



RESEARCH PAPER

Informal Social Networks and Post-Divorce Challenges of Middle-Aged Divorced Women

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ABSTRACT

Pakistan is a patriarchal and collectivist society where marriage and divorce are not in isolation. In fact, the structure of informal social networks regulate the norms and provide sanctions and resources in case of following or deviating them within marriage and family institution. Coming out from appreciated social status of being married, a woman when divorced face plethora of problems. The current study investigates and explores the post-divorce challenges of women in Pakistan in context of informal social networks. The data was collected through 15 in-depth interviews of divorced women from Lahore .After transcription, it was divided in further codes and a thematic analysis was applied. The research findings are low self-esteem, stigmatization, financial burdens, fear of tomorrow, burden of single parenting and post-divorce regrets. Moreover, the women reported low social support from informal social networks except their parents. However, the challenges vary with socio-economic and cultural settings subjective to the each participant.

Keywords

Divorce, Informal Social Networks, Marriage, Patriarchy, Post-Divorce Challenges, Social Support

Introduction

Pakistan is a country where relationships flourish and fade under the dynamics of collective social acceptance. Individuals are evaluated, constrained and appreciated on the basis of regulated cultural and social norms through social interactions within formal and informal social structures including networks and institutions to attain the benefits and resources. However, these informal relations provide social sanctions when someone deviates the social norms. Relationships are the ties of networks which bind the social actors together, such networks are formal, informal, binding, bonding and expressive networks (Lin, 1999). Thus, informal relations within informal social networks continuously monitor, judge, evaluate hence play an essential role in choices and opportunities in a constructive or constraining manner (Felmlee, 2001). Informal social networks are intangible or emotional informal mechanism providing shared set of norms and values in collectivist's societies where reputation is required in multiplex roles. These networks have cohesive power which make them alive, functional and stable (Aoki, 2007 ; Hennart, 2015).

In Pakistan, marriage and divorce are not beyond the societal and institutional influence and contribution (Gul, et al., 2019). The social identity of being

married is a dignified and valued social status especially a happy and functional marriage which ultimately becomes a source to enhance social and subjective well-being of an individual (Ramzan et al., 2018). Contrary to it, divorce is a life threatening decision not only for the spouses but also for the dependent and connected social relations including kids, family and siblings in all personal and professional domains of life (Khan et al., 2017). In spite of all of its harmful consequences the divorce rate is increasing globally and nationally. At global level in last four decades the divorce rate is more than double as compared to previous years. Only in Lahore, more than 100 separation cases are registered in family courts on daily basis and 80% of these are initiated by women. With all the plethora of problems, divorce brings in someone's life, it brings hopes and relief for someone especially coming out from unwanted, toxic and abusive marital relations (Ramzan et al., 2018).

In the patriarchal society like Pakistan, the autonomy of decision-making and being resourceful of a woman is still not cherished and acknowledged in modern and contemporary days in spite of increased participation of women in economic domains of family (Chaudhary & Dutt, 2022). But with changing traditional and cultivated roles of women, societies are confronting new and emerging interactions and roles of women globally and locally (Ikram, Ishtiaq & Javed, 2022). The increasing sense of self in a collectivist country is a major cause of marital dissolution. Khaleeq (2015) explored in his research that economic instability, joint family systems, extra-marital affairs, mismatches and unrealistic expectations are the main causes of divorce in Pakistani society.

Divorce and separation are a source of dissatisfaction and humiliation for everyone involved in it. However, the consequences of divorce on women are more harmful and deep rooted in spite of the increasing divorce rate in Pakistani Society. Our social identity is an outcome of a dialogical process of knowledge, truth and power dynamics and we negotiate on it. Our roles and identities are product of a process of interaction, communication and conversation which bring the meaning to ourselves and the society as well (Schalkwyk, 2005; Pena et al., 2018). The post-divorce challenges are distressing for both genders but the role of networks, support and social status can vary in their effects. Resources and support from the informal domains of a divorcee are based on his or her position in the society, family and network. Rahman, Giedraitis & Akhtar (2013), elaborated in their research that divorce brings consequences for many but the ultimate cost goes from the pocket of divorced women.

Individuals do not exist in a vacuum, they need interaction, adaptation and yet are dependent on other social beings for the survival and attainment of their goals which are for collective benefits in the family and marriage domains. However, in case of conflict, contradiction or deviance of certain rules and regulated norms bring conflict and the problems arise in these institutions (Latifzadeh, Zarea & Moghadam, 2015). The post-divorce challenges for women put them at high risk of dependence, accountability in their social surroundings in a collectivist culture of Pakistani Society where the divorce of one is considered harmful for the whole family network and brings the consequences in many lives. Consequentially the informal networks of family play different roles in adjustment, or even create more challenges in the post-divorced years. The researcher on the basis of existing literature gap in the Pakistani academia aims to explore the post-divorce challenges of women in context of informal social network to understand the positive or negative role. The findings of the present research can be helpful for family counsellors.

Literature Review

Individuals' and society's harmony and well-being are highly dependent on marriage and family institutions. Family is an essential source of support in the hour of need and hardship (Berlin, 2004). Marriage also regulates sexuality in culturally and legally accepted ways and strengthens women economically (Scott, 2000). Where marriage strengthens the dignity and prestige in a social status of someone, it can also suck the happiness and self-esteem in case of conflict and dispute prevailing deeply within marital interaction. Hence the marital dispute turns into a legal divorce if the couples do not save their relation by dissolving the conflict. Divorce brings many problems including the self and family formation with new role and resources adjustment for divorced women (Akter & Begum, 2012) especially in a country like Pakistan where in spite of a lot of development, women are under the burden of maintaining relationship and are judged by their performance as a good wife, mother and daughter-in-law.

Khan et al., 2017 highlighted that divorce is a striking problem in all the social upheavals of modern society which kill the social harmony at all levels including micro to macro. Divorce brings negative consequences in social life, which make the women vulnerable to many social, emotional and psychological problems including anxiety, depression and social isolation especially in the patriarchal culture of Pakistani society (Qamar & Faizan, 2021). Divorce can change the nature, structure and functions of social relationship (Kramrei et al., 2007). Divorce depreciates the social network affecting the resources and benefits for an individual (Afifia et al., 2013). Divorce changes the patterns, behaviors and expectations of an individual in his social interactions. The new and damaged social status comes after a legal divorce, the whole world changes its views for them, makes them distressed with the fear of tomorrow (Beauchamp, 2003). Post-Divorce period brings many challenges in the personal, familial and social domain of human life. However, Individual's resilience, social support, friends, family, employment and education make them different for him (Amato, 2000).

Pakistani Women in the patriarchal society living in collective culture are more accountable in public and private domain of life. Consequentially, the "good women" label is required for her to live with happiness and dignity. Being evaluated and judged under the label of "Home Maker", she actually doesn't possess a house in her journey from parent home to in-laws' home. Moreover, whoever breaks the house, she is the one to be blamed. Women are supposed to be subservient and submissive both in the natal family and in-laws. At in-laws, serving in-laws, being obedient to the husband showing dependence on him in spite of being a working woman is ideal and appreciable (Qadir et al., 2005). The marital dissolution, stigma and social identity of a divorcee increase the burden of adjustment for the divorcee in collectivist cultural society like Pakistan (Zafar & Kausar, 2014). Economic challenges and the loss of friendships is a common threat where it comes to the social identity of divorce (Nikparvar et al., 2018).

The current study investigates and understands the women's challenges and burdens of decoupling and breakup after their marital dissolution and legal divorce. Pakistani scholarly debates revolve around the consequences, outcomes and coping strategies of divorced women, finding the support either emotional, financial or instrumental. But this study is comparatively an addition to understanding the dynamics of informal social networks including family and close friends either in creating the post-divorce challenges or the resource of coping them.

Material and Methods

Family, Culture, social norms cannot be detached from one another in the marriage institution of Pakistani Society (Qamar & Faizan, 2021). Likewise, marital conflict, dissolution and divorce are based on the subjective experience of the social actors within a particular context. Social constructionists focus and prefer the subjective experiences of people attached to reality to understand the particular phenomena. Divorce and its consequences or challenges are better to understand in an interpretivist paradigm. So, the current study is based on qualitative research design on the 15 in-depth interviews of middle aged women (35-50) from urban Lahore, by using semi-structured interview guide as a tool. Understanding the contrasts and similarities of the data within the specifically chosen context is aided by a small homogeneous sample (Smith & Osborn, 2015). The participants were recruited through purposive sampling technique including women who initiated divorce and lived with their dependent kids. Field notes were taken and the interviews were recorded. Later the collected data was transcribed in codes and themes were generated. The subjective experiences of divorce required the qualitative research paradigm for achieving the research goals of current research. Keeping in view the research ethics, the informed consent was taken from all participants considering the issues of confidentiality and anonymity.

Results and Discussion

The section below discusses, elaborates and brings forth the findings from the field. Respondents were the divorced women who lived first five years of post-divorce duration. The narratives and experiences regarding post-divorce challenges are tough for women especially for those who live with their dependent kids. Moreover, women try to cope challenges with their personal strength but the role of informal social network in context of post-divorced obstacles and resources is quite blurring for them where the challenges they face are usually emerging from their closed and informal social networks. The data generates the themes of Lower Self-Esteem, Health and Well-Being, Financial Burdens, Fear for Tomorrow, Stigmatization, Discrimination and Loud Judgments in Social Gatherings, Dual Burden of Single Parenting and Post-Divorce Regret.

The socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents are as below:

Table 1
Sociodemographic Characteristics of the Participants

| SR # | Age | Gender | Type of Marriage | Years of Marriage at the time of Divorce | Academic Qualification | Employment status | No. of Children | Duration of post-divorce period |
|------|-----|--------|------------------|--|------------------------|-------------------|-----------------|---------------------------------|
| 1 | 38 | F | A | 6 | Engineering | Unemployed | 2 | 4 |
| 2 | 37 | F | A | 8 | Masters | Self-Employed | 3 | 3 |
| 3 | 35 | F | L | 4 | Graduation | School Teacher | 1 | 1 |
| 4 | 40 | F | A | 8 | B.Com | Unemployed | 1 | 2 |
| 5 | 41 | F | A | 7 | M.Com | Banking | 2 | 3 |
| 6 | 39 | F | A | 5 | MS | Self-Employed | 2 | 3 |
| 7 | 41 | F | A | 7 | Graduation | Home-Tuitions | 1 | 5 |
| 8 | 38 | F | A | 6 | Master | Call-Center | 2 | 2 |
| 9 | 37 | F | L | 6 | Graduation | Receptionist | 1 | 4 |

| | | | | | | | | |
|----|----|---|---|---|-------|----------------|---|---|
| 10 | 36 | F | A | 3 | MS | Teacher | 1 | 2 |
| 11 | 41 | F | A | 8 | Inter | Tailor | 2 | 5 |
| 12 | 44 | F | A | 7 | Inter | Sales Woman | 2 | 4 |

The experiences of post-divorced women highlighted the under discussion themes. From the sample of the current research 2 out of 12 women were divorced from a love marriage, only 2 women were under graduates and almost all of them got divorced in first 8 years of marriage.

Lower Self-Esteem, Health and Well-Being

Marriage brings social benefits and privileges that divorce snatches from someone. The feeling of rejection and failure sucks their dignity, worth and self-esteem and women are in more suffering in this regard as compared to their partners (Akter & Begum, 2012 & Muzaffar, et.al, 2018). One of the respondents shared as: "I lost my focus, I started forgetting things and I was totally not in control of hiding my emotions especially while attending the family events in the first year of post-divorce period and my sister's husband took me to the psychologist." (P5, 39). Collectivist cultures do not accept the deviance and provide sanctions which are controlling tool to regulate the social norms. Informal social networks of family in Pakistani society consider the women in divorce more accountable and do not appreciate them as normal human being. A female respondent shared that:

"In the first year of divorce, I felt the sympathies of my siblings with me, but I felt after 3 years that things became messier for my dignity. "I never felt that my opinion and feelings were preferred and given importance after my divorce".(P1,38).

Post-Divorce challenges and problems are linked with the pre-divorce scenario and context. Violence, disloyalty and unvalued social worth of a woman in pre-divorce years influence her in the post-divorce year. No matter she initiates the divorce or not. Another female respondent shared that:

"Yes, I took khula after 7 years of my marriage, because of the unexpected and unbearable extra-marital relation of my husband. To disclose it in public even after divorce, I feel my self-having no worth. When people say, why your husband was involved in someone else. It really hit my dignity that I was not a good wife or woman. (P7, 41)

Post-divorce challenges related to self-esteem and health prevail for many years even until end of life after divorce and usually they come from the informal networks including siblings and extended families. Social support in these circumstances vary due to socio-demographic attributes and the pre-divorce scenario of one's life.

Stigmatization, Discrimination and Loud Judgments in Social Gatherings

Social and family gatherings are for the social inclusion of an individual among groups and community which are essential for their well-being. A respondent shared that: "My friends stopped inviting me to the birthday parties of their kids when they celebrated with their families. Although, they did not disconnect and did listen to my problems." (P8, 38)

Informal social networks of friends among divorced women help them in adjustments, however to introduce and own a divorced friend in their in-laws is a

source of stigma and judgment for their own self. Because society judges that a divorced woman is a failure and a deviant of social norms, she can be contagious promoting relationship breakdown and deviance in their families as well. The discrimination is not only confined to the informal setting, however, the judgments and discriminations influence the professional life of women.

A female shared that: "I was working in a private organization, at the time of my promotion, my professional skills were compared with my divorced status. I was considered unable to maintain responsibility and inconsistent in commitments, my promotion was postponed twice." (P11-41)

The most constant source of distress was none other than interpersonal-social problems such as stereotyping, judgments and distancing by others (Lee, 2018).

Women in Pakistan face judgments coming out of their marriage, and the role of informal social networks is less functional in sorting this out. However, many of the women shared that their friends provided them support whenever they faced labeling and judgments. But there were some constraints on them from their families. Moreover, some of the respondents said that they found more strength while connecting and making friends with someone who was in the same status.

Fear of Tomorrow

Divorce is a socially deviant act either by male or female, however, women while pursuing divorce are more at stake. The continuous disapproval of them makes them more insecure about their future. Their future remains uncertain for their own selves, however, they have the fear of social and marital non- acceptance of their dependent kids and sometimes in spite of going with the flow they feel themselves deprived of the sleep because of their ultimate loneliness in their old age. Even some women, in spite of having the children with them fear that they will leave them and will go to their fathers. A respondent said: "*I am in fear of being alone again and again in my life*". (P2, 37).

Divorce makes a woman more stressed than a married woman, in fact she becomes more vulnerable to the emotional insecurities. However the adjustments, personal development and reorganization of self vary depending on support, education and employment opportunities (Hetherington, et al., 2001).

A female respondent shared that: "I already have spent 6 years in fear of breaking down, being alone. But now I am not in a false hope. The one who did not protect me and betrayed me was not worthy to rule my life. I feel I am in such an age where I can strengthen my life in better way rather than depending on any other support." (P6, 39)

Most of the respondents were in doubt of being alone when their close ones would leave them at any stage of life. However, women with good income status found it not tough to grow alone and showed resilience while sharing their experiences and life scenario.

Dual Burden of Single Parenting

Being a single parent especially a single mother in a patriarchal society is a super power of a woman (Deborah, Micosteen & Palani, 2020). But it is the biggest challenge she faces in her post-divorce period. She has to be a cook, a friend, a mother,

a father and a mentor while she already faces the fear of being a less ideal parent for her child as she is not a successful home maker. It really needs resources and support.

A female respondent shared: "We never talk and appreciate single parent families in our informal settings. So, my kids always questioned it. To keep them emotionally stable is a continuous battle for me that I think will never end." (P12, 42)

Women after divorce fix their life around their kids and their every problem is what is their child's problem including the education, residential moves and quality time (Khan et al., 2017). Women are the home maker in traditional, patriarchal societies, but they pay the cost more when a home breaks. They move from one house to another and then coming back in the same family unit after divorce change the meaning of "family" for them and for their kids. Women living with their parents consider that after divorce the only protective shield for them were their parents. A woman respondent told that: "My father never let my son feel that his father is away, from eating at MacDonald to applying for a foreign degree, my son's Nana was his father." (P.10,36) She further added, "but this created rivalry and jealousy between me and other siblings who felt I am exploiting their right with such favors."

Almost more than 60% of the respondents shared that their parents were the shield of protection and affection while bringing up their kids. Yet there were some other obstacles from the informal social network of the divorced women's natal family including the rivalry from their siblings.

Financial Burdens

Divorce breaks the collective financial resources including accommodation and childcare especially when women are not working before divorce. Residential moves, changing of educational institutions of children, health care all are the economic challenges and burden of the divorced women.

A female respondent shared as: "My kids were going to a well-known school, they started to feel deprived because my married brother was not in condition of supporting the expenses of my family. I started to work after 2 years of my divorce. Also I am living in a rented house and bearing all the burden for myself." (P2, 37)

Women face multiple problems due to economic resources, either it is a legal case against their husband for maintenance or for dower. All what they need is money to reorganize their shattered life and make it again a family unit.

Another respondent shared that: "My parental family stopped me to pursue the legal case on my husband, they felt it is a wastage of money and time. So, I neither got the maintenance, and nor any economic support when I was at my parents' home with a toddler. Gradually, people make me realize I will have to earn for me and I am a burden on others.

Almost all women face some kind of financial burden despite being educated working women. It shows the low economic empowerment of women in spite of her work in personal and professional arena of their lives. Women don't have their spatial rights, they either share parents' home where they feel themselves and their kids more deprived emotionally and sometimes physically. In case of living alone, it is again a test and trial because of existing patriarchies in the private and public life.

Post-Divorce Regret

Divorce brings you out from a series of conflict but its consequences create some other harms that are not at all easy to cope. In the initial years of divorce the intersectional challenges of financial burden, multiple roles adjustment and judgments bring more stressful events for the divorced women, which ultimately can lead them to regret (Pirak, et al., 2018).

A female respondent shared: " There come many moments where I honestly feel isolated, alone, deprived of and unloved but these are some moments. The trauma of living with a disloyal person and its consequences on my children were far more dangerous. So, I feel I am in a good state now". (P.8, 36)

Women especially coming out from the abusive marriages feel themselves more relaxed and better in post-divorce period. However, many of them did complain that they were subjected to objections and bad remarks from many informal social relations. But they were determined to overcome them.

Another respondent shared that: " I do not miss even any moment of my married life, a suffocated home sucks the oxygen of person living in it. 7 years of bearing all kinds of violence and abuse don't allow my nerves to look back". She further said, " I eat, I enjoy and I can feel relaxed which was not a part of my life before." (P.7,41)

Women with high income and education and less restrictions from their immediate informal social networks handle and fight with the challenges of post-divorce period.

Conclusion

The present study explored the post-divorce challenges faced by urban women in Lahore. Based on the analysis and subjective reality of the experiences, it can be elaborated that the changed social status and identity of urban women with divorce bring harmful consequences in their personal life which they ultimately try to cope with the strengths they gain based on demographic attributes including age, education and employment. As far the role of informal social networks in these challenges, in spite of being a collectivist society the emotional and economic support is less available which divert the attention towards the dark side of informal social network in context of urban divorced women where being a divorcee and especially being a divorce initiator is not acceptable in spite of the efforts a woman put in her relationships. She is the one to be blamed and suffer. But contemporary resources for a divorced women are their education, religion and employment. Although, they are being judged on the basis of religious misconduct and their personal growth is negatively associated as a reason of their marital breakup in the informal settings and structure of social networks.

Recommendations

The present study highlights the post-divorce challenges of divorced women in context of informal social networks in urban Lahore. However, a perspective from the rural women can also be added further in any other research which can be helpful in understanding the acceptance of divorced women and understanding their challenges in context of informal social relations either they are the resources or obstacles in post-divorce adjustment of women.

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