

The Causes and Impacts of Divorce: The Lived Experiences of Educated Middle-Class Divorced Women in Dhaka City

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Abstract

This paper explores the lived experience of educated, middle-class divorced women, focusing on the factors influencing their decision to divorce, the challenges they face post-divorce, and the coping strategies they adopt to address these challenges. Using a qualitative research approach, data were collected from eight divorced women residing in Dhaka city through in-depth interviews. The findings reveal that women experience subjugation, misery, and violence within marriage, which undermines their security and self-dignity. Drawing on Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's theory of personal relationships, marriages, and family patterns in late modernity, this research demonstrates that rather than being passive victims of these adversities, women actively choose to divorce to escape dysfunctional marriages. However, such agency is often not well received by the patriarchal society, resulting in a range of vulnerabilities and challenges in post-divorce life, including financial insecurity, social stigma, sexual harassment, emotional distress, and so on. In response, women seek education, formal employment, and entrepreneurship to overcome financial hardship, while adopting strategies to disregard negative social judgements as a coping mechanism. This paper emphasizes the need for a more gender-sensitive and women-friendly cultural shift to ensure women's security, freedom, and respect within marriage, which is crucial for maintaining healthy family dynamics and preventing divorce. Furthermore, in instances where divorce does occur, it is essential for families, communities, society, and the state to adopt supportive and positive attitudes toward divorced women, rather than stigmatizing them.

Keywords : Women Seeking Divorce, Causes of Divorce, Consequences of Divorce, Educated Middle-Class Women, Dhaka City.

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Introduction

Marriage, a legally and socially sanctioned union, usually between a man and a woman (“Marriage”, 2025), serves as an almost universal social institution within different societies and cultures. Marriage primarily builds the foundation of a family and fulfills diverse needs of people’s lives: having love and care, legitimate sexual courtship, happiness, companionship, and the desire to have children (Qamar & Faizan, 2021). A good physical and emotional partnership between spouses has an essential contribution to the well-being of individuals' lives, the family, and the larger society as a whole (Hashmi et al., 2007).

However, marital life shapes men’s and women’s lives differently. In the patriarchal social context, the lives of women in many parts of the world are still largely influenced by the event of marriage. Like in other South Asian countries, marriage is nearly inescapable in Bangladesh, which leads to the turning point of a woman’s life, on which her fortune depends (White, 1992). Women in Bangladesh usually get married at a young age, and therefore, a major part of women’s lives here is ordained by marriage (Parvez, 2011). Consequently, women expect a healthy, happy, and secure married life; however, in many cases, the reality is the opposite. Unhappy and abusive conjugal life often results in the dissolution of marriage.

In diverse patriarchal social contexts in Bangladesh, the event of divorce has an immense effect on women’s lives; in most cases, divorce leads to increased vulnerability for women and children (Bhuiya & Chowdhury, 1997). As per the information provided by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, the number of divorced/separated women was 460,429 in 2011, compared to only 70,126 males who were divorced/separated (BBS, 2022). The divorce rate is increasing day by day. Those days are gone when marriage lasts for a lifetime; one divorce takes place every forty minutes in Dhaka city, as per a recent report (Hossain, 2023). As per the Bangladesh Sample Vital Statistics 2022, the divorce rate had doubled in one year, rising from 0.7 per thousand people in 2021 to 1.4 per thousand people in 2022 (BBS, 2023). Getting divorced by husbands was a frightening phenomenon for women in earlier days, and most of the applicants for divorce were male (Patoari, 2020). Interestingly, however, divorce applications in recent days have been filed more by females than their male counterparts (Hossain, 2023; Patoari, 2020). A recent report indicates that out of 12,268 divorce cases from January-November 2022 in Dhaka city, 65 percent were given by women (“37 divorces a day”, 2023). Women are now seeking a way out to get rid of an unhappy and abusive marriage (Hossain, 2023).

The decision to divorce is not an easy task. It’s a lengthy and complex procedure that can take years, where individuals weigh the pros and cons and fluctuate between staying and leaving (Aker & Begum, 2012a). Individuals experience diverse stressors during the pre-divorced period that adversely affect their emotional, physical, and psychological state (Qamar & Faizan, 2021). Studies in Bangladesh indicate that various oppressions, violence, and miseries in conjugal life, like dowry, husband’s failure in provider role, extramarital relations, polygamy, drug addiction, and physical violence, are the major issues accountable for divorce among women in

Bangladesh (Akter & Begum, 2012a; Parvez, 2011; Patoari, 2020). Parvez (2011) in her study on urban middle-class women explored that besides the above-mentioned traditional factors, many modern push factors like value clash, lack of care and commitment from husband, deprivation of freedom, and obstacles in self-development through education led to women-initiated divorce. Among the pull factors, the opportunity for women's education and employment, as well as the legal development regarding the ability to divorce, creates the space for women to get rid of a chaotic married life through divorce (Hossain, 2023; Parvez, 2011).

To a certain degree, divorce relieves individuals from a lifetime pain and suffering (Patoari, 2020). Parvez's (2011) study discloses that leaving an abusive marriage provides women with freedom and have their decision-making power; women gain several positive changes, including a good career, the ability to provide a better environment to children, and consequently an increased sense of self-worth and personal courage. However, post-divorce life remains very stressful and bears severe negative consequences for both men, women, and especially for their offspring, as indicated in many studies (Parvez, 2011; Patoari, 2020; Rahman et al., 2013). Women are the main victims who bear most of the immediate consequences of divorce and eventually pay most of the costs of its dreadful effects (Rahman et al., 2013). Divorced women face financial insecurity for the maintenance of the children as well as social exclusion, stigma, disrespect and blaming, lack of family support, harassment in the workplace, difficulties in remarriage, downward changes in lifestyles, and diverse physiological and psychological disturbances (Aktar, 2013; Parvez, 2011; Patoari, 2020). Akther and Begum (2012b) disclosed in their study that women undergoing the divorce process face acute mental suffering that includes helplessness, hopelessness, frustration, low self-esteem, suicidal ideation, distressful thoughts about real-life crises, and so on. Despite all these severe consequences, sometimes divorce is badly needed to get rid of cruelty, hardship, danger, physical torture, mental pressure, or unbearable suffering (Patoari, 2020), which is reflected in the increasing number of divorces in Bangladesh, particularly initiated by women.

Divorce has received considerable focus in numerous developed nations due to its profound effects on individuals and society (Parvez, 2011). The increasing rate of divorce in Bangladesh, particularly the increase in women-initiated divorce and the post-divorce vulnerabilities faced by women and children, demands in-depth research on the issue. However, the issue of divorce has not yet received significant attention from the research community. Furthermore, studies on the experiences of divorce among educated middle-class women are also limited. Existing studies chiefly portray divorced women as victims; however, the issues of women's choices regarding the divorce decision (which is reflected in the increasing rate of women-initiated divorce) and various post-divorce adaptation strategies by women are yet to be significantly addressed.

Research Objectives

Considering the research gap, this paper aims to explore the lived experiences of educated middle-class divorced women residing in Dhaka city, based on a qualitative

study. The paper looks into the factors that led women to decide on divorce, post-divorce experiences of women, and their coping mechanisms.

Theoretical Approach: Modernity, Individualization, and Stability of Marriage

We are guided by the Beck and Beck-Gernsheim theorization on personal relationships, marriages, and family patterns in late modern times. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) explored the chaotic dynamics of personal relationships, marriages, and family structures in a rapidly changing world.

Beck argued that one of the characteristics of contemporary late modern society is individualization. It does not denote alienation or loneliness (Lupton, 2005), instead, individualization is a requirement in late modernity that individuals must craft their own life stories, in a context where the fixed, obligatory, and traditional norms and certainties have become less powerful and the emergence of new ways of life that are continually subject to change (Beck, 1994).

Individualization is a social transformation that is intricate and obscure: “Seen from one angle it means freedom to choose, and from another pressure to conform to internalized demands, on the one hand being responsible for yourself and on the other being dependent on conditions which completely elude your grasp” (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, p. 7). Thus, people in this era face new types of risk. People are free from fixed traditional accepted social roles and regulations, which indicate their relative freedom, but at the expense of anxieties and tension of taking all responsibilities alone in a social world of diverse insecurities. As Lupton (2005) clarified Beck’s explanation: in education and work, people are expected to shape their future by engaging in competition with others for credentials and employment. The notion of stable and secure employment can no longer be expected, and it is now the responsibility of individuals to create their own chances. Workers are confronted with a diversified and decentralized labor market that necessitates flexibility and an entrepreneurial mindset, or else they may face the consequences of underemployment or unemployment.

Modernity and individualization also lead to new forms of risk in the arena of intimate relationships, marriage, and family patterns. Individualization creates greater chaos between individuals in intimate partnerships as each seeks to maintain the relationship while simultaneously pursuing their right to autonomy and self-development (Lupton, 2005). The traditional norms, regulations, and principles that once dictated personal relationships are no longer relevant, leaving individuals confronted with an endless array of choices to establish, adjust, improve, or break the bonds they form with others (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). Marriages are now chosen willingly, rather than for economic purposes or due to family pressure, bringing both freedoms and new strains (Giddens, 2006). Individuals need to find a balance between autonomy and self-expression on one hand, and their need for dependence and emotional stability on the other, in relationships. Conflicts often arise between the demands of the family and those of the workplace, which demands an autonomous person unfettered by family responsibilities (Lupton, 2005). In this context, new personal risks arise, especially for women, such as uncertainties related

to job, financial security, as well as around the stability of the relationship in marriage (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995).

Bangladesh's economy, society, and culture have also undergone various changes that are characteristic of late modernity. We observe changes in traditional gender roles that encourage and result in an increase in women's educational attainment and engagement in paid employment. Such changes bear the possibilities of freedom for women regarding choices of various issues of their lives, compared to the earlier days. Existing literature shows that the scope of education, employment, and various legal developments function as pull factors for the decision to dissolve chaotic marriages by women (Hossain, 2023; Parvez, 2011). While in earlier days, women in Bangladesh were constrained by various patriarchal structures and norms to endure violence in married life; or they were the passive victims of being abandoned or divorced by husbands, nowadays, women dare to dissolve marriage for oppression and violence they face in conjugal life (Akter & Begum, 2012b; Hossain, 2023; Patoari, 2020), which result in increasing rate of women initiated divorce compare to that of men. Besides, research shows that issues like deprivation of freedom, value clash, and obstacles in self-development, which are the components of individualization in contemporary society, act as push factors of divorce among middle-class women (Parvez, 2011). However, as discussed, individualization in late modern society pushes actors to new forms of risk. Existing literature shows that women face various vulnerabilities, ranging from financial insecurity and social exclusion to mental trauma, in their post-divorce lives. Overall, this study is guided by the theoretical approach of chaotic dynamics of individualization, personal relationships, marriage, and family structure in late modern society to cover the experiences of women in the event of divorce initiated by them.

Research Methods

The issue of divorce includes sensitive and emotional experiences in a woman's life. Such experiences cannot be properly covered only by numerical data following a quantitative method. Furthermore, due to the sensitivity of the issue, getting divorced women as research participants was a challenging job, and therefore made it impossible to go for a quantitative method based on large samples. In this context, this research followed a qualitative method. Qualitative research gathers in-depth insights into a problem based on non-numerical data and endeavors to understand how people experience the world (Bhandari, 2020). In our study, we followed a qualitative research approach to highlight the lived experiences of divorced women.

The scope of the study is to cover the experiences of divorce among educated middle-class women. The research participants of this study were middle-class divorced women living in Dhaka city. As the capital of Bangladesh, Dhaka has become the center of middle-class people, and a dramatic increase in the divorce rate in Dhaka city has also been observed (Parvez, 2011). Education and income were the inclusive parameters to define middle-class women. In this study, women who had at least entered the graduate level of education and had a monthly income between 40,000 and 80,000 taka were considered to belong to the middle class. Besides, participants' perceptions of their social status were also considered.

In total, 8 divorced women were selected purposively for in-depth interviews. In the selection procedure, various characteristics of the research participants, including age, level of education, current marital status, duration of divorced life, occupational status, and parenthood status, were considered to provide in-depth insights from the experiences of different categories of women. Even though the sample size might seem small, it complies with the standards of qualitative research, which prioritizes thematic richness and analytical depth over statistical generalization. Qualitative research prioritizes the depth of insights derived from a purposively chosen sample over the generalization of findings from the sample to population (Suter, 2012). Furthermore, data saturation was achieved during these interviews; it seems that divorced women in the patriarchal context of Bangladesh experience a relatively homogeneous reality.

The fieldwork was conducted between July and October 2023. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with the research participants, using an unstructured question guide. Interviews were conducted in the participants' residences at their convenience.

The basic ethics of conducting social research have been adhered to in this study. Participants were fully informed about the study's purpose and their right to participate or withdraw at any time prior to the interview. They were asked to sign a written informed consent form indicating their willingness to participate in the study after being given one. This study implemented safety measures because it was concerned about potential risks and the participants' emotional safety. To establish a cordial rapport, a significant amount of informal time was spent with the participant prior to the commencement of each interview. The interviews were conducted in private, and the presence of other family members was not allowed during the interview session. The participants were reassured to put them at ease that their identity and participation would be protected, and that confidentiality and anonymity would be upheld. Participants occasionally became emotional when discussing traumatic life events; in these situations, the interviewer passionately supported the participants in overcoming their feelings. The interviews were recorded once the research participants gave their consent. The data was presented using pseudonyms to protect the privacy and anonymity of the respondents' identities.

We followed the thematic approach in data analysis. All the recorded interviews were thoroughly transcribed. The data analysis included: reading and rereading the interview transcriptions carefully to code the data, organizing the codes into categories and subcategories following the common characteristics or patterns, and finally, generating major themes (Saldana, 2009). These phases were guided by the research objectives of the study. The categories and themes were explained by attesting examples from the data and citing the narratives of the research participants. In the analysis, numerous secondary data sources were also used to supplement and support the data.

Findings

Socio-demographic Profile of the Research Participants

Table 1 exhibits the socio-demographic background of the research participants. The age range of the women who participated in this study was between 20 and 50 years, indicating that this research covered the experiences of women belonging to various age groups. Two of them were graduate students, five had completed graduation, and one started graduate study, but was not able to complete it. Regarding the marital status at the time, two of the divorced women had remarried, while five continued to live as divorced. The duration of divorce life experienced by different women ranges from one year to fourteen years. Three of them had one child, two of them had two children, and three of them had no children. Three of them were engaged in small entrepreneurships (e.g., boutiques, homemade food supply), one was a journalist, one was a junior bank officer, two were students, and one was a full-time homemaker.

Table 1: Socio-demographic Profile of the Research Participants (N=8)

Characteristic	Category	Number
<i>Age</i>	20–30	2
	31–40	4
	41–50	2
<i>Education</i>	Graduation Completed	5
	Graduation Incomplete	1
	Graduate Student	2
<i>Current Marital Status</i>	Divorced	5
	Remarried	2
<i>Duration of Divorced Life</i>	1–4 years	3
	5–9 years	2
	10–14 years	3
<i>Number of Children</i>	No Children	3
	One	3
	Two	2
<i>Occupational Status</i>	Small Entrepreneurship (e.g., Boutiques, Homemade Food Supply)	3
	Journalist	
	Junior Bank Officer	
	Homemaker	1
	Student (Earning a little from private Tuition)	1
		2

Source: Fieldwork, 2023

Factors that Pushed Women to Make a Decision to Divorce

Research findings suggest that there is an intersectionality of several factors that ultimately led women to decide to dissolve their marriages. The chief causes are summarized in Table 2, where the sequence was based on how frequently women (the research participants) experience a particular event.

Table 2: Factors that Pushed Women to Make a Decision to Divorce (N=8)

Causes	Number
<i>Physical and Mental Assault</i>	8
<i>Domination and Control</i>	8
<i>Less Priority</i>	8
<i>Husband's Extramarital Affair</i>	6
<i>Value Clash</i>	4
<i>Husband's Drug Addiction</i>	3
<i>Cheating</i>	3
<i>Forced Marriage</i>	2
<i>Forced Sexual Relationship</i>	2
<i>Husband's Second Marriage</i>	1

Source: Fieldwork, 2023

Table 2 exhibits that a single woman mentioned several miserable experiences and disturbing events in her life, for which she suffered, and finally found divorce as a means to get rid of those miseries. The most common painful experiences mentioned by the women are physical and mental assault, domination and control, and less priority followed by the husband's extramarital affair, value clash, husband's drug addiction, cheating, forced marriage, forced sexual relationship, and husband's second marriage.

Women in this study mostly suffered from domination and control over them. In a patriarchal society in Bangladesh, women, after marriage, enter a new form of life in their in-laws' house, where they have to abide by diverse regulations imposed upon them. The findings of this study revealed numerous forms of regulation that include dress codes, restrictions on mobility, constraints on contact with friends and relatives, and even restrictions on eating. Some women mentioned that in their cases, the domination was extreme and suffocating:

“My mother-in-law was well known to our family before the marriage, and she used to love me a lot at that time. She was eager to marry off his son to me and promised that she would keep me like her daughter. However, after the marriage, her behavior changed. She wanted me to follow the manners of a traditional housewife. She always daunted and commanded me: you must veil yourself properly, you must cook, you must not go to the rooftop, and so on... I was not allowed to talk to any man, and my husband suspiciously monitored my phone contacts regularly. I was kind of imprisoned there” (Ratna, Age: 25; Education: Graduate Student).

Domination and control often led to numerous forms of violence against women. All women in this study mentioned physical and mental abuse as painful events in their married lives. They were subjected to torture if they spoke against the decisions and opinions of their husbands and in-laws. Lopa was brought up in a suburb, whereas her husband's family were residents of Dhaka city. Her mother-in-law always made her feel down regarding this and also for her lower family status. She was also restricted from visiting family members, friends, and relatives:

“They completely stopped my visiting with family members. I used to be upset about this. If I raised questions about this issue, my husband would usually lay his hands on me. Once I met one of my female friends outside the home..., that day my husband beat me harshly” (Lopa, Age: 35, Education: Completed Graduation)

Afia (Age: 50, Education: Graduation Incomplete) faced severe mental harassment in her in-laws' house. Her mother-in-law slandered Afia to her husband, so the relationship with her husband worsened. Though there was a paid house worker, Afia was forced to do all the housework by herself, even during her critical stage of pregnancy. Due to the extreme workload during pregnancy, she faced the risk of miscarriage, which remained detrimental to her health. Laila also reported mistreatment and incidents of violence during pregnancy:

My husband was not gracious enough to me and occasionally beat me if there was any issue against his wishes... I had a hard time during my pregnancy. He was not ready to take a kid at that time, and he forced me to abort the fetus. However, due to my health complications, it was not possible, as the doctor detected. For that, I was subjected to huge torture. I could not bear it and eventually decided to dissolve the marriage (Laila, Age: 50, Education: Completed Graduation).

Besides the domination and violence, women also expressed their despair on the issue of being given less importance in their in-laws' houses. Women particularly mentioned being given less priority and care by their husbands, which made them feel depressed, disrespected, and down in their in-laws' homes. Many of them felt a nonbelonging in the in-laws' house:

Before my marriage, I used to buy fancy dresses for the Eid festival...However, my husband did not buy any dresses for me during the first Eid festival after our marriage, as I had expected. My mother-in-law gave me two sets of simple, ordinary dresses on that occasion. I was shocked. They just treated me like a housemaid..." (Papri, Age: 31, Education: Completed: Graduation).

Many of the participants experienced cultural differences and value clashes with husbands and other members of their in-laws' houses. In the case of Shimul and Papri, there was a significant age gap between the wife and the husband, which created a gap in mutual understanding. In some cases, women struggled to adjust to norms and values in their in-laws' houses, which were different from their premarital life:

I was brought up in a balanced and educated environment. I found a different environment after the marriage. Everyone in my husband's house was always busy with entertainment. Business was their source of income; they had money but were not eager for education. Lying and cheating were usual for them. The whole family used to drink together frequently. All my ideals were shattered there. I was very worried about bringing up my kids in that environment... When my kids started school, I left that house and started living in Dhaka separately, (Afia, Age: 50, Education: Graduation Incomplete).

Along with these sufferings, the husband's extramarital affairs exacerbated the mental stress in the cases of some women in this study. Out of eight research participants, six mentioned that they had to endure this issue where the husband used to maintain relations with other women. In the case of Papri, her husband even secretly married the woman with whom he had an affair. The issue was injurious to women's self-respect and mental health. However, they did not get any mental support from their in-laws; rather, they were forced to adapt to this situation or hide the issue from the public:

My husband used to keep in touch with different women. I even suspected that my husband had sexual relations with the housemaid. It was so embarrassing and upsetting for me. But I had to endure a long time until I made the decision to divorce (Afia, Age: 50, Education: Graduation Incomplete).

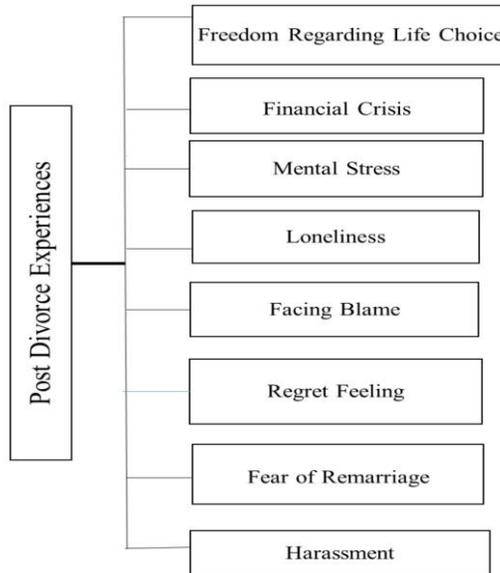
Some other bitter experiences include forced marriage, forced sexual relationships, husband’s drug addictions, and cheating on many issues. Some of the research participants mentioned that they were not willing to get married; they were forced to get married, which resulted in unhappy marital relations in the end. In such cases, they also experienced the bitterness of forced sexual relationships with their husbands.

Overall, women went for a divorce decision in the context of multilayered experiences of misery in their lives. However, the decision to divorce was not an instant choice. In most cases, women endured for a long time and tried to adapt to the situations. The decision was made after a long period of suffering during which women experienced vulnerability and a decline in their self-respect.

Women’s Life after Divorce

Women mostly mentioned that they got relief from the violence and miseries of their ex-married life through the divorce decision, and they became able to exercise a certain degree of freedom regarding diverse life choices. Afia (Age: 35, Education: Graduation Incomplete) particularly mentioned that breaking the marital relationship gave her the freedom to plan better education for her children; otherwise, their lives would be ruined.

Figure 1: Women’s Experiences After Divorce



Source: Fieldwork, 2023

However, women faced different forms of struggles after the divorce. The experiences of women in this study indicate that the socio-cultural environment is not supportive of divorced women, and women enter a completely different phase after divorce, where they encounter economic crises, loneliness, mental stress, blame, regret, fear of remarriage, and various forms of harassment.

Women mostly face economic struggles after divorce. The women in this study were housewives in their married lives, and after the divorce, the economic support they used to get was cut, which was a sudden shock for them. They faced a crisis in terms of the maintenance of the kids and had to compromise on fundamental life bearings.

My son was only 6 months old when I got divorced. My parents had already departed. My brothers were married and were not willing to support me. It was tough for me to think of a job as my son was almost an infant. That time I struggled to bear the expenses (Papri, Age: 31, Education: Completed Graduation).

The patriarchal culture in Bangladeshi society does not show a positive attitude towards divorced women, particularly those who initiate divorce by themselves. In this study, women mentioned that during the post-divorce economic crises, family members and relatives didn't provide a helping hand; rather, they blamed the divorced women. Relatives and neighbors perceive the failure to maintain a married life as a woman's fault, and they view a woman's decision to dissolve a marriage as an unusual phenomenon. Every single woman in this study mentioned that post-divorce life became miserable due to the blame they faced.

My mother is annoyed with the event of my divorce. She always blames me, 'You could not stay with your husband. You can never have a happy married life in the future (Shimul, Age: 23, Education: Graduate Student).

After the Divorce, all my family members avoided contact with me except my younger brother. They perceived the divorce as a shame for the family (Afia, Age: 50, Education: Graduation Incomplete).

Besides, divorced women also face various forms of harassment, particularly sexual harassment by their friends, relatives, and neighbors, as well as by bosses and colleagues in the workplace. Men perceive that a divorced woman is easily approachable. They show a pitying face to a divorced woman and directly or indirectly expect dating and hanging out with her in exchange for any help, as Laila (Age: 50, Education: Graduation Completed) mentioned. Divorced women encounter the bitterness of sexual harassment, particularly at work.

I feel disturbed at work. My bosses expect intimate time together, which I perceive as unethical. My senior male colleagues also exhibit indirect sexual advances and seek to exploit the circumstance that I don't have a husband... When I got promoted, friends and colleagues perceived that I achieved this success because of my affair with the boss. If I go outside with a glorious getup and wear branded clothes, relatives and neighbors doubt that I am involved in unethical affairs to get those luxuries (Lopa, Age:35, Education: Completed Graduation).

Women in this study who remarried mentioned various forms of harassment and humiliation. Their ex-marital status remains a stain, and they can easily be humiliated in their newly formed conjugal life.

After divorce, I remarried. However, I don't receive proper care, love, or respect from my husband... Once, I found my husband having an affair with another woman. When I questioned him about it, my husband replied, 'You have been married before, so what's the problem if I have an affair (Nahar, Age: 31, Education: Completed Graduation).

Because of negative attitudes and stigma towards them, divorced women feel mental stress and various forms of psychological issues. Many of the research participants mentioned a kind of post-divorce trauma.

After the divorce, I suffered a lot for two years. I was restless and always kept silent. I didn't like to meet or talk to people (Afia, Age: 50, Education: Graduation Incomplete).

In post-divorce life, women mostly have to shoulder all responsibilities by themselves because of non-cooperation from family members. This creates a feeling of loneliness among them.

There are many issues and responsibilities in life that you can only share with a husband. No one else will give you a hand on such issues. Once, my daughter became acutely ill with a fever, diarrhea, and vomiting. It was almost midnight, and I had to go outside for medicine, leaving her alone at home...I always feel lonely now. Everyone around me is busy with their own lives, so it's difficult to get a schedule from them (Laila, Age:50, Education: Completed Graduation).

The experiences of post-divorce suffering led to a sense of regret among some women. They felt that though their married life was miserable, there was some social security in it. Afia (Age: 50, Education: Graduation Incomplete) expressed regret that her children have been deprived of property rights due to her divorce decision. After a couple of years following the divorce, her husband died of a massive heart attack. In that event, her husband's family members remained hostile and greedy and denied the rights of her kids to their father's property. She is still fighting for legal rights, but in vain. This makes her regret that if she had not decided to divorce, her children's future would have been secured.

Despite the fact of various miseries and loneliness in post-divorce life, women in this study expressed a fear of remarriage.

Though I feel lonely, I don't want to take the risk of a new relationship. I don't trust men anymore... A happy married life is a myth. So I have to be stronger and take on the responsibilities myself (Khodeja, Age: 42, Education: Graduation Complete).

Coping with Post-Divorce Events

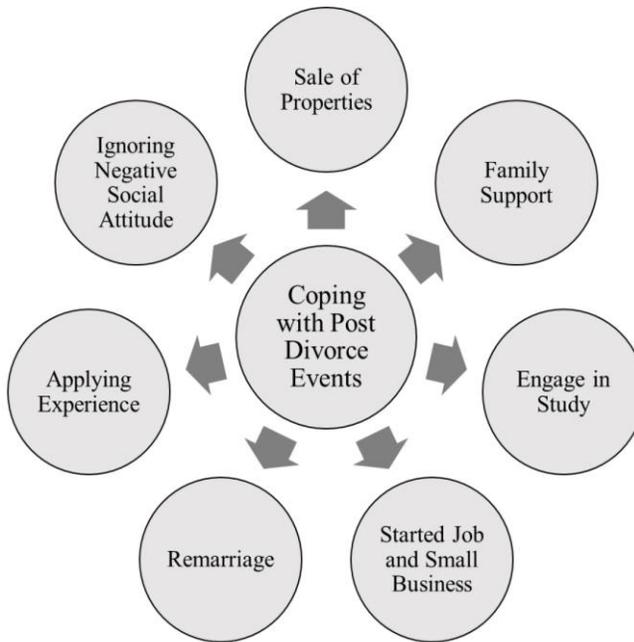
Though women faced diverse miseries in post-divorce life, they adopted various strategies and practiced varied forms of agency to cope with post-divorce events, which have been depicted in Figure 2. To meet the economic hardship, many of them used the property, jewelry, and other savings that they received from their parents as inheritance and gifts during the marriage.

I am fortunate that I inherited a flat and a good amount of land from my parents. This ensured my residence after the divorce. I also had a good amount of jewelry, which I sold and used the money for basic maintenance, and started some small businesses. Recently, I sold some of my land to send my son to Canada for higher education (Afia, Age: 50, Education: Graduation Incomplete).

Engaging in jobs for earning, starting small businesses like boutiques, and homemade food supplies, and in some cases, earning as private tutors, provided a means of economic security for divorced women. Lopa joined a media house as a journalist, Nahar joined a bank as a junior officer, and Afia became involved in various home-based small businesses. In many of these cases, they received family support to look after their kids; otherwise, it would be difficult to maintain their jobs.

My parents, particularly my elder sister, support me a lot. She looks after my kid while I am at work. Without her help, I could not continue my time-consuming profession as a journalist, where there is no fixed schedule (Lopa, Age: 35, Education: Graduation).

Figure 2: Coping with Post-Divorce Events



Source: Fieldwork 2023

Women who faced difficulties in continuing their studies during their married life restarted their studies after the divorce with full motivation. They have taken education as a way out to establish their confidence and social dignity, which was worsened in post-divorce life.

I was a graduate student at the time of my marriage. However, I faced a two-year study break due to the marriage and the subsequent divorce after the short-lived marriage. I have been readmitted to my studies and I want to build my life with renewed hope (Shimul, Age: 23, Education: Graduate Student).

Some of them remarried to move on with their lives. However, they had to face various forms of stigma due to their previous marriage. Ignoring negative social attitudes has become an important coping strategy for divorced women in the face of social exclusion, stigma, disrespect, and blame. Some of them mentioned that at the beginning, they faced difficulties in dealing with people's negative attitudes, particularly flirting and sexual harassment by male relatives, neighbors, and colleagues. However, they became confident later and learned from their experience to deal with such people. Though divorce was a traumatic experience, many of the divorced women have learned to treat it as an accident. They try to spend quality time and enjoy life. They feel that if they are bothered by people's negative attitudes, their lives will be nothing but depressing.

Now I don't care about people's comments about my life. I am just concerned about my kid's wellbeing, and I want to enjoy my life (Lopa, Age: 35, Education: Graduation).

I always try to keep myself busy with positive activities. Whenever I get the chance, I love to spend time in nature. In my leisure time, I sing and dance at full volume. I am also devoted to Almighty Allah and perform regular prayers and religious activities to keep my mind calm and free from stress (Laila, Age: 50, Education: Graduation).

Discussion and Conclusion

Overall, the findings reveal that women in the patriarchal social context of Bangladesh experience domination and control, various forms of misery, and violence in their married lives. Many studies in the context of divorced women in Bangladesh also exposed the reality of various oppressions, violence, and miseries in conjugal life that resulted in the dissolution of marriage (Akter & Begum, 2012a; Parvez, 2011; Patoari, 2020). This study explicates that women's sufferings, like restriction and regulations over their valuable life choices, neglect, physical and mental violence, husbands' extramarital relationships, cheating, etc., push their lives into a vulnerable situation. Educated middle-class women feel these vulnerabilities are worsening for their self-respect and risky for their future, resulting in a divorce decision by them. Guided by the theoretical approach of modernity and individualization by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995), we explain that educated middle-class women are exercising their agency to get rid of vulnerable and disrespectful married life, which has been disclosed in this study. This is a criterion of late modernity, where women exercise their choice regarding their life events, particularly those that are worsening for them. In earlier days, women were the passive victims of being divorced by husbands. Contrariwise, women nowadays exercise their agency to escape the chaos and miseries of married life through divorce on their own.

However, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim explained (1995) that individualization in modern times is a complex social process in which individual freedom, choice, and agency are associated with various consequent risks. On the one hand, it gives people the freedom to make their own choices. On the other hand, it also creates pressure to follow certain expectations, e.g., being responsible for one's life, but at the same time, being affected by things one can't control. This study also reveals that although women decided to divorce due to a miserable married life, they faced new forms of difficulties in their post-divorce lives. The biggest difficulty women face after divorce is the financial responsibility for themselves and their children, as many women in marriage have remained dependent housewives. In these cases, parents and relatives often don't offer support; instead, they blame the woman for deciding to divorce. The patriarchal society doesn't easily accept women's choice of divorce. Furthermore, the patriarchal social context makes divorced women's lives difficult in many ways. They experience various forms of sexual harassment from male relatives and colleagues, who perceive that a divorced woman is easily approachable. As a result, a divorced woman is left to shoulder all the responsibilities for her children, often in a harsh and patriarchal social environment that subjects her to constant harassment and isolation. A woman experiences mental trauma, depression, loneliness, and helplessness in such a situation. The above-mentioned sufferings in post-divorced life are also mentioned in some other studies (Akhter & Begum, 2012b; Parvez, 2011; Patoari, 2020; Rahman et al., 2013).

Despite facing numerous post-divorce challenges, women enjoy, to some extent, a certain degree of freedom regarding various life choices. This includes the freedom to pursue education, formal employment, and small business ventures—opportunities that are often constrained within the context of marriage. Education and financial independence provide them with the decision-making capability regarding the betterment of their children, particularly in terms of their education. Additionally, these factors provide them with the resilience to disregard negative social judgments towards them. Women actively seek ways to heal from the trauma of divorce, striving to embrace life in ways that align with their own desires and aspirations.

Overall, this study concludes that women-initiated divorce in the patriarchal social context of Bangladesh remains a challenging and complex experience for women. While evolving gender norms and societal changes in the late modern era enable women to exercise agency to escape dysfunctional marriages through divorce, many deeply rooted patriarchal practices continue to expose women to various vulnerabilities in post-divorce life. These remnants of patriarchy often manifest in social stigma, financial insecurity, and emotional distress.

This study strongly recommends an end to the domination, oppression, and violence that women face within marriage. A more gender-sensitive and women-friendly cultural shift is essential for ensuring women's security, freedom, and respect within the institution of marriage. Such a shift is fundamental to fostering a healthy family environment and preventing the dissolution of marriage, which negatively impacts both parents and children. Besides, in cases where divorce does occur, family and community should exhibit positive and supportive attitudes toward divorced women

instead of stigmatizing them. Social acceptance and encouragement can significantly alleviate the challenges these women face in their post-divorce lives.

This study also suggests the importance of providing financial assistance to divorced women, particularly through low-interest loans that can be offered by the government and women's rights-based NGOs. Such initiatives would help address financial insecurity and support their economic independence. Additionally, the establishment of affordable mental health counseling services is essential to help women cope with the trauma of divorce and heal from emotional distress. Furthermore, divorce law should be reformed to be more women-friendly, particularly in terms of child custody and the financial responsibilities for child maintenance. Overall, the government, women's rights organizations, the media, and community leaders can collectively play a significant role in fostering positive attitudes towards divorced women in society.

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