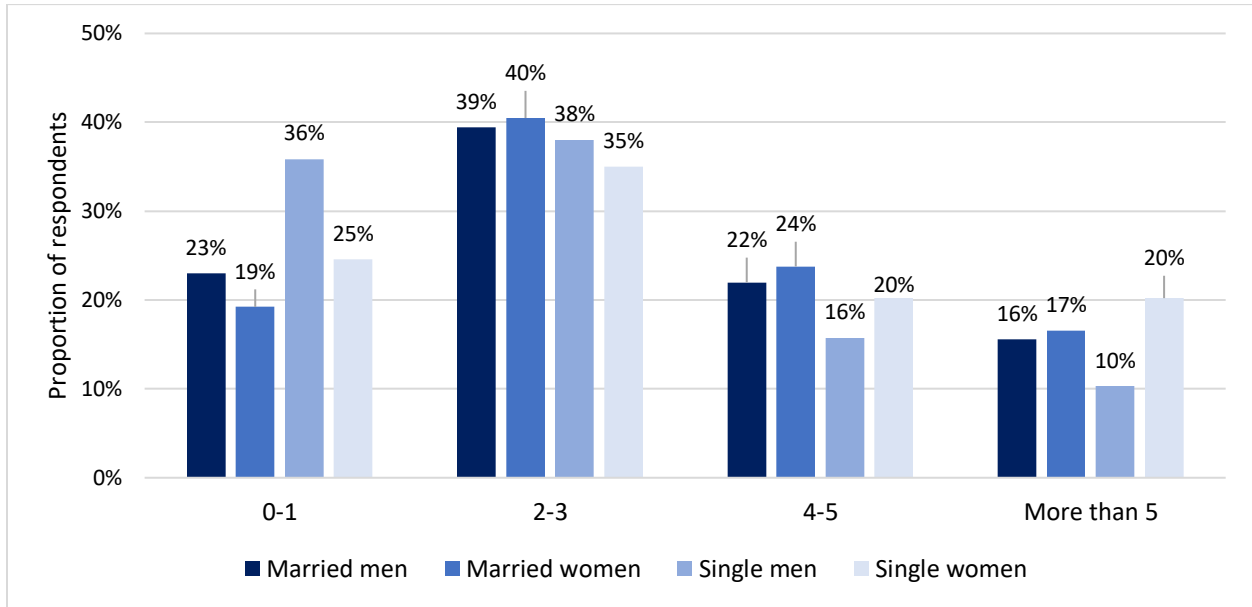
Network size

Respondents indicated the integer number of close relatives, neighbours, coworkers, and friends that they have, with the definition of “close” being that respondents would talk to them about important things in their lives.

Post-hoc analyses showed that married men ($M=3.56$, $SD=3.65$), married women ($M=3.72$, $SD=3.80$), and single women ($M=3.99$, $SD=5.98$) have significantly greater number of close relatives than single men ($M=2.57$, $SD=2.33$) ($p<.05$).

We present the number of close relatives reported by respondents in Figure 3. A higher proportion of single men (35.87%) reported having only one or no close relatives, compared to all other groups. Single women reported the greatest proportion of those with more than 5 close relatives (20.21%), twice the proportion of single men who reported more than 5 close contacts (10.33%).

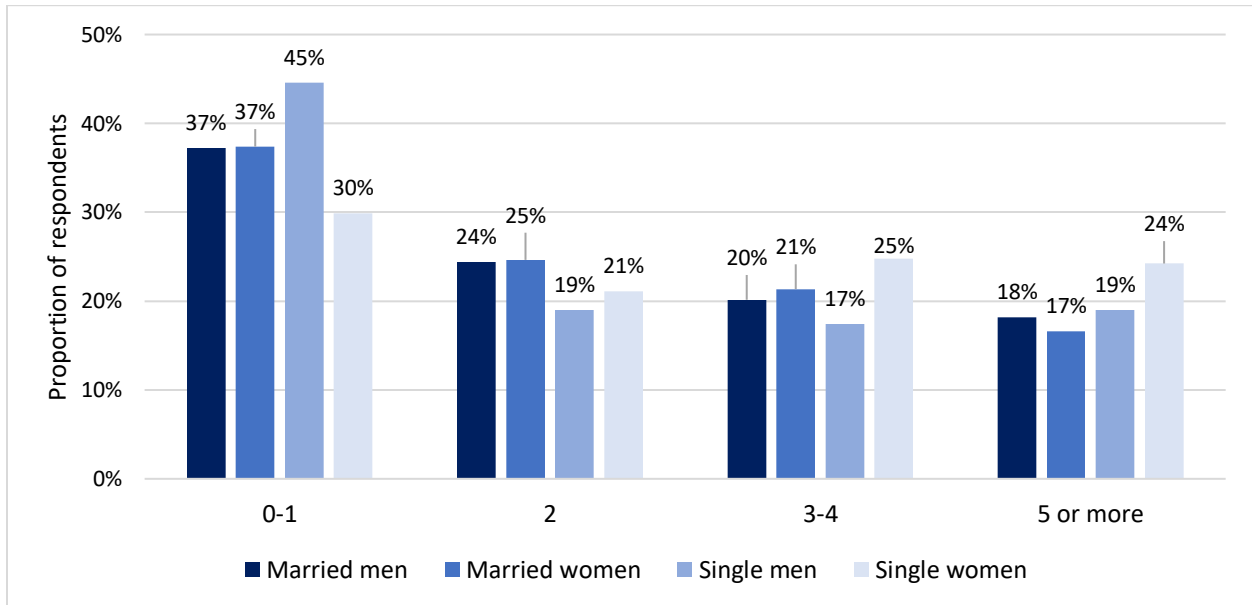
Figure 3. Number of close relatives reported by respondents.



Single females ($M=2.99$, $SD=2.73$) have a significantly greater number of close friends than married men ($M=2.57$, $SD=3.08$) and married women ($M=2.52$, $SD=2.75$) ($p<.05$), and single men ($M=2.44$, $SD=2.67$) (Figure 4).

The greatest proportion of single men reported having only one or no close friends (44.56%). Single women reported the greatest proportion of those with 5 or more close friends (24.23%), while married women reported the lowest proportion (16.63%), followed by married men (18.18%).

Figure 4. Number of close friends by respondents.



There was no significant difference in number of close coworkers and neighbours between groups.

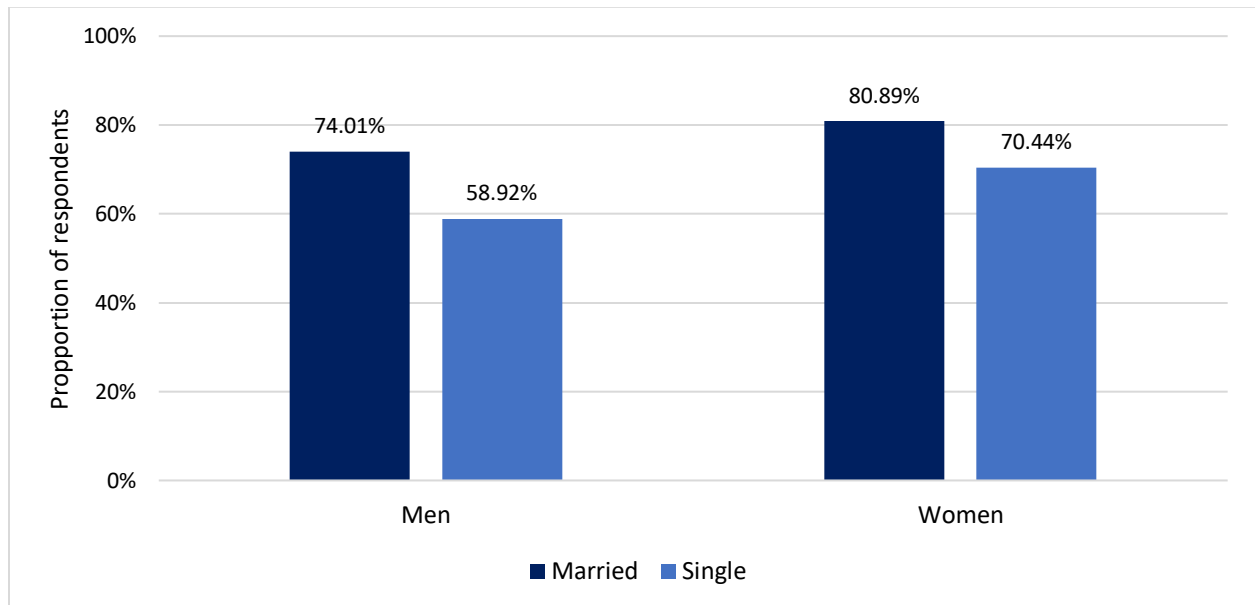
Network contact frequency

For up to five close contacts that respondents listed, they were asked to indicate how often they contact their close contacts. Responses were on a 6-point scale (1 “Daily” to 6 “Once a year or less”). Mean network contact frequency was averaged from the reverse code of up to five items.

Tukey’s post-hoc revealed that married men ($M=4.32$, $SD=1.08$) and women ($M=4.52$, $SD=1.02$) reported significantly greater frequency of contacting their five close contacts compared to single men ($M=4.06$, $SD=1.20$) and women ($M=4.06$, $SD=1.10$) ($p<.05$), while married women reported significantly greater frequency of contacting their five close contacts on average than married men.

By proportion of responses in Figure 5, 4 in 5 married women (80.89%) contact two or more of their close contacts at least weekly, while about 3 in 4 married men (74.01%) do so. The proportion of single women who contact two or more of their close contacts at least weekly is slightly lower at 70.44%, and it is lowest for single men at only 58.92%.

Figure 5. Proportion of respondents who contact two or more of their five close contacts at least weekly, by gender and marital status.



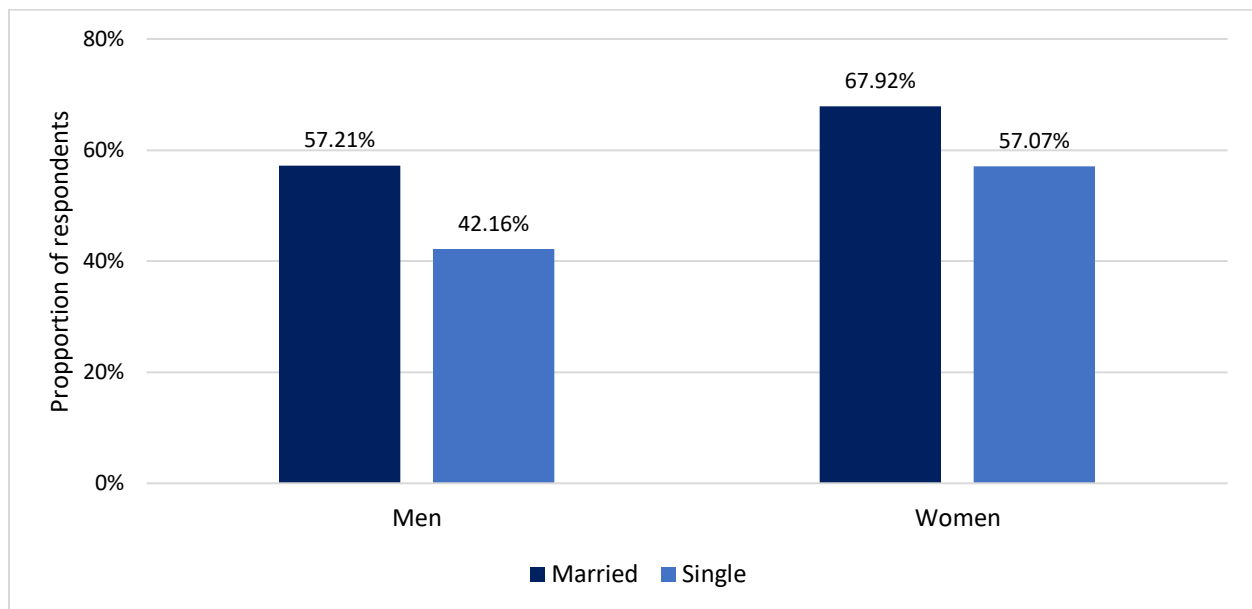
Network closeness

For up to five close contacts that respondents listed, they were asked to indicate how close they feel to their close contacts. Responses were on a 4-point scale (1 “Not at all close” to 4 “Very close”). Mean network closeness was averaged from up to five items.

Post-hoc comparisons showed that married women ($M=3.51$, $SD=0.53$) reported significantly greater perception of closeness to their close contacts as compared to all other groups ($p<.05$). Single men ($M=3.20$, $SD=0.75$) reported significantly lower perception of closeness to their contacts compared to married men ($M=3.39$, $SD=0.56$) and single women ($M=3.37$, $SD=0.57$).

By proportions, over 2 in 3 married women (67.92%) feel very close to two or more close contacts, followed by almost 3 in 5 married men (57.21%) and single women (57.07%), and only slightly over 2 in 5 single men (42.16%) (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Proportion of respondents who feel “very close” to at least two close contacts, by gender and marital status.



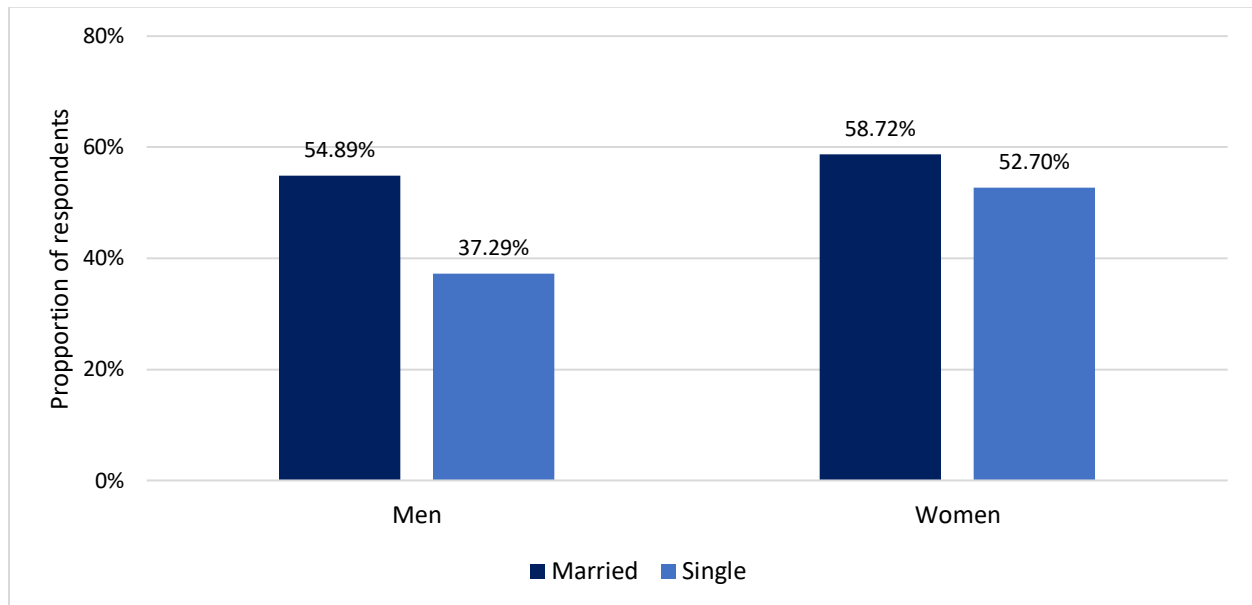
Network satisfaction

For up to five close contacts that respondents listed, they were asked to indicate how satisfied they were with their close contacts. Responses were on a 6-point scale (1 “Very dissatisfied” to 6 “Very satisfied”). Mean network satisfaction was averaged from up to five items.

Tukey’s HSD revealed that single men ($M=4.92$, $SD=1.37$) reported significantly lower satisfaction with their close contacts compared with married men ($M=5.23$, $SD=1.11$) and single women ($M=5.25$, $SD=1.02$) ($p<.05$). Married women ($M=5.31$, $SD=1.02$) reported significantly greater satisfaction compared to married and single men. No significant difference was found for satisfaction levels with close contacts between single women, and married men and women.

In Figure 7, almost half of married men (54.89%), married women (58.72%) or single women (52.70%) feel very satisfied with two or more of their close contacts. However, only slightly over 1 in 3 (37.29%) of single men report likewise.

Figure 7. Proportion of respondents who feel “very satisfied” with at least two close contacts, by gender and marital status.



Social support

Social support is measured by seven items, four of which measure emotional support (having someone to listen to you talk, confide in, count on for help and show you love and affection) while the other three measure instrumental support (having someone to help if you were confined to bed, prepare your meals, help with daily chores). Responses were on a 5-point scale (1 “None of the time” to 5 “All of the time”).

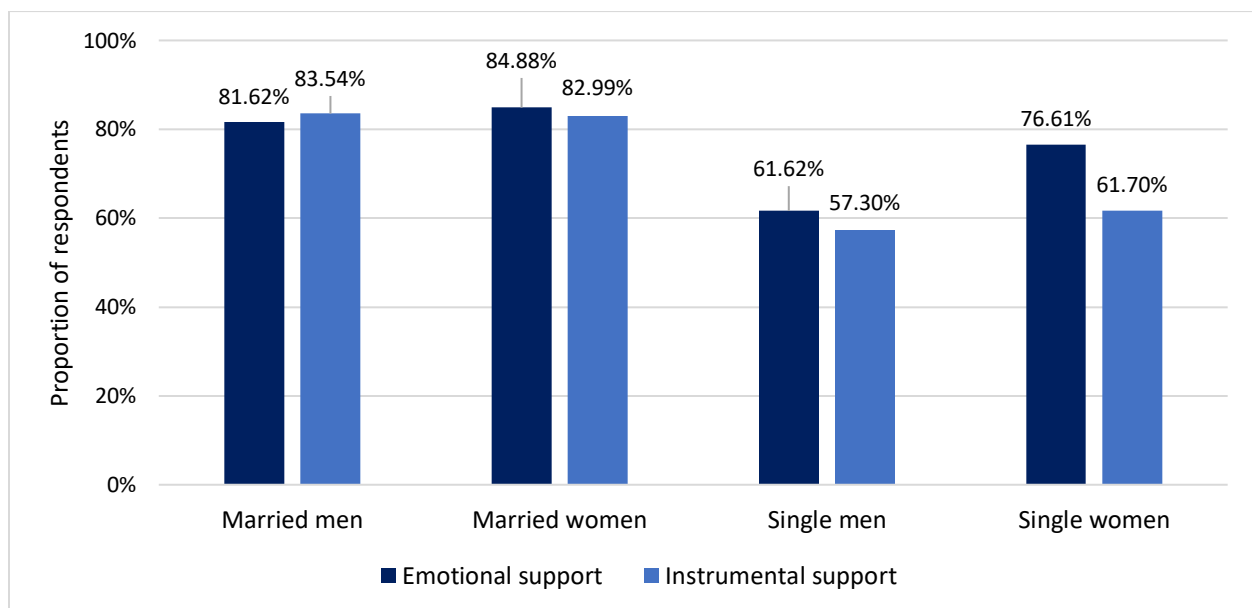
For emotional support, single men ($M=12.12$, $SD=4.59$) experienced significantly less support than all other groups, while single women ($M=13.39$, $SD=3.91$) experienced significantly less support than married men ($M=14.84$, $SD=4.08$) and women ($M=15.08$, $SD=3.84$) ($p<.05$).

In terms of proportions, over 4 in 5 married individuals reported receiving emotional support at least some of the time on average, with 81.62% of married men and 84.88% of married women. For single individuals, this number is the lowest for single men, with only about 3 in 5 single men (61.62%) and 3 in 4 single women (76.61%) who reported receiving emotional support at least some of the time (Figure 8).

For instrumental support, married men ($M=11.43$, $SD=3.26$) reported significantly higher levels of instrumental support than all other groups, followed by married women ($M=11.14$, $SD=3.26$), single women ($M=9.18$, $SD=3.71$), and single men ($M=8.46$, $SD=3.86$) with significantly lower levels of instrumental support. The difference between all four groups for instrumental support was significant at the .05 level.

In terms of proportions, over 4 in 5 married individuals reported receiving instrumental support at least some of the time on average, with 83.54% of married men and 82.99% of married women. For single individuals, this proportion is lower at about 3 in 5, with 61.70% of single women and 57.30% of single men reporting likewise (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Proportion of respondents who receive emotional and instrumental support at least some of the time on average, by gender and marital status.



Well-being indicators

To obtain a holistic measure of well-being, we look at respondents' self-rated overall life satisfaction, satisfaction with physical and mental health, satisfaction with economic situation, social well-being, and feelings of isolation and feelings of helpfulness. Single men score lower on all well-being indicators when compared with all other groups.

Life satisfaction

Respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction with life as a whole, from 1 "Very satisfied" to 5 "Very dissatisfied". Responses were reverse coded such that a higher score reflects greater satisfaction.

Tukey's HSD revealed that single men ($M=3.11$, $SD=0.97$) reported significantly lower mean overall life satisfaction than single women ($M=3.45$, $SD=0.77$), married men ($M=3.48$, $SD=0.81$), and married women ($M=3.52$, $SD=0.75$) ($p<.05$).

The proportion of single men who felt satisfied or very satisfied with their life was the lowest among all groups (37.84%). This is contrasted with over 1 in 2 for all other groups (52.60% in married men, 54.21% in married women, and 50.90% in single women) (Figure 9).

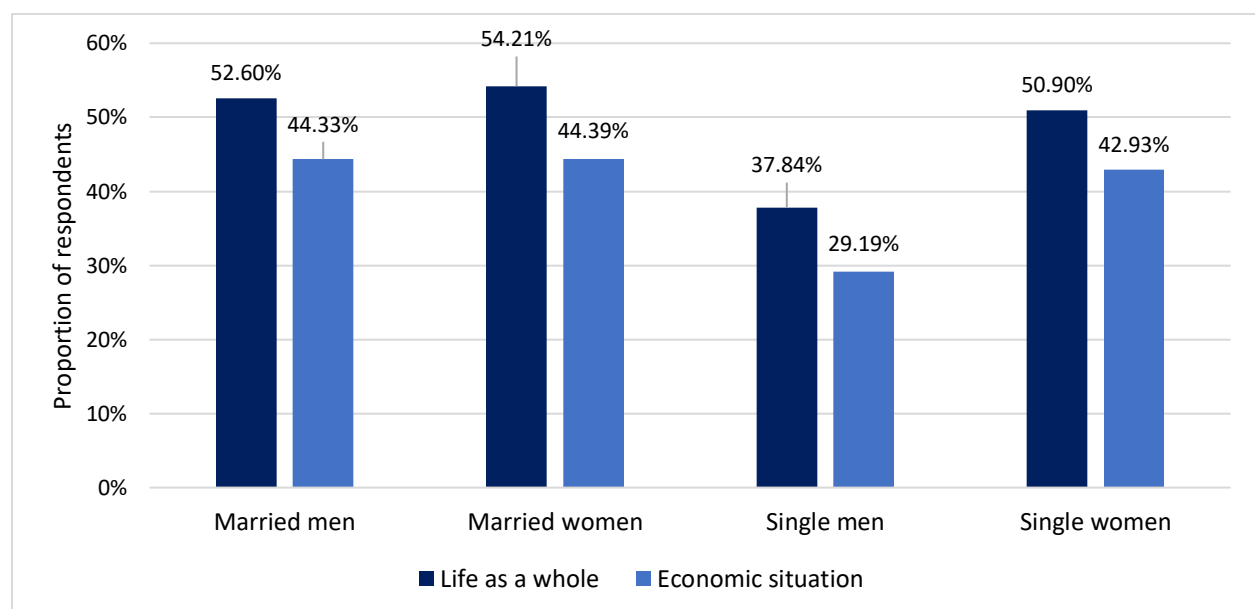
Economic satisfaction

In a similar manner, respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction with their overall economic situation.

Single men ($M=2.97$, $SD=0.95$) reported significantly lower economic satisfaction than single women ($M=3.28$, $SD=0.84$), married men ($M=3.29$, $SD=0.88$), and married women ($M=3.33$, $SD=0.80$) ($p<.05$).

A smaller proportion of single men feel satisfied or very satisfied with their financial situation (29.19%), as compared to the other groups where more than 2 in 5 were satisfied or very satisfied (44.33% in married men, 44.39% in married women, and 42.93% in single women) (Figure 9).

Figure 9. Proportion of respondents who are satisfied/very satisfied with their life and economic situation, by gender and marital status.



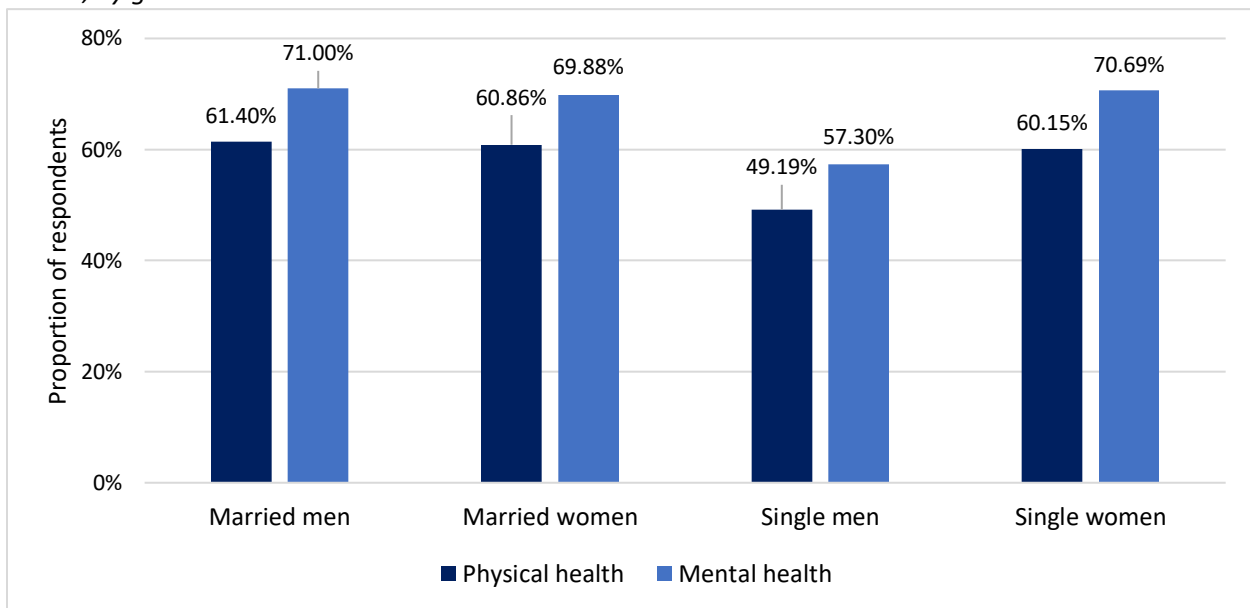
Physical and mental health

Respondents were asked to rate their physical and mental health from 1 “Very satisfied” to “6 Very dissatisfied”. Responses were reverse coded such that a higher score reflects greater satisfaction.

In terms of physical and mental health satisfaction, single men score significantly lower than all other groups (M=4.10, SD=1.37 and M=4.39, SD=1.32 for physical and mental health respectively), with no significant differences between single women (M=4.45, SD=1.12; M=4.79, SD=1.04), married women (M=4.55, SD=1.07; M=4.83, SD=0.99), and married men (M=4.53, SD=1.12; M=4.84, SD=1.02) ($p < .05$).

By proportions, more than half of married men, women, and single women are moderately or very satisfied with their physical and mental health. These proportions are higher compared to single men who are moderately or very satisfied with their physical and mental health (Figure 10).

Figure 10. Proportion of respondents who are moderately/very satisfied with their physical and mental health, by gender and marital status.

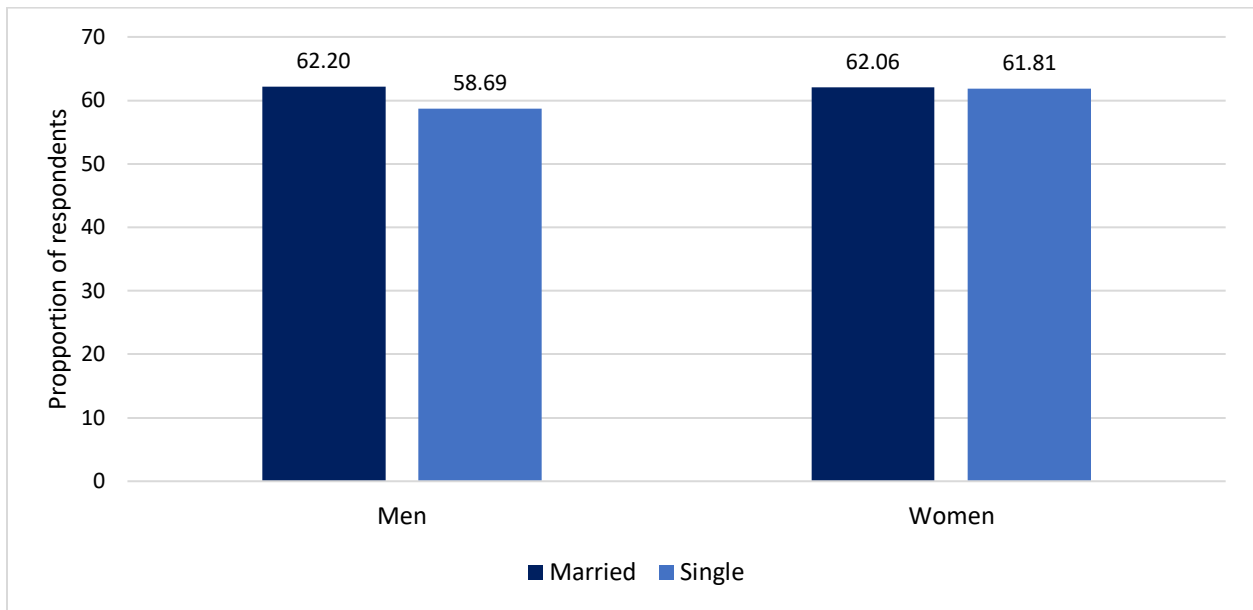


Social well-being

For social well-being, it is measured as a composite score of five dimensions of social well-being: social actualisation, social acceptance, social coherence, social contribution, and social integration (Keyes, 1998). Each dimension has three statements that respondents indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree, from 1 “Strongly disagree” to 6 “Strongly agree”. Negative statements are reverse coded, such that a higher social well-being score represents better social well-being.

As with previous trends in well-being scores, married men (M=62.20, SD=10.32), married women (M=62.06, SD=9.63), and single women (M=61.81, SD=9.60) have significantly higher social well-being scores than single men (M=58.67, SD=13.30) ($p < .05$). Figure 11 present the mean social well-being scores for each group.

Figure 11. Mean social well-being scores, by gender and marital status.



Social Isolation and Helpfulness

Two aspects are measured: frequency of feeling isolated and feeling helpful. Single men feel isolated most often, while single individuals feel helpful least often, when compared with the other groups. Responses were on a 5-point scale (1 “None of the time” to 5 “All of the time”).

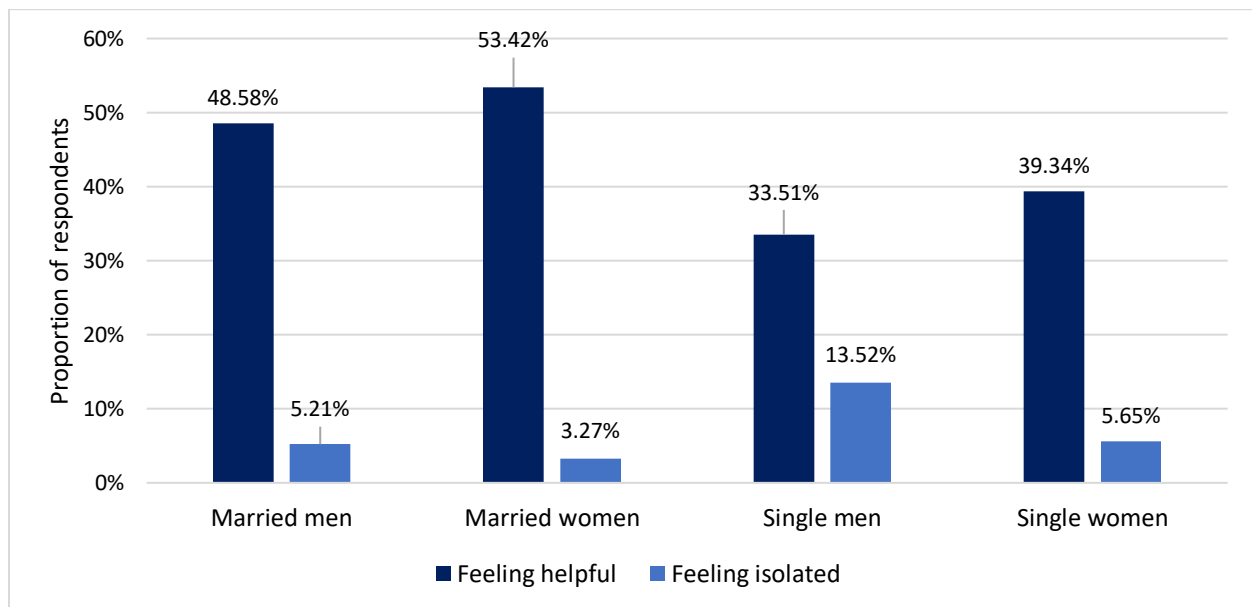
Perceived helpfulness has recently been found to be a predictor of perceived social isolation (Nuqoba et al., 2024). In our study, post-hoc comparisons showed that married women significantly feel helpful most often ($M=3.50$, $SD=0.97$), followed by married men ($M=3.38$, $SD=0.97$), and finally single women ($M=3.18$, $SD=1.00$) and men ($M=3.01$, $SD=1.16$) ($p<.05$).

Comparing the proportion of responses, over half of married women (53.42%) feel helpful most or all the time, while close to half of married men (48.58%) report similarly. This proportion is slightly lower in single women at 39.34%, followed by 33.51% in single men (Figure 12).

For perceived isolation, Tukey’s HSD revealed that married women significantly feel the least isolated ($M=1.96$, $SD=0.85$), followed by married men ($M=2.02$, $SD=0.91$) and single women ($M=2.12$, $SD=0.89$), and lastly single men ($M=2.37$, $SD=1.14$) who feel most isolated ($p<.05$).

Comparing proportion of responses, 13.52% of single men feel isolated most or all of the time compared to married men (5.21%), married women (3.27%), and single women (5.65%) (Figure 12).

Figure 12. Proportion of respondents who feel helpful or feel isolated most or all of the time, by gender and marital status.



DISCUSSION

This study revealed differences between gender and marital status groups in terms of social engagement, social networks and support, and well-being. In line with the wider literature, single older adults may be more prone to loneliness and isolation than their married counterparts due to reasons such as having smaller kin-based networks, especially for single individuals who do not have a partner and children. This likely results in lower perceived social support from their networks, and lower participation in social activities (Shapiro & Keyes, 2008). Similarly, in our study, the most prominent aspect in which the single respondents differed from the married respondents was in their perceived social support, with married individuals scoring higher than single individuals.

Further, our data suggests that single older men broadly scored lower in almost all aspects of social engagement, support, networks, and well-being among all groups in our study. The gender differences observed between single men and single women could be attributed to differences in socialisation and relationship building for both genders. Entrenched gender norms, especially traditional norms of masculinity, may impose certain expectations on men to be less expressive (Seidler et al., 2016). This may impair their ability and desire to build deeper relationships, likely contributing to the phenomenon of “male friendship recession”, exacerbated by how they mostly approach relationships from a transactional perspective (Kuek, 2023). This is in contrast to women, who have been found to be more likely to have close relationships that involve the exchange of emotional support (Elkins & Peterson, 1993; G. R. Lee et al., 2001; Liebler & Sandefur, 2002).

Previous studies have also suggested an interaction in the effects of marital status and gender on social relations (Feng et al., 2016; Liebler & Sandefur, 2002). For example, married men generally exhibit better social engagement and well-being compared to single men. Married men may benefit from maintaining social ties through their spouses' efforts of kin-keeping, as studies have suggested that women often take a lead in maintaining connections with family networks (di Leonardo, 1987; Lock, 2023). In our study, married men reported significantly greater levels of instrumental support than all other groups, including married women. This could possibly be because married men are more likely to benefit from being in a marriage and having someone to assist with household management.

In our study, single women tend to have significantly greater number of close friends compared to married individuals. The well-being of single women was also comparable to married individuals. Furthermore, single women's level of social engagement, social contact, and well-being were higher compared to single men. Feelings of social isolation were also greater for single men than single women. This may be due to the perception of gender roles, where women are typically viewed as more relationship-oriented in their approach to socialisation (Rivera & Scholar, 2020). Consequently, women whether single or married, may be more likely to make the effort to build and maintain relationships and friendships.

It is evident that both gender and marital status contributes to older adults' social engagement, social networks, social support, and well-being. In the next section, we provide some recommendations on engaging the different groups of older adults.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Community efforts to engage older adults, especially single men

Given the substantial evidence in literature demonstrating how social engagement and interactions are beneficial for older adults' well-being, it is important to design targeted interventions for single men. Our study has identified single men as a vulnerable group of older adults in Singapore who are the least likely to be integrated into our communities.

Therefore, we recommend an increase in community efforts to engage and support single men in various social activities. One recent example is the all-male interest groups run by Active Ageing Centres (AACs), which proved to be effective in encouraging more male participation in female dominated environment (Ang, 2023). Gender-based activities from other countries has also been beneficial to mental health, and this may also have some consequences for social integration (Gleibs et al., 2011). As current programmes in seniors' centres may be more appealing to females due in part to the predominance of female staffing in social services and the eldercare sector (Lau, 2023), there is clearly a need to tailor more programmes to the interests and needs of men.

Social programmes to increase sense of helpfulness.

Our past research suggests that perceived helpfulness associates with reduced social isolation (Nuqoba et al., 2024). Single men and women tend to report lower feelings of helpfulness, potentially increasing their risk of social isolation. Promoting volunteerism can foster the development of a sense of helpfulness. For instance, National Healthcare Group (NGH) Network for Senior Volunteers offers tailored volunteering opportunities according to seniors' preferences and abilities and encourages patients recovering from illnesses to volunteer as a form of rehabilitation (Tan, 2023).

Furthermore, innovative social engagement models, like Project Silverlight, which empower older adults to design their own social programmes may further facilitate social engagement (Straughan et al., 2024). Such initiatives may want to consider framing their efforts to instil a greater sense of helpfulness to address social isolation.

Conversations and research on singleness, gender and social engagement in society

With the demographic shift and increasing trend of rising singlehood and delayed marriages, a crucial aspect is the transformation of our social environment to account for this change. Changing policy narratives about gender norms may be crucial to promote a more inclusive and supportive environment for singles. Furthermore, men have reported that structured programs are largely unfavourable (Lau, 2023; V. Lee, 2023). Therefore, policy discourses may need to transform top-down initiatives to a more grassroots approach akin to Project Silverlight. Policymakers may want to address societal attitudes toward singlehood, particularly for single men, and create positive shifts away from stigma to support the well-being of individuals regardless of relationship status. To better understand older adults' needs and aspirations as they age, further studies and interventions, especially on single men in society, need to be conducted.

LIMITATIONS

This study however is not without limitations. First, those who are widowed, divorced, or separated were excluded due to extremely small sample sizes. This exclusion may hamper our ability to provide a comprehension of marital status. Moreover, the life experiences of those who are married, single (never married), separated, divorced, or widowed are not homogenous. This may limit the generalisability of our findings, and future studies may want account for how the heterogeneity of life experiences or behaviours within these groups impact social engagement, networks, and well-being. Lastly, while responses are collected independently, married men and women may partake in the survey together, and thus their responses may be correlated. Future research should therefore account for the dyadic relations between couples to compare gender and marital differences.

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About the Centre for Research on Successful Ageing (ROSA)

ROSA is a multidisciplinary research centre based in SMU. It was established with an MOE Tier 3 social sciences research grant, as well as the generous support of The Ngee Ann Kongsi. Research at ROSA seeks to define and measure a holistic construct of well-being and to identify the factors that impact Singaporeans' well-being as they progress through the later phases of life. Through close collaboration with government and other partner agencies, ROSA also aims to translate research insights into policy innovations that advance the well-being of older adults holistically and promote successful ageing in Singapore. ROSA brings together a diverse team of leading international and local researchers in ageing and age-related issues from various disciplines. Through empirical evidence derived from a longitudinal methodological approach, the multidisciplinary and multi-institutional research team advances propositions that promote successful ageing in Singapore.

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