



Comparison of the Social and Psychological Consequences of Single, Never Married Women at Different Societies: A Narrative Review

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Abstract

Context: In traditional communities, marriage is recognized as a mandatory requirement to having children and to achieving social status; given this, singleness may unfavorably impact on individual's psychological well-being. This holds particularly true for women. The purpose of the present review was to compare psychological and social consequences of singleness on never-married women in Western and Eastern societies.

Evidence Acquisition: Published data were gathered from PubMed, Google Scholar, Web of Science, and Iranian databases such as SID and Magiran. The keywords included "psychological health", "social health", "reproductive health", "marriage", "never-married women", "singleness", and "single women". Databases were searched with no time limitation, in both Persian and English languages and it lasted from January 2021 to April 2021.

Results: Being single, particularly in old ages, has a variety of positive and negative psychological consequences in individuals, families, and communities, negative effects including depression, strained interpersonal relationships, isolation, rejection, sadness, and anxiety and positive effects like feeling more freedom because of not having marital life responsibilities and happiness because of having more social activity and contact. Some outcomes are common, while others vary according to different cultures and religions, such as response to sexual needs.

Conclusions: Singleness have positive and negative effects on individuals. The mental burdens of singleness affect persons, families, and societies. Cultural and societal peculiarities define the way how to cope with the effects of singleness. Thus, identifying the social and psychological consequences of singleness and planning to address them in accordance with the cultures and religions can be an important step for improving the well-being of never-married women.

CONTEXT

Marriage is a voluntary and personal choice, but it is also influenced by environmental, social, economic, demographic, and political factors [1]. Particularly in traditional communities marriage is considered as a necessity to building up a stable and long-term relationship, to ensuring the next generation, and to achieving social status [2]. Despite the enormous impact of a modern lifestyle and individualism in both eastern and western communities, marriage and living with a spouse are still preferred both socially and culturally, especially among older people [3]. For example, in Iran, marriage is regarded as a social norm and a source of human empowerment with cultural, social, and religious importance [4].

The number of never-married women are increasing around the world [5]. In the United States, the number of never-married women over the age of 35 increased by nearly 10% between 1980 and 2010 [6]. In Malaysia, the number of never-married women over the age of 30 rose from 3.1% in 1960 to nearly 23.3% in 2000 [7]. Similarly, the number of never-married women over 35 in Iran increased by about 8.8% between the years 1986 to 2016 [8].

Economic, structural, socio-cultural and individual factors are the most important contributors to explain the increasing rates of singleness [9]. The main reasons for singleness among never-married women include structural changes such as modernity, urbanization, industrialization, access to reproductive rights and reproductive health services, changes in values and beliefs [9, 10], acceptance of singleness in different societies and religions, individualism, higher education, preferring to work outside instead of being a mother [7, 9], postponing marriage in young ages and inevitable singleness in older ages, the trauma of war gender imbalance at the age of marriage, a decreased males' tendency to marry, intellectual immaturity, preventive attitudes among females (for example, marriage is only for satisfying men's needs, doing household chores, and bearing children) [11], idealism, strict requirements set on marriage by families [12], decreased stigma of singleness and its acceptance in society as a new lifestyle, and the fear of being divorced due to the rise in divorce rates [13]. Further, factors such as parents' indifference to their children's marriage, parents' negative attitude toward girls' education, and parental illiteracy cause women to overlook marriage courses and postpone their marriages [14]. Legal concerns can be effective as well. For example, according to some national constitutions, the right to continue education or employment after marriage is subject to the permission of the husband. Thus, continuing education and employment may be a way to be free of marriage constraints. So, women in

such societies are harmed by an emotional duality: Despite their desire for marriage, they refuse it due to fear of being deprived of education and job, delaying their marriage, and, in some cases, never get married [15].

Regardless of the reason for singleness, the consequences of singleness can vary across countries (different cultures and religion) and may lead to different psychological and social consequences for the individual. Never-married women typically experience a dual positive-negative emotion spectrum, with positive feelings such as satisfaction, peace, freedom, and independence on one side, and negative feelings such as loneliness, stigma, and deprivation on the other side [16, 17]. However, compared to their married counterparts, never-married women are more likely to experience mental health issues such as isolation, lack of self-confidence, feelings of psychological failure, depression, and fear of an uncertain future, particularly as they get older [18].

On the other hands, singleness and its associated psychological health issues are tightly linked to the structure of society. For example, single women in non-Muslim communities can easily cohabitate and satisfy their sexual needs, whereas in Muslim communities, the only way for satisfying the sexual needs is marriage and in Islam having sex out of marriage is prohibited. Furthermore, single women in Western countries participate in social activity more than single women in Eastern communities [16]. In a Canadian study, community and family support, and individual personality traits such as openness were identified as primary factors for single women having positive feelings [19]. In contrast to Western countries, where people prefer to live independently, single women in Eastern societies are more likely to live with their families, and this can give these women a sense of security [20]. In a Malaysian study, never-married women cited that the family was the most important factor in helping to overcome life's challenges [7].

Overall, while numerous studies have been conducted to identify factors influencing delayed marriage, this is less the case as regards the psychological consequences of singleness. Furthermore, given that the consequences of singleness differ depending on culture and religion, more research into this topic can help improve the health of never-married women. The objective of the present narrative review was to compare social and psychological aspects of single never-married women in different societies.

EVIDENCE ACQUISITION

This is a narrative review. Steps were:

1. Identification of the Research Question

What are the psychological concerns and consequences of single never-married women in different communities?

What are the social concerns and consequences of single never-married women in different communities?

2. Conducting Literature Search and Article Selection

Electronic databases including PubMed, Google Scholar, Web of Science, and Iranian databases such as SID and Magiran were consulted. The keywords included “psychological health”, “social health”, “reproductive health”, “marriage”, “never-married women”, “singleness”, and “single women”. For example in the PubMed database, the search strategy was “never married women” OR “single women” AND “psychological health” OR “social health”. The process of searching last from January 2021 to April 2021. All articles used in this study needed to meet the following inclusion criteria: be available in full text, have English or Farsi languages and classify as original research article, review article, meta-analysis, or letter to the editor. Also, databases were searched with no time limit. If an article weren't met the inclusion standards, the paper wasn't included. At first, title and abstract of all resources were reviewed by two independent researchers; if any reviewer indicated that a study was potentially eligible, the full text was obtained for additional evaluation. When the final list of publications had been determined, all articles were read completely. Researchers used the “Endnote” software for preventing duplication. Figure 1 illustrates the process of the literature search.

3. Data Extraction

The full texts of the articles were read carefully and the data required for the presentation of findings were extracted.

4. Ethical Considerations

This study is a part of the Ph.D. dissertation on reproductive health. The ethics committee of Tehran University of Medical Sciences (Ethics Code: IR.TUMS.VCR.REC.1398.420, 07/17/2019) approved the study. Basic copyright principles were noted when publishing findings, and plagiarism was avoided by properly citing the articles.

RESULTS

A total of 149 articles were found, in the including process 119 articles were excluded and finally 30 were selected for this study. The characteristics of included studies are shown in Table 1.

DISCUSSION

Singleness is becoming more common in various communities in recent decades. Economic, structural, socio-cultural, and individual factors have a significant impact on consequences of singleness [9]. Never-married women in various communities share a broad range of distinct needs and concerns according to specific cultural, social, and religious expectations. The two important issues of singleness that can be affected in different societies are psychological and social aspects.

1. Psychological Issues of Never-married Women in Different Societies

Singleness can have negative and positive psychological effects on never-married women, as we discuss in following:

One of the negative issue of singleness that can be common concern for all never-married women in the most societies is feeling of loneliness. Despite some regional and cultural differences, we note that psychological-mental health issues of never-married women are similar in different contexts.

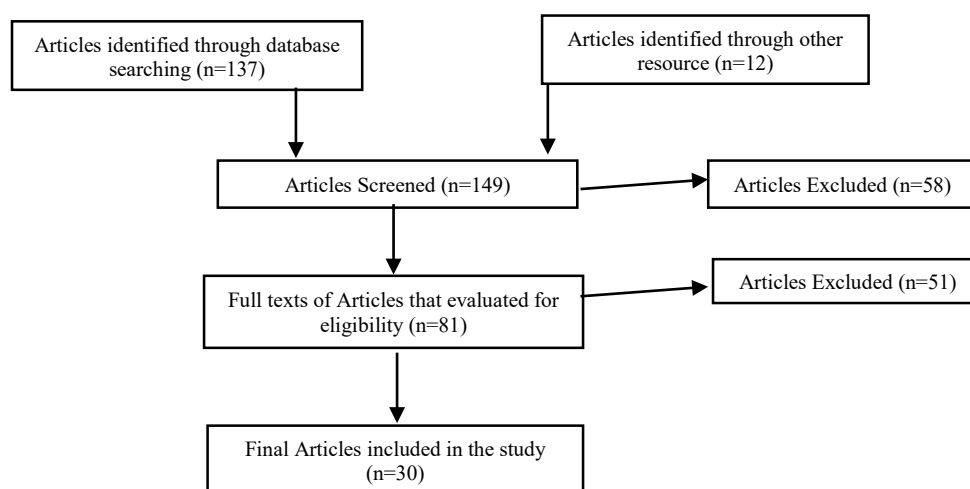


Figure 1. Articles' including process

Table 1. The characteristics of included studies

No.	Author (Year)	Study Design	Description
1	Ezabadi (2015)	Cross-sectional	This research were measured the phenomenon of stigma of singleness in interaction between single women with other people by means of a survey to explore people's attitudes about the singleness of never-married women aged 30 and above.
2	Shahanvaz (2020)	Futures studies	This study wanted to determine (predict) the likelihood that singleness drivers in Iran will occur as well as conduct a sensitivity analysis.
3	Ibrahim (2009)	Qualitative study	The researches wanted to evaluate the lived experiences of single never-married women above 30 who lived in Malaysia.
4	Shahnavaz (2019)	Meta-synthesis	The objective of the research was to identify the components of singleness based on the research done in this field.
5	Qaderzadeh (2017)	Case study	The study's author attempted to recreate the meaning of singleness' experience, as well as to identify the backgrounds and manner in which never-married women confront singleness through their perceptions and subjective meanings.
6	Zarean (2017)	Qualitative content analysis	This study investigated the reasons of increasing in the age of marriage from the viewpoint of never-married university students using a sociological approach.
7	Band-Winterstein (2014)	Phenomenological study	This study illustrated the experience of the single never-married people above 60 years old who had no child from the perspective of their aging process.
8	Alirezanejad (2013)	Mix method (qualitative and quantitative research)	In this study, researchers were attempted to study the effects of some structural factors such as having academic education, employment and marriage (non-marriage or delayed marriage age) on single women's social identity.
9	Hosseini (2016)	Phenomenological study	The research were evaluated the viewpoint and feelings of single never-married women above 35 years old towards singleness and their live experiences.
10	Adamczyk (2017)	Cross-sectional	The paper studied if romantic loneliness influences the association between "voluntary and involuntary singlehood", "positive mental health", and "mental health problems".
11	Safiri (2016)	Grounded theory	The study evaluated the lived experience of never-married women above 35 in one of the small city in Iran and their challenges with traditional identity.
12	Newbold (2013)	Grounded theory	This paper that was done on single adult refugee women in Canada tried to find factors which reinforce resilience and adaptability to the new country.
13	Situmorang (2007)	Qualitative study	This study evaluated the patterns of singlehood among never-married Indonesian women over 35 and prospected the lifestyles of these women such as how they were remained single, their views about marriage and their coping strategy with the social stigma.
14	Sharafoddin (2018)	collecting documentary information	In this study, researchers explained about singleness in Iran and its consequences on people and society.
15	Saili (2018)	Phenomenological study	The paper searched viewpoint of never-married professional women about singleness and also illustrated the negative emotional factors of singleness on these women.
16	Zeynalzadeh (2015)	Cross-sectional	The study compared psychopathological consequences between single women and married ones.
17	Janicka (2015)	Cross-sectional	The researchers tried to compare married and single women's experience of security and financial situation.
18	Lindberg (2008)	Cross-sectional	In this study, sexual behaviors and its risk factors and reproductive health needs of single women was evaluated.
19	Himawan (2018)	Narrative Review	This research were described social views about single women and explained the role of religiosity in overcoming to social stigma against single women.
20	Alwi (2020)	Qualitative study	This study evaluated the life challenges and elements that could improve the quality of life of single never-married women who lived in Malaysia.
21	Kislev (2020)	Multilevel analysis	This study that was done on 32 countries in western communities, tried to seek the relationship between "social capital" and "happiness" in various kind of marital status as well as never-married people.
22	Simpson (2015)	Qualitative study	The paper tried to evaluate single self-identity among single people in Britain.
23	Azmawati (2015)	Qualitative study	The research were evaluated the view of Malasian never-married women about marriage and its related factors.
24	Lesch (2018)	Phenomenological study	The paper prospected the life experiences of educated, without child and never-married women who lived in South African.
25	Ezabadi (2013)	Phenomenological study	In this study, researchers seek to explore lived experiences of never-married women above 30 years old from the perspective of social stigma.
26	Sharp (2011)	Phenomenological study	This article's objective was seek the messages that families and society send to women who are never-married between the ages of late 20s or early 30s.
27	Macvarish (2006)	Qualitative study	The researchers in the paper focused on social problems that single women who lived in London faced with in the society.
28	Gaetano (2010)	Ethnographical study	This paper wanted to recognize the implications of being single from the perspectives of single women and focused on the issues if marriage is essential to the personal identities and aspirations in life.
29	Farzade (2014)	Qualitative study	The study examined the factors that contribute to rural never-married women's social isolation within a specific communitie, as well as their existing status and potential consequences.
30	Salamah (2018)	Qualitative study	This article examined the quality of life of adult single Saudi women by evaluating their social lives, family dynamics, health, financial consequences and daily routines.

In Iran, never-married women reported loneliness, diminished satisfaction, less attractiveness, low self-esteem in social interactions, rage, isolation, depression, and emotional and mental deprivation as prevalent feelings [21]. In a study was carried out in a small town in Iran where never-married women were not allowed to live alone even at older ages, resulting in psychological problems and feelings of worthlessness and social isolation, they experienced a sense of uselessness, uncertain future, psychological violence, and isolation as the most serious consequences of singleness [11]. Malaysian never-married women reported inadequacy, anger, regret, and sadness of not having a partner as the most leading psychological impacts of singleness [22]. These feeling is the same, even in the western contexts. For example single women in Poland endure negative feelings such as severe depression, disruption in social relationships, and anxiety [17]. Among never-married women in Texas (USA), singleness was causally associated with symptoms of anxiety, depression, and behavioral disorders [23]. In this regard, some researches introduced marriage as a supportive system to damp mental disorders in married women [24, 25]. Studies carried out in Poland and in the United Kingdom in 2015 revealed that married women reported being mentally healthier than single ones, presumably due to a sense of support from the spouse [26, 27]. Khodarahimi (2009) and Bolagh (2015) reported that Iranian single women were mentally more vulnerable than married women; because spouses appeared to play a critical role in solving problems during marital life [24, 25].

Singleness in never-married women have other adverse long-term psychological consequences, too [28]. To illustrate, one of the most significant issues for never-married women is not having children when they get older [23]. Given that the only way being a mother in most eastern countries is marriage, never-married women undergo insufficient psychological support, and they experience a double lack of social support and social relationships: Not having children (and a husband) and losing their parents [11]. This issue is not the same for never-married women that live in Western countries. As in Western societies, single women can be pregnant and have child.

In most Eastern societies, single women were in challenge with need and desire of sexual experiences, prospects of being mother on one side, and respecting the social and religious rules, on the other side [21]. On the other hand, single women who fulfill sexual need feel guilty because having sexual relationships outside marriage is unacceptable and a major sin in some countries. While for a US-American woman, singleness is not a barrier to not having children and most never-married women engage in sexual intercourse [29]. In contrast, in Muslim societies such as Indonesia and

Malaysia, premarital sex is prohibited, and never-married women are precluded from motherhood [30, 31]. Never-married women in Columbia complained that they cannot experience of being a mother once they got older, they reported the dilemma of not enjoying parenthood [23].

Strong beliefs to God among single Muslims may lead to two different feeling for them, in one side they are under a higher risk of mental health issues such as symptoms of depression and unsatisfying interpersonal relationships, as Quran (The holy book of Muslims) and religious teachings emphasizes on marriage and prohibits people from doing sex out of marriage [24]. Not surprising, such women feel more pessimistic, and they struggle with life, fate, and with God. For example, Malaysian single women felt guilty for ignoring God's orders, because marriage is advised in Islam; accordingly, never-married women feel guilty for neglecting God's commands [22]. In the flip side, following the will of God for women who have never been married may make them more satisfied; thus, such women focus on their lives and other responsibilities and avoid intellectually engaging in the grief of singleness [30, 31].

On the other side, staying single can have positive effects for never-married women. In a study that was done on 32 countries in Europe, women who were single or unmarried more often meet socially with friends, relatives and work colleagues compared with married people. Furthermore these social meeting and activities, correlated more strongly with happiness for unmarried than married people [32]. In a study carried out in England, single women mentioned that they are happy of their situation and they are in good relationship with their friends [33]. Compared to their married counterparts, Iranian never-married women report lower mental health issues; it appears that this lower degree of mental health issues was related to fewer marital-related responsibilities [34]. Also, in Malaysia, single women appear to be happier and more satisfied with their life, compared to married women [35]. In a similar vein, Colombian single women feel free and comfortable as they do not have to care for spouses and children, and they prefer to focus on the advantages of being never-married [23]. Never-married women in South Africa reported feelings of freedom and also loneliness, and they strive for better job positions for coping with life, they also had many sexual relationships to find a committed partner [36]. One of the reasons that single people live more comfortably in Western societies is that they are not questioned for marital status and people are not pitied in social interactions [35]. In contrast, in Eastern societies, marital status is key information in social interactions [30]. Given this, family and friends put never-married women in a status of continuous stress [22].

In summary, it can be noted that singleness appears to be double-edged: It can be associated with feelings like anxiety, depression, aimlessness, uselessness, and emotional deficiency, and also it can be associated with feelings like independence, freedom, peace, and satisfaction.

2. Social Issues of Never-married Women in Different Societies

Another important issue in the life of never-married women is social issues that they face in their individual life. The issue of never-married women in social areas with stronger religious and cultural norms (so-called collectivistic societies) gets apparent, when comparing their status with the context of never-married women living in so-called individualistic societies [3].

Never-married women face social isolation in countries where marriage is socially valued like most of Middle East countries; this issue cause psychological pressures for these women such as sarcasm and false sympathy from the family and society [2]. In Eastern countries where marriage is highly valued such as Malaysia and Indonesia, never-married women even experience feelings of failure, because these women believe to have acted against societal values. Furthermore, never-married women feel angry about their social situation, feel inferior in society, and always relinquish their demands in society [22, 30]. Such societies usually reject these women, too. In these communities, never-married women face difficulties in living alone (especially in small towns and villages), staying in hotels, and going on trips; besides, they encounter some problems at home [11].

Singleness not only negatively impacts the individual but also on the closest family and society [21]. To illustrate, parents of never-married women are concerned about their daughters' social future. Also, singleness can threaten the health of society, especially those who do not commit to moral values. Crises included sexual need, social corruption, and wrong social interactions [24].

To understand the dynamics of never-married women among a social system and their psychosocial consequences, "Goffman's Stigma Theory" is helpful. Briefly, "Goffman's Stigma Theory" claims that single people do not satisfy the societies' expectations of bringing the next generation of the society further; thus, single people are not complete; as a result, people not fitting in the "plan" of society are discriminated against and stigmatized [37]. However, such stigmatization causes mental and social problems in the individual [38]. The stigmatization can sometimes overwhelm a person to accept her/his social marginalization [39]. As such and compared to married people, single people experience a sense of exclusion and rejection from the family and community [9]. We note that such dynamics are particularly prevalent in Asian communities where

marriage is known as a social norm; while on the flip side being never-married is perceived as a deviation from the norms and expectations. Given this, never-married women are stigmatized [2]. A further negative consequence of stigma is that never-married women avoid social interactions and further social activities. Such an avoidance behavior appears to further accelerate feelings of isolation and loneliness [11]. In Nigeria, marriage is known as a social norm and often takes place at a young age; given this, never-married women feel stigmatization, which also increases with women's higher age. More dramatically, such women are subjected to discrimination and violence at work and in the family [40]. In some communities, in order to avoid being labeled as never-married, women's parents force their daughters to marry for having at least a child and then divorced [41]. Further, over time, single women are more likely to desist from the idea of starting a family. Alternatively, such women might be forced to accept any kind of marriage, in order to avoid any stigma.

Last, single people have a higher tendency for cohabitation [21, 42]. Cohabitation is noticeable in all societies, but it is more accepted in Western communities than in Eastern communities, particularly in Muslim regions where this type of lifestyle is forbidden.

As discussed, remaining never-married is considered a stigma in different communities. The severity of the stigma varies depending on the cultural, religious, and societal context. Researches showed that although the number of never-married women in the United States has increased dramatically, the stigmatization of singleness has gradually declined [41]. However, singleness is viewed as a failure in life in the United Kingdom, though it is no longer considered shameful [43]. In England never-married women are called "On the self". In China, adult never-married women face intense governmental and family pressure to marry. Specifically, being never-married is not accepted, and society does not support single women. Not surprising, never-married Chinese women are called "Shengnu", meaning "leftover women" [44]. In Mexico these women called "Solterona" which means "completely alone". In Norway, these women called "Bitter". In Spain, these women called "Se te pasa el arroz" means "Rice that is cooked more and destroyed and is not good to eat". In Malaysia, never-married women are called "Andartu" which means "an old virgin" [7]. In Iran, never-married women are called "Torshideh", meaning "the expired". In some Arab countries, these women called "Abes" "disappointed women". Although stigma is more visible in Muslim Eastern nations where marriage is heavily featured in religious comments, and being a woman equals being a wife and mother [22], it can be appeared in western countries, too; while it is not more

visible in Western societies compared with Eastern societies.

Also, single women may be subjected to financial exploitation by their families, as well as violations of privacy as a result of strict supervision, and sometimes never-married women suffer from being neglected. Never-married women may also face workplace harassment from men, such as being assigned more tasks due to having more leisure time, not being married, and having no children, sometimes no sufficient wages, or when male colleagues compete with them due to greater efforts [45].

Further, evidence shows that compared to married women, never-married women are less socially supported [46]. This issue is more apparent in some eastern countries like Iran. For example, single women in even old ages never support financially by the government, so if a single women that does not job or wealth has to burden of other people of family, which can cause more problem for her. In Saudi Arabian single adult women from lower socioeconomic status that live alone were dissatisfied with their situation and suffered from depression, isolation, and loneliness. In contrast, higher socioeconomic status women who lived alone were gratified with their lives and happy to be independent [47]. These findings suggest that favorable economic circumstances appear to have an important moderating impact on single women's well-being.

It can be noticed that all never-married women in Western and Eastern countries face with social problems that affect their individual life and even cause psychological consequences for them.

CONCLUSION

To summarize, it can be said that never-married women experience a broad range of psychological and social disadvantages, this holds particularly true for never-married women in Eastern countries, where cultural and religious expectations appear to be particularly high.

Given the growing domination of singleness in most societies and its outcomes that affect both the individual and the community, and due to the value of mental health in realizing the goals of society, the psychological impacts of this phenomenon must be thoroughly analyzed. The stigmatization of their civil status is still a societal and individual issue associated with adverse mental health issues. Despite some psychological advantages of being single, social and psychological concerns of never-married women should demand more attention. According to cultural and religious variations in different societies that cause different needs for individuals, more studies are recommended to be conducted in various settings. Likewise, all individuals, families, policymakers, sociologists, and planners must act to minimize the adverse consequences of singleness

by identifying the outcomes and consequences of this phenomenon in societies.

In this study, we just include articles that were in Persian or English languages, other languages were missed, and this can be a limitation of our study.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no competing interest.

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ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

This study is a part of the Ph.D. dissertation on reproductive health. The ethics committee of Tehran University of Medical Sciences (Ethics Code: IR.TUMS.VCR.REC.1398.420, 07/17/2019) approved the study. Basic copyright principles were noted when publishing findings, and plagiarism was avoided by properly citing the articles.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

SPS, SB, and ZT read and approved the final manuscript. SPS and ZT designed the study. SPS performed gathering data, which were analyzed by SPS and ZT. SPS wrote the manuscript which ZT and SB read and commented on. SPS, SB, and ZT worked on the completion of the manuscript.

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