Noshaba Razaq[*]
Najia Zulfiqar[**]
Amara Gul[***]

A Study Based On Stigma Experienced by Divorced Women in Pakistan; An Exploratory Research

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study, grounded in phenomenological theory and utilizing semi-structured, issue-focused interviews, explores the stigma experienced by divorced women in Pakistan. The study involved 15 women who had experienced stigma after divorce, selected through purposive sampling. Data were analyzed using a grounded theory approach, resulting in 44 initial codes, 19 sub-themes, and 7 main themes. The first theme, "Forms of Stigma Experienced," includes social, familial, and economic stigma, while the second, "Impact on Mental Health and Well-being," encompasses psychological distress, physical health issues, and social isolation. The third theme, "Coping Mechanisms," highlights personal resilience, support systems, and spiritual practices. "Cultural and Religious Influences," the fourth theme, focuses on cultural norms and religious beliefs. The fifth theme, "Barriers to Social and Economic Reintegration," identifies challenges such as employment difficulties, legal and financial barriers, and social acceptance. "Identity and Self-esteem," the sixth theme, explores how divorced women perceive themselves and their public identity. Lastly, the seventh theme, "Strategies for Reducing Stigma," discusses the importance of community awareness, policy reforms, and support services. The findings show that divorced women in Pakistan endure significant stigma, leading to mental and physical health challenges and social isolation. However, they demonstrate resilience through personal growth, support from networks, and spirituality. Cultural and religious norms often hinder their reintegration into society. The study calls for increased community awareness, policy changes, and enhanced support services to reduce stigma and aid divorced women's reintegration.

Keywords: *Divorced women, experience, stigma, phenomenology, Pakistan*

[*]   PhD scholar at the University of Haripur
[**]   Assistant Professor at The University of Haripur Department of Psychology
[***]   Dean Faculty of Social Sciences & Administrative Sciences

Introduction

Divorce, defined as the legal dissolution of marriage allowing partners the freedom to remarry, is increasingly recognized as a stressful life event with the potential to cause severe psychological disturbances akin to post-traumatic stress disorder (APA, 2018; Mokhtiyari et al., 2013; Hald et al., 2022). Globally, divorce rates are rising, and the Middle East is not exempt from this trend (Mendoza et al., 2023).

Pakistan is among the countries experiencing a gradual increase in divorce rates. Major contributing factors include in-laws' interference, temperamental incompatibility, extramarital affairs, young age, low education levels, low income, parents' divorce, lack of patience, forced marriages, media influences, and inequality (Sultana & Azzam, 2021). This rise in divorce rates adversely affects the psychosocial well-being of women and children (Qamar & Fazan, 2021). Research indicates that domestic violence and abuse are endemic causes of divorce in Pakistan. The emotional and psychological consequences of domestic abuse severely damage women's self-worth and well-being, impacting their mental health stability (Waseem et al., 2020). Divorced individuals face a constant struggle between internal dilemmas, individualistic pursuits, and societal norms, complicating and prolonging their post-divorce adjustment. Institutional, psychosocial, and family support are crucial for alleviating the burdens on divorcees and their children (Rubab et al., 2023).

The stigma associated with divorce further complicates divorced women's efforts to rebuild their lives, exacerbating societal issues related to this phenomenon. Research demonstrates that divorced women face considerable discrimination in the workplace, including gossiping and reduced training opportunities. This discrimination increases turnover intentions and stress while decreasing cognitive performance and disturbing work-life balance. Major coping strategies include avoiding the situation and/or concealing their identity (Saeed et al., 2022). Addressing these challenges requires societal support, acceptance, and the mitigation of socio-economic factors leading to divorce. Promoting healthier relationships and well-being among families can be achieved by addressing these determinants (Tahira et al., 2023). Understanding and addressing the broader societal implications of divorce is essential for fostering resilience and ensuring successful adjustment for divorced individuals in Pakistan. Divorce is associated with serious issues such as depression, anxiety, and social deviance among both men and women (Zafeer et al., 2022). While existing research often focuses on divorce statistics and causes, there is a notable gap in studies addressing the stigma experienced by divorced women.

The significance of this study lies in addressing the underexplored stigma experienced by divorced women in Pakistan. Despite rising divorce rates and

known challenges, the specific stigma and discrimination faced by divorced women remain inadequately studied. This research aims to fill this gap by exploring societal, institutional, and personal challenges. By raising awareness of the profound social and psychological impacts, the study contributes to the discourse on gender, family dynamics, and social justice. The insights gained will inform targeted health education programs and policy interventions to support divorced women more effectively, promoting their psychosocial well-being. Addressing stigma requires a societal shift in perceptions, and this study advocates for greater empathy, acceptance, and support. It will help mental health professionals develop better strategies to enhance the resilience and quality of life for divorced women. This study seeks to explore the stigma experienced by divorced women to provide insights for developing effective health education programs and policy interventions aimed at supporting divorced women in Pakistan.

Research Method

The study employs a qualitative method to explore the stigma experienced by divorced women in Pakistan. To achieve this objective, a phenomenological approach was used, which focuses on studying phenomena from the participants' perspectives without relying on theoretical frameworks, deductive reasoning, or pre-existing assumptions.

The study's population consisted of women who had experienced divorce and were living in Pakistan. Purposive sampling was utilized to select participants who met the criteria of having at least a primary school, being employed, and having been divorced for a minimum of six months and a maximum of one year. Those who met these criteria and volunteered to participate in the study were invited for interviews.

Ethical considerations were addressed before the research commenced by obtaining consent from the participants for both their involvement in the study and the recording of the interviews. Participants were informed about the study's aims, the purpose of recording the interviews, the confidentiality of their information, and the anonymity of their identities.

After interviewing 15 women, data collection reached saturation, indicating that no further interviews were necessary. The interviews were conducted in-depth, semi-structured, and face-to-face, with the sequence of questions adjusted as needed based on the interview process and each participant's responses to ensure consistent and comprehensive information was gathered. The demographic information of each participant is presented using pseudonyms.

67

Research Tools

1. Semi-Structured Interviews

The semi-structured interview form was designed with open-ended questions to explore the stigma experienced by divorced women in Pakistan. The form included the research project title, interview details (time, date, and location), and a brief explanation of the research goals. The interviewer clarified these goals to the participants before asking the questions. Each interview lasted between 35 to 60 minutes, depending on the participants' conditions and willingness. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim immediately after the sessions. To ensure scientific rigor in qualitative research, the researcher maintained prolonged contact with participants to enhance data credibility and included a diverse group of participants.

Implementation Method
Participant Recruitment and Data Collection

Participants were recruited through announcements to colleagues and social media advertisements. They were informed about the research goals and were asked to share their experiences of divorce stigma. The interviews began with a broad question: "Please describe your divorce and the stigma you face afterward," and then explored their reactions, the effects of stigma, and their coping strategies. Interviews lasted between 35 to 60 minutes and were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis and Validation

Thematic analysis was used to interpret participants' experiences of divorce stigma, following six stages: familiarization, coding, theme searching, theme reviewing, defining, and reporting. To ensure accuracy, the study validated data by returning interviews to participants for verification (truthfulness), maintained extended contact with participants (prolonged engagement), and achieved credibility through member checks and methodological rigor. Member checks involved reviewing interviews and codes with participants, while confirmability minimized researcher bias. Additionally, peer checks were conducted by consulting experts to review transcripts and coding.

Findings

The average age of the participants was 32.1 years (SD = 6.77), and the average duration of marriage was 5.8 years (SD = 4.22). Other demographic characteristics of the seven divorced women who experienced unexpected divorces are shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

Participant	Age	Education	Occupation	No of Children	Duration of Marriage (Years)	Duration of Separation (Months)
Saiba	26	Bachelor's	Employee	0	1	6
Nadia	33	Bachelor's	Housewife	1	4	8
Benish	32	Master's	Employee	0	6	10
Azra	26	Matric	Housewife	0	3	9
Fareeiha	36	Master s	Employee	0	7	4
Maria	31	Middle	Housewife	1	8	5
Rahila	28	intermediate	Housewife	0	12	9
Asia	45	Bachelor's	Employee	0	11	6
Shazia	43	Bachelor's	Housewife	1	15	4
Lubna	41	Master's	Employee	0	10	10
Labial	36	Bachelor's	Employee	0	7	11
Faizaan	26	Bachelor's	Employee	0	4	8
Mahnoor	31	primary	Housewife	1	9	10
Samaria	28	middle	Housewife	0	5	11
ushna	25	middle	Employee	0	6	2

The participants, aged 25 to 45 (mean age 31), have diverse educational backgrounds, with most holding Bachelor's or Master's degrees. There is a balance between employed (7) and housewives (10).

Most have no children (11), and the rest have one child each. They were married for 1 to 15 years (average 7 years) before separation, with separation durations ranging from 2 to 11 months (average 7 months).

Table-2
Main Themes, Sub-Themes, and Initial Codes from Data Analysis

Main Theme	Sub-theme	Initial Codes
Forms of Stigma Experienced	**Social Stigma**	Isolation and exclusion from social gatherings, Negative labeling and judgment, Gossip and slander
	Familial Stigma	Rejection or reduced support from family members, Pressure to remarry, Blame for the divorce

69

Main Theme	Sub-theme	Initial Codes
Impact on Mental Health and Well-being	**Economic Stigma**	Difficulty in finding employment, Financial dependency and exploitation, Limited access to financial resources
	Psychological Distress	Anxiety and depression, Feelings of shame and guilt, Low self-esteem and self-worth
	Physical Health Issues	Stress-related health issues, Changes in eating and sleeping patterns
Coping Mechanisms	**Social Isolation**	Loss of friendships, Reduced social interaction, Loneliness and feelings of abandonment
	Personal Resilience	Self-acceptance and self-compassion, Personal growth and empowerment
	Support Systems	Seeking support from friends and family, Joining support groups or counseling
Cultural and Religious Influences	**Spiritual Practices**	Engagement in religious activities, Finding solace in spirituality
	Cultural Norms	Pressure to conform to societal expectations, Judgment based on cultural beliefs
	Religious Beliefs	Influence of religious views on divorce and remarriage, Religious guilt or acceptance
Barriers to Social and Economic Reintegration	**Employment Challenges**	Discrimination in the job market, Lack of opportunities due to stigma
	Legal and Financial Barriers	Difficulty accessing legal support, Challenges with financial independence

Main Theme	Sub-theme	Initial Codes
	Social Acceptance	Difficulty reintegrating into social networks, Challenges in building new relationships
Identity and Self-esteem	**Perception of Self**	Low self-worth, Internalized stigma, Struggles with self-image
	Public Identity	Fear of judgment by society, Impact of stigma on public perception
Strategies for Reducing Stigma	**Community Awareness**	Public education on divorce-related stigma, Campaigns for awareness and empathy
	Policy Reforms	Advocacy for legal protection, Reform of societal norms and attitudes
	Support Services	Availability of counseling services, Creation of support networks for divorced individuals

After interviewing and analyzing the data from divorced women, the study identified seven main themes, 19 sub-themes, and 44 initial codes. The first theme, *Forms of Stigma Experienced,* highlights the social, familial, and economic stigma divorced women face. They often experience isolation and exclusion from social events, negative labeling, and gossip, while also encountering rejection from family members and pressure to remarry. Additionally, finding employment is challenging, and women face financial dependency and limited access to resources.

The second theme, Impact on *Mental Health and Well-being,* demonstrates how stigma leads to psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, feelings of guilt, and low self-esteem. Physical health issues arise, such as stress-related health problems and disrupted eating or sleeping patterns. Furthermore, social isolation contributes to loneliness and the loss of friendships, deepening the emotional strain.

The third theme, *Coping Mechanisms,* covers how women cope with these challenges. Many find strength in personal resilience, self-acceptance, and empowerment. Support systems, including friends, family, and counseling groups, are crucial for emotional support. Spiritual practices also

71

play a significant role, with many women seeking solace and guidance through religious activities.

The fourth theme, *Cultural and Religious Influences,* highlights how cultural norms and religious beliefs shape the experiences of divorced women. Cultural expectations around marriage and divorce often contribute to judgment, while religious views can either reinforce stigma or provide comfort and acceptance.

The fifth theme, *Barriers to Social and Economic Reintegration,* reflects the difficulties women face in returning to social and economic normalcy. Employment discrimination and challenges in securing financial independence further hinder their reintegration. Social acceptance is also a significant barrier, as societal views on divorced women remain critical.

The sixth theme, *Identity and Self-esteem*, shows how divorced women struggle with self-perception. Stigma can lower their sense of self-worth and influence how they are seen by others, complicating their sense of identity. The seventh and final theme, *Strategies for Reducing Stigma,* focuses on the need for community awareness, policy reforms, and support services. Educating the public, implementing legal reforms, and creating accessible support networks are essential to reducing stigma and helping divorced women rebuild their lives.

Discussion

The findings from this study provide valuable insights into the stigma experienced by divorced women in Pakistan, revealing complex layers of social, familial, economic, and psychological implications. Divorced women in Pakistan face significant social stigma, manifesting in isolation and exclusion from social gatherings, negative labeling, and gossip. This social rejection severely impacts their self-esteem and social standing Saeed et al., 2022; Saleem, et al, 2020). Familial stigma is also prevalent, with family members often rejecting or reducing support for divorced women, pressuring them to remarry, and sometimes blaming them for the divorce, exacerbating their emotional distress (Memon et al., 2023; Ahmed, 2022). One of the most striking results is the pervasive stigma that these women face. Social stigma, which is often coupled with familial and economic challenges, significantly impacts their daily lives. Many participants reported being socially isolated, with their divorce becoming a subject of gossip and judgment within their communities.

The stigma leads to significant psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, feelings of shame, and low self-esteem, which can be debilitating and long-lasting (Fang, et al, 2021). Stress-related health issues and changes in eating and sleeping patterns are common among divorced women facing stigma, underscoring the need for comprehensive health support (Kim, et al,

2023). The study found that divorced women face social, economic, and psychological challenges, with 58.7% living on $700 or less per month. Higher-income, education, and older age were associated with fewer problems, except socially. (Khataybeh, 2022).

Many women develop personal resilience through self-acceptance, self-compassion, and personal growth, which are crucial for their well-being. Seeking support from friends, family, and support groups or counseling helps mitigate some negative effects by providing emotional and practical assistance (Saeed et al., 2021). Engagement in religious activities and finding solace in spirituality are common coping mechanisms, offering comfort and a sense of community (Strizzi, et al, 2022; Krumrei-Mancuso 2021). Discrimination in the workplace and lack of job opportunities are major barriers to social and economic reintegration, hindering their economic independence and ability to reintegrate into society (Saeed, et al, 2021). Difficulty in forming new social connections and challenges in dating and forming new relationships highlight the need for societal change and acceptance (Mandell, 1988).

Internalization of stigma and changes in self-identity post-divorce are critical issues. Helping women rebuild their self-esteem and identity is essential for their overall well-being, while supportive communities and positive public discourse can improve their public identity (Qamar, & Faizan, 2021; Lawson, & Satti, 2016). Educational programs, awareness campaigns, community dialogues, and workshops are effective strategies for reducing stigma by promoting understanding and acceptance (Demo, & Fine, 2010; Simpson, 2020). Advocacy for legal rights and protections, along with the implementation of supportive policies, is crucial for providing divorced women with the rights and support they need (Waldman, 1993). Access to counseling, mental health services, and support networks is vital for their recovery and reintegration, and developing comprehensive support services can significantly improve their quality of life (Schramm, & Becher, 2020).

Conclusion

This study reveals the severe stigma faced by divorced women in Pakistan, impacts their social, psychological, and economic well-being. They experience social isolation, negative labeling, and exclusion from social gatherings, which harm their self-esteem and social standing. Familial stigma adds to their emotional distress, with family members often withdrawing support, pressuring them to remarry, and blaming them for the divorce. The resulting psychological distress includes anxiety, depression, shame, and low self-esteem, along with stress-related health issues. Economic challenges are significant. Resilience through self-acceptance, personal growth, and support from friends, family, and counseling is crucial for well-being. Engagement in

religious activities provides additional comfort and community. Workplace discrimination and limited job opportunities hinder economic independence and reintegration, emphasizing the need for societal acceptance. Addressing internalized stigma and rebuilding self-esteem is essential for overall well-being. Supportive communities and positive public discourse can improve public identity. Educational programs, awareness campaigns, community dialogues, and workshops can reduce stigma. Advocacy for legal rights, supportive policies, and access to counseling and mental health services are vital for recovery and reintegration. Developing comprehensive support services can significantly enhance the quality of life for divorced women, fostering resilience and a successful society.

References

APA, 2018. APA Dictionary of Psychology. Retrieved from; https://dictionary.apa.org/.

Mokhtari, M., Khadem, M., Abbasinia, M., Rahmani, A. R., Ghasembaklo, U., Ahmadnezhad, I., & Asghari, M. (2013). Effects of Divorce on Women's Mental Health: An Epidemiological Survey. *Pakistan Journal of Public Health*, *3*(3).

Hald, G. M., Ciprić, A., Sander, S., & Strizzi, J. M. (2022). Anxiety, depression, and associated factors among recently divorced individuals. *Journal of Mental Health*, *31*(4), 462–470.

Mendoza, K. R. (2023). *The Effects of Single-Family Homes on Children's Academics: Systematic Literature Review* (Doctoral dissertation, CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE).

Sultana, M., & Azzam, Q. (2021). Factors About Rising Divorce Rate and Post-Divorce Problems Faced by Women in Pakistan: A Qualitative Study. *AL-ĪQĀẒ)*, 01–14.

Qamar, A. H., & Faizan, H. F. (2021). Reasons, impact, and post-divorce adjustment: The lived experience of divorced women in Pakistan. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, *62*(5), 349–373.

Waseem, J., Muneer, R., Hoor-Ul-Ain, S., Tariq, R., & Minhas, A. (2020). Psychosocial determinants of divorce and their effects on women in Pakistan: a national review. *International Journal of Human Rights in Healthcare*, *13*(4), 299–315.

Rubab, K., Alam, A., Shah, I., Elahi, N., & Khan, H. (2023). Gender-based adjustment problems of divorcees in Hazara Division, Pakistan. *Plos one*, *18*(11), e0295068.

Saeed, A., Kehkishan, S., & Sameer, M. (2022). Divorce status in the Pakistani workplace: Women's narratives on stigma, outcomes, and coping strategies. *Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion: An International Journal*, *41*(6), 927–950.

Tahira, I., Sultan, T., Javeed, M., & Afzal, A. (2023). Social Adjustment of Divorced Women: A Study of District Gujrat, Punjab, Pakistan. *Journal of Social Sciences Review*, *3*(2), 940–950.

Zafeer, H. M. I., Maqbool, S., & Yanping, L. (2022). Psychological and social factors and their impact on divorced and married women: A case study from Punjab Pakistan. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, *63*(5), 352–373.

Saleem, M., Rasheed, I. R., & Malik, B. (2020). Islamic Conception of Divorce: Lived Experiences of Divorced Women from Sialkot, Pakistan. *AL-QAWĀRĪR*, *1*(4), 13–25.

Memon, Z. A., Mian, A., Reale, S., Spencer, R., Bhutta, Z., & Soltani, H. (2023). Community and Health Care Provider Perspectives on Barriers to and Enablers of Family Planning Use in Rural Sindh, Pakistan: Qualitative Exploratory Study. *JMIR formative research*, *7*(1), e43494.

Ahmed, S., Méndez, R. Y., Naveed, S., Akhter, S., Mushtaque, I., Malik, M. A., ... & Younas, A. (2023). Assessment of hepatitis-related knowledge, attitudes, and practices on quality of life with the moderating role of internalized stigma among hepatitis B-positive patients in Pakistan. *Health Psychology and Behavioral Medicine*, *11*(1), 2192782.

Fang, M., Li, G., Kang, X., Hou, F., Lv, G., Xu, X., ... & Li, P. (2021). The role of gender and self-esteem as moderators of the relationship between stigma and psychological distress among infertile couples. *Psychology, Health & Medicine*, *26*(10), 1181–1194.

Kim, A., Jeon, S., & Song, J. (2023). Self-stigma and mental health in divorced single-parent women: the mediating effect of self-esteem. *Behavioral Sciences*, *13*(9), 744.

Khataybeh, Y. D. A. (2022). The consequences of divorce on women: An exploratory study of divorced women problems in Jordan. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, *63*(5), 332–351.

Strizzi, J. M., Koert, E., Øverup, C. S., Ciprić, A., Sander, S., Lange, T., ... & Hald, G. M. (2022). Examining gender effects in postdivorce adjustment trajectories over the first year after divorce in Denmark. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *36*(2), 268.

Krumrei-Mancuso, E. J. (2021). Religion and Spirituality in Divorce Adjustment. In *Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research* (pp. 1–6). Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Mandell, B. (1988). Mothers post-divorce: The challenges of adjustment. *Journal of Rational-Emotive and Cognitive-Behavior Therapy*, *6*(1), 81–101.

Qamar, A. H., & Faizan, H. F. (2021). Reasons, impact, and post-divorce adjustment: The lived experience of divorced women in Pakistan. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, *62*(5), 349–373.

Lawson, E. J., & Satti, F. (2016). The aftermath of divorce: Post-divorce adjustment strategies of South Asian, black, and white women in the United States. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, *57*(6), 411–431.

Demo, D. H., & Fine, M. A. (2010). *Beyond the average divorce*. Sage.

Simpson, B. (2020). *Changing families: An ethnographic approach to divorce and separation*. Routledge.

Waldman, E. (1993). The role of legal norms in divorce mediation: An argument for inclusion. *Va. J. Soc. Pol'y & L.*, *1*, 87.

Schramm, D. G., & Becher, E. H. (2020). Common practices for divorce education. *Family Relations*, *69*(3), 543–558.