

Perception of Subjective Well-being among Divorced Women: A Comparative Study of Hindus and Muslims

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Divorce is a complex psycho-social phenomenon. It is the end product of a long process of marital disharmony ignited by multiple factors. The incidence of divorce is a major upsetting event that brings new stressors and strain into the lives of most of the spouses. Due to strong socialization for conjugal role and low social status, women are at a greater disadvantage in divorce. Most women undergo considerable psychological distress such as depression, loneliness, alienation and a sense of personal rejection after divorce. The present study intends to comprehend the phenomenon of divorce in the given socio-cultural context of India and to examine the impact of divorce on the subjective well-being of divorced women belonging to Hindu and Muslim community. The sample of the study comprised 55 divorced women (25 Hindu, 30 Muslim) and 60 intact-married subjects (30 Hindu, 30 Muslim). A self-developed Subjective Well-being Scale (SWS) was used. The statistical measures of mean, SD and t-test were applied to analyze the collated data. The results revealed that social, emotional, financial, and health were the important facets of life where most of the divorced women found dissatisfied. Findings have implications for devising policies and programs for the welfare of women in general and divorced women in particular.

Key words: divorce, subjective well-being, marital disharmony, Hindu, Muslim.

The institution of marriage lies at the core of the society, as it promotes eternal human bondage and social stability. Contemporary India is in the process of rapid social and technological changes. This has led to life-style choices which have seriously undermined inter-personal relations, values and attitude for marriage crucial for the foundation of family organization. Marital adjustment has therefore become increasingly difficult and stressful. Evidences reveal that marital discords and consequent divorce have become more common now than before. 'Many people have started believing that marriage is more an alliance of social convenience than a perpetual bond made in heaven. As a result, the practice of divorce is increasing in urban areas (Waheed, 2003). As per Census statistics, the total number of divorced/separated female in Aligarh increased from 700 in 1991 to 1654 in 2001 (GOI, 2001). Of course, divorce may free people from bad relationship and 'is one of the major solutions for an intense degree of marital disharmony' (Goode, 1970, p. 113). However, divorce is still considered as one of the most unfortunate possibilities of discord in marriage. It may be very upsetting event for most persons. When a relationship is brought to an end, the process of adjusting to resultant life begins. Undeniably, conflict is endemic to marriage, and all conjugal disputes may not necessarily lead to marital dissolution.

Divorce is not a sudden occurrence either, but a culmination of a prolonged psycho-social process in which husband and wife, defying every reconciliatory effort, no longer want to live together. It is the end product of marital disharmony initiated by multifarious reasons. The common and almost universal grounds for divorce, as

stated in various studies, are adultery, ill health, problems with in-laws, bad temper, disobedience, barrenness, dowry, poor economic conditions etc. (Azeez, 2003; Azim, 1997). Divorce is fundamentally a legal action. A marriage can be terminated informally but a couple is not considered divorced unless the dissolution of their marriage has been sanctioned by law. Beside law, the other factors impacting divorce include socio-economic forces, gender role in the family, role of the kinsmen in reconciliatory efforts, religion, cultural system, and emotional and behavioural elements in everyday living which are inextricably intertwined. In accordance with Phillips (1991) "Divorce is not an isolated legal event that is unrelated to other personal, familial and social actions and circumstances, but is the final stage of marital process" (Phillips, 1991, p. 93-94). Divorce is a complex social phenomenon. But its consequences are largely psychological and adverse for the persons involved. Research indicates that the divorce may leave the spouses in a state of shock, depression, social and marital deprivation because of many factors, such as loss of meaning in routinized behavior, uncertainty in life patterns, and the problem of coping with the unknown and unexpected (Imtiaz, 2003).

Thus, divorce brings considerable distress and behavioral disruptions in the life of the person concerned. The personal disorganization and trauma varies by individual personality traits as well as the degree of mental preparedness. "Divorce benefits some individuals, leads others to experience temporary decrement in well-being and forces others downward trajectory from which they never recover fully" (Amato, 2000, p. 1260). Spouses who take the decision in favour of divorce are less likely to be shocked than those who were unprepared. Women are typically considered to be at the losing end in a divorce because of their dependence on the opposite sex and because of the dire need of socialization for the conjugal role (Imtiaz, 2003). Due to socio-cultural reasons, women face more problems in the event of divorce or separation. Some problems can be common, but some vary from community to community depending upon their religio-cultural identity (Azeez, 2003).

Several studies have explored the well-being and stress the women experience in the event of divorce. One such research revealed that situation of divorce in many ways was comparable with widowhood particularly when the divorcee was the mother of young kids. The immediate period after death/separation for both was a time of loneliness, emotional stress and economic hardship (Hart, 1976). Other studies indicate that divorce precipitated a number of emotional reactions such as fear, sadness, anger and depression leading to psychological distress (Amato & Previti, 2000; Bharat, 1994; Emery, Shaw & Jackson, 1987, Rekha, 1992) found that women report intense psychological and emotional problems in divorce than socio-economic difficulties. They undergo psychological crisis of lostness, insecurity and a sense of personal rejection. Another research by Holtman (1997) indicated that women usually experience anger, depression and anxiety about their future lives during separation and divorce. Zakiya (2003) reported that adjustment with sisters-in-law, economic hardship and children's marriage were some of the important post-divorce problems faced by majority of divorced Muslim women. A few researches conducted with Muslim population have highlighted the pathetic state of divorced women and their reduced well-being (Dasgupta, 2003; Gani, 2003; Hussain, 2003; Rafat 2003)

When the divorce among Hindus and Muslims is discussed, it becomes necessary to explain its religious underpinnings. Divorce is to be analyzed in the light of the nature of marriage as outlined in scriptures. Hindu marriage is a sacrament and indissoluble. It was only after the enactment of Hindu Marriage and Divorce Act of 1955 that the divorce could receive a legal sanction. We find that Hindus of higher casts or classes did not allow divorce nor practiced remarriage in the past. However, a large section of Hindus among lower strata have traditionally practiced divorce. The usually customary forms of divorce are; a) by mutual consent, b) unilateral at the pleasure of the husband or by abandonment of the wife, and c) by deed of divorce (Waheed, 2003). It has been observed that people of lower and middle class from the urban areas are more prone to divorce. Explaining the pattern and causes of divorce in segmented Indian society, Goode (1970) says, "Where there is a well developed stratified system, it would seem likely that the marriage itself costs less, less is invested in it than the upper strata, the kin ties are less important and therefore, the ambiguity created by divorce would not be taken so seriously as in the upper strata" (Goode, 1970, p.113).

Muslim marriage on the other hand is a sacred contract. Islam views marriage as a social institution of utmost importance and exhorts man to marry (Kidwai, 2005). Islamic law has explicitly recognized the termination of marriage by way of divorce called 'talaq' (derived from Arabic word 'itlaq' meaning 'set free'). Divorce is permissible for both men and women. However, it can be allowed only when several attempts of reconciliation have failed. Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) was against the practice of divorce, unless it is inevitable. He said, "Divorce is most detestable in the sight of Allah of all permitted things" (vol. 3, book 8, Hadith 1863, 2008) *Qur'an* emphasizes that divorce should not be a hasty impulsive act, and be finalized only after a period of waiting during which couple is counseled and given a chance to rethink on the decision. The holy *Qur'an* explicitly states this:

"When you have to divorce woman, pronounce only when they are in a free state (i.e. free from menstruation or pregnancy)... Do not turn them out of their houses... God may perhaps bring about a reconciliation between you" (Surah Al-Talaq:2)

A Muslim marriage contract may be dissolved in three principle

ways: (a) *Talaq*; by act of husband, (b) *Khula*; by act of wife, and (c) *faskh*; through judicial process. *Talaq* by husband or repudiation may be pronounced by i) *talaq-e-ahsan*, ii) *talaq-e-hasan*, and iii) *talaq-e-bid'at* or triple *talaq* (Khuayzai, 2013). Another form of divorce through mutual consent is called *mubar'ah*. The most common *talaq-e-bid'at* or triple *talaq* was forbidden and disapproved form of divorce by the Prophet (PBUH), because it goes against the spirit of *Shariah*. Despite many restrictions imposed in Islamic jurisprudence, the Muslim men appear to have misused the provision of *talaq*. This led to believe that the divorce law makes the position of Muslim women weak, and they have to lead a life under fear and subordination. Under the Islamic law, there is no ambiguity in the matters of divorce, social roles and responsibilities in marital tie. Yet the issue of divorce has become a source of misconception and controversy due to erroneous interpretations and practices of Islamic provision.

Objective

The present study aims to investigate the phenomenon of divorce in the given socio-cultural context and to find out how it affects the subjective well-being of Hindu and Muslim divorced women on different parameters of subjective well-being in relation to intact-married women.

Hypotheses:

H_{1a}: There will be no significant difference between Hindu and Muslim divorced women on social, emotional, health, and financial dimensions of subjective well-being.

H_{2a}: There will be a significant difference between divorced and married women on social, emotional, health, and financial dimensions of subjective well-being.

Method

Sample

The sample of the study consisted of 55 divorced women (Hindu 25, Muslim 30) and 60 intact-married women (30 Hindu, 30 Muslim) selected from the city of Aligarh. The subjects belonging to the former category were located with the help of acquaintances, influential members of the different localities of the city and lawyers dealing with family matters. The latter category subjects were chosen randomly from the general population. The age of the subjects ranged from 20 to 44 years. According to official data (GOI, 2001), maximum number of divorce took place in this age group. While selecting the married subjects, care was taken to match them with the sample of divorced women in age, education and socio-economic background.

Instrumentation

Demographic data sheet was given to the participants. Information regarding the participants' age, religion, qualification, socio-economic status, number of children, present marital status, etc. was collected.

A Subjective Well-being Scale for divorced women (SWS) was developed. The scale consists of 22 items and covers 6 dimensions of subjective well-being, i.e., 'social', 'emotional', 'health', 'finance', 'life aspiration' and factor of 'being realistic'. It is a 5-point scale ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. Higher score on the scale indicated dissatisfaction while low score

denotes satisfaction. In the present scale, subjective well-being refers to peoples' evaluation of their lives including emotional responses, domain satisfaction and global judgment of life-satisfaction. The same Scale was applied for intact-married subjects. The split-half reliability with divorced and intact-married group was 0.89 and 0.85 respectively. The face validity was checked by the five independent judges well versed with the subject.

Procedure

After gaining approval from the relevant board of studies, the participants were contacted individually. The investigator established adequate rapport with the respondents and assured them that the information would be kept confidential. The participants were briefed about the study and asked to respond as per instructions in the Questionnaire (Scale). The collated data were analyzed with the help of independent sample t-test.

Results

Table 1

Comparison between Hindu and Muslim Divorced Women on different Dimensions of Subjective well-being (PWB)

Dimensions of PWB	Divorced - Hindu Women (n=25)	Divorced - Muslim Women (n=30)	t	95% CI		Cohen's d
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)		LL	UL	
Finance	15.20 (3.77)	16.00 (4.00)	.76	1.40	3.00	.21
Social	16.00 (4.20)	14.80 (2.90)	1.21	.74	3.14	.33
Emotional	15.60 (3.80)	15.20 (3.45)	.42	1.52	2.32	.12
Health	15.40 (3.90)	14.00 (2.05)	1.73	.32	2.48	.48
Life-aspiration	7.10 (2.40)	7.50 (2.10)	.66	.34	2.48	.18
Being-realistic	7.95 (1.80)	8.40 (1.50)	1.02	.45	1.35	.28
Total PWB	12.88 (3.31)	12.64 (2.67)	.29	1.35	1.87	.08

Note: CI = Confidence Interval; LL = Lower Limit, UL = Upper Limit; PWB = Psychological Well-being

Table 2

Comparison between Divorced and Intact-married Women on different Dimensions of Subjective well-being (PWB)

Dimensions of PWB	Total Divorced Women (N=55)	Intact-married Women (N=60)	t	95% CI		Cohen's d
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)		LL	UL	
Finance	15.60 (3.89)	8.40 (1.54)	12.41**	6.80	8.30	2.33
Social	15.40 (3.55)	4.00 (1.15)	22.80**	10.43	12.37	4.29
Emotional	15.60 (3.62)	6.00 (2.04)	17.45**	8.51	10.68	3.28
Health	15.40 (2.98)	5.00 (1.77)	22.61**	9.49	11.31	4.25
Life-aspiration	7.30 (2.25)	9.00 (2.44)	3.86**	.88	2.55	0.73
Being-realistic	8.18 (1.65)	9.30 (2.05)	3.37**	0.44	1.80	0.63
Total PWB	23.25 (2.99)	6.95 (1.83)	35.65**	15.38	16.30	6.71

**p<.01

Note: CI = Confidence Interval; LL = Lower Limit, UL = Upper Limit; PWB = Psychological Well-being

Table-1 shows the mean score, SD and t-value and the comparison between Hindu and Muslim divorced women on different facets of Psychological well-being (PWB). The mean score and SD of Hindu and Muslim divorced women on overall PWB were 12.88 (3.31) and 12.65 (2.67) respectively. The t-value is 0.29 i.e. insignificant at $p < .05$. The mean score and SD of Hindu divorced women on different dimensions of PWB indicated to be finance; 15.20 (3.77), social; 16.00 (4.20), emotional; 15.60 (3.80), health; 15.40 (3.90), life-aspirations; 7.10 (2.40) and being-realistic; 7.95 (1.80). The mean score and SD of Muslim divorced women regarding the same dimensions were 16.00 (4.00), 14.80 (2.90), 15.20 (3.45), 14.00 (2.05), 7.50 (2.10), and 8.40 (1.50) respectively. The corresponding t-values revealed that statistically no significant difference was found between two groups. Therefore, results support the first hypothesis (H_1).

As demonstrated in table-2, the mean score and SD of divorced and intact-married groups regarding total PWB were 23.25 (2.99) and 6.95 (1.83) respectively. The t-value was 35.65 i.e. significant at $p < .01$. The mean score and SD of divorced women on each

domain of PWB were as finance; 15.60 (3.89), social; 15.40 (3.55), emotional; 15.60 (3.62), health; 15.40 (2.98), life-aspirations; 7.30 (2.25) and being-realistic; 8.18 (1.65). On the other hand, mean score and SD of intact-married women were 8.40 (1.54), 4.00 (1.15), 6.00 (2.04), 5.00 (1.77), 9.00 (2.44), and 9.30 (2.05) respectively. The t-values given in the table suggest that divorced group significantly differ with married group in respect of all stated dimensions of PWB viz., finance ($t=12.41$; $p<.01$), social ($t=22.80$; $p<.01$), emotional ($t=17.45$; $p<.01$), health ($t=22.61$; $p<.01$), life-aspiration ($t=3.86$; $p<.01$), and being-realistic ($t=3.37$; $p<.01$). Thus, the results confirmed the second hypothesis (H_2).

Discussion

The main objective of the study was to compare the divorced and intact-married women of Hindu and Muslim community in the perception of their subjective well-being. Results revealed statistically no significant difference between Hindu and Muslim divorced women in respect of given dimensions of PWB. But the

divorced and married women differ significantly in the perception of their PWB. It suggests that divorced women from both the communities sharing common socio-cultural environment have been facing almost similar social, financial, emotional and health related difficulties after divorce. The study further pointed out that divorced women in comparison to intact-married women reported more complaints of unhappiness and worries pertaining to said aspects of their life. Beside socio-economic woes, a majority of divorced women has emphasized the psychological trauma they felt as a result of being divorced. Such negative emotions/consequences adversely affect their physical and mental health resulting in poor psychological well-being. Contrary to this, married women had reported fewer complaints related to different domains of PWB and have better quality of life than divorced women. The findings of the present study are in line with the results obtained by Aghajanian and Moghadas (1998). They found that divorced women experienced more psychological problems when compared to married women and scored higher on measures of dissatisfaction, irritability, insecurity and general maladjustment.

Conclusion

Divorce, being a complex psycho-social phenomenon, brings adverse consequences for women irrespective of their religion. It is the social stigma, emotional insecurity and economic uncertainty that make divorced women more vulnerable to psychosocial troubles which in turn, reduce their subjective well-being in post-divorce period. In fact, it is the immediate socio-cultural milieu rather than the religious privileges or guidelines that play vital roles in determining the actual status of women in the event of divorce. The study underlines the need for effective campaigning to change the attitude towards divorced women, imparting skill oriented education among girls, proper counseling for resolving marital conflicts as well as to help cope with the aftermath, and last but not the least, establishment of community based organizations for urgent rehabilitation.

Limitations and Implications

The present study has certain limitations. Given the present socio-cultural ethos, divorce is a vexed and stigmatized issue. Participants therefore could have shown socially desirable responses. The size of the sample was relatively small and collected from a particular city (Aligarh, India). Moreover, some bias in recruiting purposive sampling could not be ruled out. All these might have affected generalizations to some extent. However, results drawn from the scientific methodology have implications for designing policies and programs for the betterment of divorced women and future research on this socially relevant subject.

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