

PSYCHOSOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCES FACED BY DIVORCED WOMEN OF KARACHI, PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the psychosocial and emotional experiences of divorcee women and also to understand the coping strategies women use for post-divorce adjustment. This qualitative phenomenological study was conducted from June 2021 to February 2022 in Karachi. Almost 6 divorced women and 3 divorced men were interviewed using an unstructured interview guide. IDIs were conducted. Non-probability convenience sampling technique was used initially, followed by snowball sampling. The analysis generated four main themes with 4 subthemes: Stigmatization, compromised mental health, Becoming a better version of one's self (Self-care & wellness, Financial Independence), and Support system (Moral support, Spiritual awakening). Through our study findings, we concluded that divorce is a stigma and is considered a curse in our society. In Karachi, a divorcee is considered as a bad woman and seen as a threat to the society. By facing these challenges they learn to be independent and start focusing on their personal growth.

Keywords: Divorce, Divorced women, Stigma, Challenges, Positive outcomes

INTRODUCTION

Divorce, being multifaceted, is a process that affects women more than men. Divorce seems to be more miserable for women in our society, as they hold a low status in education and are not economically sound. Women have to go through a lot of trials and have experienced economic, psychological, and social problems. Besides these difficulties, the biggest issue or the reason behind most of the problems divorced women face is the viewpoint of society about divorcee women (1). Women face psychological stress because of society as people always blame a woman for her divorce. Society doesn't accept a divorced woman the way it used to before her divorce (2). Marriage is observed as a blessed ritual in all cultures which helps

an individual to lead a peaceful and respectable life (3) On the contrary, divorce creates disorder in family life (4).

Divorce is the lawful termination of a legally and socially documented matrimonial relationship (5) or it means the often chaotic and aching end of a marriage (3). Islam encompasses a variety of different cultures. Here it is essential to understand that culture and religion are two very different things. The research has shown that the majority of people are more entwined with their cultural beliefs which may be entirely different from the religion (particularly Islam). Marriage is a commitment between husband and wife. Although our religion guides its followers to make this

bond strong if it is unbearable by either of the parties then getting a Divorce is permitted (6). Divorce rates are on the rise and nearly everyone is touched by divorce, either by experiencing it themselves as a partner or a child or observing someone else who has experienced it (3). Divorced women have to face different challenges in terms of losing homeownership, household income, social life, and single parenthood (7). A divorced woman has to act as an independent lady to build her post-divorce identity (8). However, the independence of women after getting separated from their husbands is also considered taboo. Such independent women are easy targets for the people to mistreat and harass them (9). If the comparison is made between a widow and a divorcee, society has a kind heart for a widow whereas the divorcee doesn't receive such social support (10). For both males and females, the experience of divorce is more traumatic than being fired from a job, it's like having a severe disease and a little less destructive than the partner's death (11).

METHODS

A qualitative, phenomenological study was conducted to explore the experiences and perceptions of divorced women in our society. The study was completed in 8 months after the permission from the research board of JSMU. The data saturation point determined the number of interviews (Theoretical sampling). IDIs were conducted with 6 divorced women and 3 divorced men. Divorced women were interviewed initially. During the analysis, it was discussed among the researchers that women and men both experience this phenomenon. Men were later interviewed to capture the comprehensiveness and completeness of the phenomenon. Non-probability convenience sampling technique was used initially, followed by snowball sampling to identify the hidden population. Divorced women and men between the ages of 18-40 years with at least one year of married life, currently not re-married were included. Divorced people who were unwilling to participate and were in a state of severe depression were excluded. This was identified with the help of a patient health questionnaire (PHQ-9 scale)

Data was collected by using an interview guide having a series of open-ended questions. Participants were asked about their perception of divorce, about

psychological, social, and emotional effects of divorce on their lives, how their family/friends responded to their divorce, and how they adjusted in their life after divorce. Data analysis was done side by side with data collection. Verbatim transcription after each interview was done. Significant statements were generated and from them, meaningful statements were formulated. This further led to the identification of themes and interpretation of the descriptions. Permission was taken from every participant before starting data collection. Ethical approval was sought from the Institutional Review Board of Jinnah Sindh Medical University.

RESULTS

Nine people participated, out of which six were women and three were men. Women were between 28 to 39 years of age (mean=31 years) whereas the ages of men were between 33-40 years (mean=36.3). All the participants were employed. The analysis generated four main themes with 4 subthemes:

- 1) Stigmatization
- 2) Compromised mental health
- 3) Becoming a better version of one's self
 - a. Self-care & wellness
 - b. Financial Independence
- 4) Support system
 - a. Moral support
 - b. Spiritual awakening

1) STIGMATIZATION

According to the interviewees, divorce, in general, is a brutal word. There is a stigma attached to it. There is an unacceptability of divorced individuals in society. As the female participants said;

"Divorce in my opinion is an extremely dangerous and painful word or I should say a scary word. Everybody is scared of divorce, parents, and children. Divorce is a stigma in our society"

Most of the women participants shared that they belong to a patriarchal society and divorcee women deal with unbearable societal pressures. In this society, women are expected to preserve the marriage by being submissive. And if divorce happens it is taken as a failure of a woman to compromise.

People also character assassinate a divorced woman after her divorce. One of the male interviewees said;

“The first thing which our society perceives is that the woman should have tolerated and the wife must have been ill-mannered. They start abusing our ex-partners”

“I had to change 4 lawyers during my divorce. My lawyer thought that my wife was a woman of loose character. The lawyer had this perception that a woman who can take divorce is 100% characterless”

The societal judgments are not confined to a divorcee but her family also gets affected. People start to question her upbringing. A female participant said; *“My sister got a marriage proposal. Everything was almost about to get finalized. Meanwhile, my parents decided that they wouldn't hide anything, so they told the family about my divorce. After they got to know about me, they didn't return. Just because I was divorced, they didn't think even once”*

In addition to being blamed and cursed for their divorce, 3 women out of 6 also had addressed that they have been harassed by men at work. People think that a divorced woman is easily approachable. These women also stated that this was the most hurtful thing out of all the challenges they had to face after their divorce. One of the female participants stated that; *“The thing I will always remember, which affected me the most was, the behavior of my male colleagues. They and society think that only a characterless woman can go for divorce. They used to approach me, harass me, and offer dinners”*

According to the interviewees, men are less at risk of being bashed by our society. They don't feel any such societal pressures and are not held accountable for their divorce as much as women are criticized.

2) COMPROMISED MENTAL HEALTH

All the participants spoke about how their divorce affected their mental health. Depression and anxiety are common experiences shared by the participants, both males and females. A female interviewee shared that;

“I was in depression. I didn't have the energy to move. I used to have suicidal thoughts. I used to think why only me”

Two of the female participants discussed that divorce had such a negative impact on all aspects of their health that they had to discontinue their jobs for some time. They were even unable to do their daily tasks.

Divorcees lose their partners and also their children in some cases, as reported by 2 of the men. They felt lonely after their divorce as they were not allowed to meet their children who were in the custody of their ex-wives. One of the male participants said; *“Life is with family, wife, and kids. When one loses them then what is the motive of life after that? Life is meaningful when the father can get to see his children growing up, going to school, sharing their joys, and enjoying all the phases of their lives. I don't have anything left in my life”*

Another male participant mentioned that; *“Divorce is very traumatic. I wish I could go back to my earlier life. There are many positive things in a relationship; I wish it had not happened. It affects you socially because you get lonely. I miss my wife”*

Men divorcees were more regretful in their experiences; they felt lonely and missed the life they had with their wives and children. Men after divorce lost their children as well, which was an additional trauma they had to face as their ex-wife got the children's custody. This was the primary reason for psychological problems on the men's end whereas women experienced depression and other health problems mainly due to the behavior of the society.

3) BECOMING A BETTER VERSION OF ONE'S SELF

The divorcees after some time of their divorce realized that valuing themselves and concentrating on their health and well-being is the most important part of adjustment in their new life. This category had two sub-themes

3a-Self-care & wellness

All divorced people have their unique way of coping with the changes and becoming a better version of themselves. Participants started to put conscious efforts into improving their health and well-being. For some, engaging in healthy activities like gardening, painting, and cooking was helpful. Staying busy and focusing on the future was the coping mechanism for almost all the participants. They consciously stopped wasting their time thinking about the past rather invested their time and energy to achieve their goals. A male interviewee said;

“I have made myself so busy that I don't have even a minute. I have started my online business. I have launched a company”

They also shared the importance of having a positive outlook in life and engaging in physical activities and meditation. Another participant mentioned that;

"I took help from meditation and Reiki therapy. It takes out all of your aggression. You start to feel positive. Meditation has this rule that you cannot be negative towards anyone. If you have negativity against your ex-partner you have to get rid of it during meditation. I also used to go for a walk and used to do light physical exercise."

Two of the women shared that having their children around gave them strength and brought them back to life. They kept themselves busy taking care of their kids. However, as male participants, were away from their children, they felt lonely and missed them due to which they went into depression and isolation. Both men and women discovered that staying busy in their lives would be helpful to overcome the post-divorce stressful life.

3b-Financial Independence

Nearly all the participants considered their jobs a true blessing in the difficult times after their divorce. Having a job made them financially strong, and kept them engaged and motivated. One of the participants stated;

"I had a job. You think about all the sufferings when your mind is free. My job proved to be a positive factor, which helped me get out of that stress."

Women participants discussed that a job is a necessity for a divorced woman; it provides financial independence, helps them to support their families, and gives them a better social life. They are not dependent on others for their basic needs. In our society, it is very obvious for a male to be financially independent as he is the provider of the family, so the males don't talk much about their jobs as a means of their progress.

4) SUPPORT SYSTEM

All the participants discussed how imperative it is to have a support system during the divorce process. 2 sub-themes have emerged from this main theme:

4a-Moral support

It was evident from the interviews that without family support it is very hard to endure the post-divorce hardships. Having family and friends around makes a divorcee feel loved which helps them to regain

the lost confidence and become strong. One of the female participants mentioned that;

"Family support is very essential. I was blessed to have that. But I wonder how girls who don't have supportive families handle all the stress"

Two of the participants mentioned that they didn't receive any support from their families. It was difficult to survive. It took a lot of time to get back to their normal lives. They talked about their friends who made them comfortable with their words. All 3 male participants had supportive family members. However, one of them reported that society has more support for divorced men. He said:

"Our society is very supportive towards a divorced man; they start suggesting different marriage proposals. Although I am 40 years old with 2 kids, even then they can get me a young wife"

Two of them reported that they didn't get support from society. They shared their experience with the careless attitude people have in our society. People are least bothered about what others are going through in life. A male participant stated;

"People don't care whether you are divorced, married, or how your life is going, nobody cares. People are so busy in their own lives that they don't even look at others"

However, the divorced women participants didn't experience the careless side of society, whereas according to them people interfere in a divorcee's life way too much. Society always has something bad to say to a divorcee.

4b-Spiritual awakening

Spiritual awakening played a crucial role in helping the participants have a support system even if nobody was there for them or they didn't want to show their weak side to anyone. Participants felt lonely at the beginning of their divorce. They started questioning the hardships in their life which made them lose their trust in the supreme power. Eventually, they realized that everything is better the way it is. And they need to trust the process.

"If I can't do anything I simply cry in front of God. I believe that nobody can change my situation except God. At times I don't need anyone. I am all on my own and I feel during that time that I only need God. Because in whatever situation I am in, only he can solve it for me"

They said a strong connection with God is everything a suffering human should have. It is the most powerful connection. This bond helped them in their spiritual healing.

DISCUSSION

The current study has gathered the lived experiences of divorced women in Karachi. In this study four themes with four subthemes were generated, which are, Stigmatization, compromised mental health, becoming a better version of one's self, and Support system. The findings of this study showed that in the process of divorce, women are more vulnerable than men, as men are dominant and have power over women in our society. Due to this fact, divorced women are stigmatized and being blamed for their divorce. This finding was consistent with the study conducted in Saudi. They also found out that in male-dominated societies, people have an unfair attitude and conduct towards divorced women. They are treated as a bad woman, people don't include them in different events (12). Another study that had similar results was conducted in Kashmir. All the participants in the study experienced being a target of stigma after their divorce (13). A study on Iranian divorced women had consistent findings with our study. The stigmatization of divorced women is due to the cultural setup and patriarchy prevailing in our societies. They have to go through a lot of challenges and have to face negative comments from the people (14). Another study conducted in Punjab also proved that divorcees are dishonored in society. They have to deal with the transition from being married to being single again along with the harsh behavior of their colleagues, and relatives (15).

Half of the women interviewed in our study experienced harassment at their workplace after people got to know about their divorce. This was consistent with the study done in Sri Lanka on workplace harassment about gender differences and whether the woman is married or not (16). In this study, all the participants went through mental health problems due to their marital breakdown, consistent with the study done in Egypt in 2019. Most of the respondents shared that they felt sad, miserable, and fearful during their marriage (17). A Saudi study in 2017 also found divorced women to have depression and resentment, mostly due to the solitude and abandonment they have

to deal with after their divorce. The ones who are financially stable and have good jobs are less prone to depressive symptoms (12). A study was done in Pakistan (Islamabad and Lahore), which revealed that participants acknowledged the sense of safety, and comfort they got post-divorce gave them the strength to become stronger and independent, results were similar to the current study (13).

A qualitative study was done in Indiana in which the author related divorce events to a framework (Mezirow's transformational framework). With time all the divorced women accepted their past. All of them started focusing on becoming financially strong. Some also uplifted themselves by getting higher education. These women experienced improvement in their physical and emotional health. These findings were similar to our study (18). A phenomenological study was conducted in the USA, recording the lived experiences of participant's adjustment in their post-divorce life. They figured out that with time healing occurs. On average people need 2 years or more to get used to the new life after divorce. We also learned through our study findings that time has a positive impact on post-divorce adjustment (19).

CONCLUSION

Divorce is a stigma and is considered a curse in our society. Due to these women after their divorce have to struggle more to survive with dignity. Divorced men also have to face certain challenges in their post-divorce life. They have to struggle with their compromised health and lack of empathy of society towards them. But they don't have to face as much societal pressure as divorced women.

AUTHORS CONTRIBUTION

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Formal analysis: MM, MP

Writing-review and editing: MS, SA

Final Approval: LB

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

We declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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