

Original Article

Challenges of divorced women: A qualitative study

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ABSTRACT

Background & Aim: The health of women, as half of the world's population and the foundation of families and societies, has played a significant role in securing and stabilizing of the health of families and societies. The increasing rate of divorce in Iran caused us to perform this study aimed to explore the challenges of divorced women.

Methods & Materials: This was a qualitative study which was carried out through in-depth semi-structured interviews with 12 divorced women whose divorce decree was issued in the Family Court of Shahrood, Iran, at least one year ago. Participants were selected purposefully and the data was analyzed using qualitative content analysis.

Results: The results of the study revealed the 4 following themes of health meaning from divorced women's experiences, causes of divorce, divorced women's problems, and divorced women's expectations from the society and authorities.

Conclusion: Adverse consequences of divorce on women's health including physical, mental and venereal diseases, and other serious social problems should be considered as the main and most important priority of the country by the authorities. Paying attention to the major and underlying grounds of divorce, also the most important problems of youth of the country, including addiction, superficiality, negligence of basic criteria in marriage, and infidelity, can be helpful in solving the problem of divorce.

Introduction

Marriage is considered to be sacred in all cultures (1). It has been found that marriage provides moral, intellectual, social, emotional, and mental balance in an individual's life (2). Happiness and fulfillment springing from a successful marriage can play a crucial role in couples' lives, because these affect their physical and psychological health (3). The dissolution of marriage or divorce is the termination of a marital union, the canceling of the legal duties and responsibilities and the dissolving of the bonds of

matrimony between married couples (4). Islam places strong emphasis on marriage and introduces it as a mean of keeping faith, survival of generation, and providing peace and tranquility. On the contrary, divorce is regarded as an indecent and unbecoming foundation and allowed by Islam as the last resort for a couple who cannot live together (5). There is no one cause for divorce. Some of the common reasons of divorce are lack of communication skills, addiction, extramarital relationship, sexual dissatisfaction, incompatibility of spouses, economic problems or aspects related to it, and any kind of violence (6). Divorce refers to the often messy and painful end of a marriage. For better or for worse, divorce is a very common event these days. Almost everyone has been touched by it, either by going through it themselves as a spouse or a

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child, or knowing someone who has gone through it as a spouse (1). Divorce may have different demographic, economic, social, and health consequences all of which are contrary to the positive outcomes of marriage (6). The World Health Organization (1946) has defined health as "a state of complete mental, physical, and social wellbeing, and not merely the absence of disease or weakness" (7). Barrett's study points to the destructive effects of divorce on mental health (8). A research by Waite et al. has shown that most people are not happy any more after divorce (9). According to another study, people from divorced families consume more alcohol and drugs in comparison with people who have never experienced divorce (10). There is a significant relationship between divorce and stroke, depression and heart attack (11-13). Compared with children with continuously married parents, children with divorced parents continued to score significantly lower on measures of academic achievement, conduct, psychological adjustment, self-concept, and social relations (14). Statistics indicate that divorce is ascending worldwide and casting a shadow over many families. Today, 52.6% of marriages in Russia, 49.8% in Norway, 48.8% in Finland, and 46.3% in Canada result in divorce (15). The rise in divorce rate has affected the structure of eastern countries after western societies. The Islamic states are not that far behind either.¹ In Iran, 12 divorce cases were reported versus 100 marriage ones in 2007, and 16.3 versus 100 by the end of October 2012. Altogether, there has been an increasing rate of divorce during the last 10 years (15).

Importance of women, as half of the demographic pyramid of the country and due to their key role in society and family health, increasing divorce rate in Iran, especially in the city of Shahrood, and its consequent serious problems guided us to perform a study. Since there is a lack of considerable qualitative research on the challenges of divorced women, this qualitative study aimed to explore this issue.

Methods

This research was conducted using content analysis method. Prior to commencing the study, the approval of the Ethics Committee of the Re-

search Center of Shahrood University of Medical Sciences was obtained. The research began in May 2010 and was completed in May 2011. Sampling took about 4 months and the left time was spent on data analyzing and reporting the findings. The sample consisted of 12 women who were selected from among divorced women in the Family Court of Shahrood. Passing at least one year of separation and women's willingness to participate in the study were considered as inclusion criteria for the research. Participants were selected using purposeful sampling and underwent individual and in-depth semi-structured interviews. Prior to each interview, the researcher explained the purposes of the study to the women, their written consents was obtained, and they were assured of the confidentiality of their name and comments, their right to withdraw from the study whenever they want, and observing other ethical commitments. The research environment was real and natural and it was carried out anywhere these women were available and felt more comfortable like a park or their work places such as a factory. Each woman underwent a separate interview which lasted between 70 to 100 minutes. Individual information, like age, level of education, and the women's and their spouses' jobs, were collected in addition to the study questions. Except 1 woman who was 46 years old and illiterate, others were in the range of 21-25 years with at least an elementary educational level. Moreover, 9 of the 12 husbands were unemployed at the time of divorce. Except 3 of the divorced women, who were housewives, others were working after the divorce. General and limited probing questions, such as "What do you think women's health depends on?"; "How about you?"; "How is your mental and physical health condition at present?"; "What are your present problems?", were designed as the interview guidelines and the subjects' answers directed its procedure. Audio taped interviews were transcribed verbatim together with observed nonverbal communication such as gesture, facial expression, and eye contact and the tapes were blanked out after being written on the paper. Sampling was continued until saturation of information and lack of access to new data. Method of conventional con-

tent analysis, in which coding categories are derived directly from the text data, was used for analyzing (16). The content of interviews was read repeatedly word by word, and finally the codes were emerged by merging into content of the text. This process steadily continued from codes extraction to naming the codes. After coding sort done through reconciliation of codes, the codes were arranged into categories according to similarities and differences in related codes across distinct original contexts. Finally after emerging concepts, one or two quotations were cited for each emerged themes or concepts (17). Methods of continuous investigation, spending of adequate time, good communication, member check, and using complementary viewpoints of professional colleagues, similar to consistency and incredibility in quantitative research, were used to increase the data objectivity.

Results

The study population consisted of 12 divorced women, age ranging between 21 and 46 years, with the educational level of elementary school to diploma of high school (9 women have diploma of high school = 75%). Moreover, 3 women (25%) were housewives and others were employed. The spouses of 4 participants (33%) were employed and others were unemployed or worked in the private sector. Of the participants, 3 women had children whom lived with their mothers (25%). Age difference between the couples was 2 to 11 years and the duration of marital life was 11 months to 23 years. Except one case, all divorces happened at the women's request. Addiction (9 persons = 75%) and infidelity (7 persons = 58%) were the main reasons for requesting divorce. In addition, 5 participants were smokers (41%). Except 3(25%) women, the others bestowed their entire marriage portion.

The 4 main themes of health meaning from divorced women's experiences, causes of divorce, divorcees' problems, and divorcees' expectations from the society and authorities were extracted from the data.

First theme: Health meaning from divorced women's experiences

The women's feeling of mental and physical

health was different before and after the divorce. However, sub-themes of the first theme and some good illustrations were as follows:

1-1- Mental health versus physical health

All participants of the study granted more importance to mental and psychological health than physical health, and regarded tranquility and happiness as necessities for health. The 2 sub-categories resulted are calmness and happiness.

1-1-1- Calmness

Participant number 11 said: "I think the mind is more important than physical health. Women will be healthy if they are at peace. When there is no tranquility in their life, they will be angry, sick, and depressed."

1-1-2- Happiness

Participant number 2 said: "Happiness and joyfulness are necessary in life. If your heart has no happiness, your soul will die and you can't be healthy anymore."

1-2- The role of the spouse and his emotional support in health

The spouse and his emotional support play a special role in women's health. All participants mentioned a good and affectionate relationship, expression of heart and love, mutual respect, and spouse's support as the main factors affecting their health. In this respect, 4 sub-categories were identified.

1-2-1- Good and affectionate relationship

Participant number 9 said: "Whenever he had drugs to use, he was cheery enough to be kind to me. Then, it wasn't important to me that he was an addict. When we had a good relationship, I really felt healthy."

1-2-2- Expressing affection

Participant number 8 said: "A wife is alive and breathes only by her husband's love. He used to express his love at the beginning of our marriage. I felt I was the luckiest woman in the world. I never felt sick, but I have been taking a handful of pills since he has stopped saying lovely sentences to me."

1-2-3- Mutual respect

Participant number 6 said: "I was happy when my husband was kind to me and respected

me in front of others. Couples can live with each other until there is mutual respect between them. I lost my dignity before my husband when he started to insult me in front of others (bitterly)."

1-2-4- Emotional support of spouse

Participant number 7 said: "My husband loved me. Nothing could break me down. But I am shattered since I have found that he doesn't love me anymore."

1-3- Lack of mental, psychological, and physical health

The majority of samples had bitter experiences of their husbands' violence and felt unhealthy in physical and mental aspects. In this category, 2 sub-categories were identified.

1-3-1- Violence

Participant number 6 said: "When he had no access to the drug, he found a pretext for beating and cursing me and my body always looked dark blue (with a tear in her eyes)."

Participant number 10 said: "When someone beats you, you have a feeling of inferiority. The pain of being insulted is greater than physical pain."

1-3-2- Lack of Physical and mental health

Participant number 12 said: "I still don't like to visit anyone. I live alone. I have taken Flueoxetine tablets for one year. Before the marriage, I was so lively and cheerful."

1-4- No regret about getting divorced

Participant number 7 said: "Everybody says I look better and that boosts my spirit and makes me pleased. I have too many problems, but I never regret getting divorced. I should have got divorced earlier".

Participant number 7 said: "Now I look healthier. I'm shattered, but not as much as the past. I wish I had got divorced sooner."

Second Theme: Causes of divorce

From this second theme, 4 sub-themes were extracted including addiction, infidelity and unfaithfulness, lack of sufficient knowledge, and hurried and thoughtless decision making.

2-1- Addiction

The country of Iran, having a young demo-

graphic structure, is a victim of the abroad use of illicit drugs. Requests of divorce made by most of the participants were due to the spouse's addiction to illicit drugs. The addicted husbands were unable to give it up even after several times of hospitalization.

Participant number 4 said: "He was private. After getting married, I found out he is a smoker. One day I caught him red-handed rolling drugs in paper. He was selling them to soldiers and made a profit. Afterwards, I understood (saying bitterly) he was an addict as well."

2-2- Infidelity and unfaithfulness

Almost all research participants believed that infidelity is less tolerable than addiction for women.

Participant number 4 said "Although I hate addiction somehow I can stand it. But when I found out he married again, I couldn't stand his unfaithfulness and got divorced. You can't understand me as you don't have a rival spouse (disgustingly)."

2-3- Lack of sufficient knowledge

Participant number 4 said: "He played a role all the time. I didn't know him. I was blinded by love. We were not right and proper for each other and neither were our families. Youths should have good knowledge of each other and their families before commencing a coupled life."

2-4- Hurried and thoughtless decision making

Participant number 3 said: "I made friends with him, but my family didn't agree to our marriage. I opposed all of them. He didn't hold a marriage ceremony for me. I wish I had heeded the elders' advice".

Third Theme: The problems of divorced women

The divorced women mentioned so many problems in their life which could be grouped into 3 sub-themes including social problems, economic problems, and health problems.

3-1-Social Problems

Participant number 10 said: "In comparison with men, in ordinary conditions, women suffer from unequal social conditions and this situation is worsened when women are stigmatized by

divorce." In the context of social problems, 3 subcategories were identified.

3-1-1- Lechery stigma

Participant number 11 said: "My family is so strict. I am from a martyr family, but people consider all of us as prostitutes. I was bothered by people's treatment and words."

3-1-2- Invasion of privacy

Participant number 3 said: "Men regard us as goods and toys. They think all of us are easily accessible. A 200 Kg. cattleman came to my work place and proposed temporary marriage for 6 months and this was enough to destroy my entire day. I didn't know what I should say. I was insulted and I wanted to give him a slap on the face but I was afraid of disgrace."

3-1-3- Complaint of their family and the society

Participant number 3 said: "It seems to others that I am a leper. I even feel my sisters dread their husbands to be seduced (choked with tears). All women of relatives broke off their relationship with me."

3-2- Economic Problems

Almost all the participants had multiple economic problems like inability to pay rent, lack of good and proper nutrition, and high costs of treatment services. For this sub-theme, 3 subcategories were acquired.

3-2-1- Inability to pay rent

Participant number 7 said: "It's very difficult. I'm unable to pay the rent, because I'm paid weekly. As I have no sufficient money to pay as deposit, I should pay more rent. I don't know how much I can tolerate. I hope I don't have to do wrong."

3-2-2- Lack of proper nutrition

Participant number 10 said: "Life is very difficult. Everything is expensive. I can't afford an adequate amount of meat, maybe one time per week."

3-2-3- High cost of treatment services

Participant number 11 said: "When children get sick, I treat them by myself. Cost of medicine and treatment is so high. I hope I can stand it."

3-3- Health Problems

Physical and venereal diseases were

extracted in this area and 2 sub-categories were identified.

3-3-1- Physical problems

Participant number 12 said: "I have no problem except smoking, no more than 10 cigarettes. But I suffered from ulcer and nervous stomachache which I'm being treated for now."

Participant number 8 said: "My body itches. My face is yellow as well. I should visit a doctor. But in fact I dread facing the test result."

3-3-2- Venereal diseases

Participant number 5 said: "I ask them to use condom, but men have no tendency to use it especially for the first time. They just think of themselves. However, it is their legitimate right. I've been suffering from wart and itching recently, but I'm ashamed to visit a doctor."

Fourth Theme: Divorced women's expectations from the society and authorities

In this respect, 4 sub-themes were identified including expectations from the society, legal expectations from authorities, educational expectations from authorities, and economic expectations from authorities.

4-1- Expectation from the society

The women complained about superficial and hurried judgments of people about themselves and wished more appropriate behavior of men. There were 3 sub-categories for this area.

4-1-1- Behavioral expectations and fair judgment

Participant number 11 said: "Men should not consider all divorced women as prostitutes. Women should put themselves or their daughters in our shoes. We aren't like stuff which men, from 15 year old boys to 70 year old married men, can buy. It is so indecent. I have 2 adult boys and they can understand everything (frowning of forehead)".

4-2- Legal expectation from authorities

The women requested from the judiciary system to revise the divorce legal processes and limit the entrance of illicit drugs.

4-2-1- Not prolonging process of divorce

Participant number 7 said: "Can the guys at the court who advise us to be reconciled, them-

selves live with an addict? Why do we have no firm and strong law to protect us? I've been involved in the process of divorce for 2 years."

4-2-2- Limitation of access to drugs

Participant number 4 said: "Doesn't the government want to take any serious action for addiction? My father and also my husband were addicted. What an ominous and unlucky destiny I had. People who ruin youth's life deserve to die. Why doesn't the government arrest the drug dealers?"

4-3- Educational expectation from authorities

The majority of women believed that lack of appropriate education and communication skills has an important and direct relationship with their problems.

4-3-1- Parents Education

Participant number 1 said: "Parents don't understand their children at all. Parents should be trained to communicate better. Please tell the mothers to be friends with their children.

4-3-2- Education in schools

The majority of participants believed that the youth should be taught life skills and the ability to say no to their friends since early childhood.

Participant number 9 said: "I wish the teachers could talk about these subjects in schools and train girls not to be tempted by any whisper of love and the boys not to be caught in the net of drugs. Studying doesn't work alone. What is the benefit of my diploma certificate in my real life?"

4-3-3- Education through the Media and pre- and post-marital education

Participant number 7 said: "Please instruct girls, through the media of TV or radio, not to be cheated by street lovers. They will be unfaithful to you very soon. Please teach your children to be aware of making friends. Furthermore the majority of divorcees (10 of 12 women) believed that the authorities had better empower young couples with pre- and post-marital education through governmental health care centers."

4-4- Economic expectation from authorities

Economic problems are one of the essential causes of serious social problems like divorce, addiction, prostitution, and etcetera in Iran at present. For this category, 3 sub-categories were identified.

4-4-1- Providing Housing

All participants had the problem of housing and most of their income was spent on housing.

Participant number 3 said: "Housing is the main problem. I spend half of my income on the monthly rent. There are many homeless people who may be misled."

4-4-2- Entrepreneurship

Participant number 5 said: "I wish the authorities could pay attention to us who have bestowed even our marriage portion to get rid of a misery. We are in need of money. I am ready to work. I am young and I can work for 12 hours per day. I need decent work. Now I can't serve as a maidservant."

4-4-3- Insurance Security

Participant number 10 said: "I wish we could be at least paid a pension or we could use the insurance in cases of illness to avoid self-treatment. Finally somebody should help us. We have no affluent family. Who can help us except the governmental system? Will you inform them of our needs and requests?"

Discussion

The results of the present research indicate that the women granted more importance to mental health than physical health. Except 2 women who suffered from migraine, 2 who suffered from stomachache probably resulted from nervous tension, and also 1 woman suffering from hepatitis infected by her addicted husband, the other subjects of this study had no serious physical problem. The findings are not in agreement with the results of the studies of Engstrom et al., and O'Rand and Hamil-Luker, in which divorced people were more vulnerable to serious diseases like heart and cerebral attacks (11, 13). The difference may be attributed to youthfulness of our samples or that only a short time has passed since their divorce in comparison with those studies. On the other hand, the results are similar to the study of Barrett which showed that mental health of women might be endangered by psychological problems like depression (8). Although women in the present research had no feeling of happiness and pleasure after divorce, they expressed better mental and spiritual feeling than before their divorce; this is in agreement with the results of the study by Waite et al (9).

In accordance with the studies of Parvizi

et al. and Plaisier et al., the women consider affectionate support by their husband as a factor effective on their health and they believe they would be healthier in the light of emotional supports from their husbands (18, 19). The destructive complications of addiction, infidelity, economic problems, and superficiality were the main factors of divorce; this was in agreement with the studies by Hungarian and Younesi, and Mohsenzadeh et al (20, 21). The study by Khurshid and Khatoon showed that social factors leading towards divorce in Pakistan include good relationship with in-laws and lack of understanding (1). Divorcees suffer from adverse social, economic, and health consequences threatening their health. This is in agreement with the study by Akhavan, in which women showed intensive vulnerability to social consequences of divorce and people showed negative attitude toward divorced women (6). It is true that divorce is one of the most abominable foundations and Almighty God does not like it, but the fact remains that it is a legitimate and permissible act in Islam and not a social innovation; therefore, people's reaction to divorce should be changed for the better. Based on many researches, in the cases of physical struggles and challenges and insoluble disputes, the divorce may be a sensible and an advisable decision (1). Uncontrolled sexual relationships named temporary marriages, though legal and legitimate are imposed on some divorced women due to their undeniable economic problems. Consequently, the serious outcomes of venereal infections like HIV, endangering not only these victims of divorce but also the whole society, are one of the most striking results to emerge from the data. As it is proven in Uganda, the risk of HIV infection in divorced persons is twice that of married persons (22). The participants need public supports of the society, especially male society, and higher observance of moral and family fundamentals. Coverage and comprehensiveness of social security services, and the quality of the services are indices of social development. Due to women's biological traits, including longer survival and senility, and their higher sensitivity to stressful conditions, like divorce and family disintegration, they need more social security support than

men (23). The participants requested secure housing, appropriate and decent job positions, and social insurance from the authorities. Legislation for serious and effective control of drug dealers and importation of abused drugs via national borders, to decrease youth's access to drugs, execution of legal articles mentioned in the marriage contract, and shortening of the process of divorce in logical cases, like addiction, were their other requests from judiciary authorities. Training life skills in schools and benefiting from media in increasing the knowledge of young girls and boys, empowering young couples with pre- and post-marital education, training parents to empower their children in creating healthy relationships before the occurrence of irreversible problems, and providing appropriate conditions in the working market to meet people's economic needs are suggestions of participants in this research.

First, the participants were only gathered from the latest divorce cases because of easy access to the archives of the court. Second, the research only reports the experiences of divorced women of Shahrood. Finally, there is the probability of underreporting some important facts due to cultural prejudices and limitations like shame and fear.

Future studies on the current topic with similar methods are suggested to be carried in men and also in other cities of the country. More importantly in this study women expressed a great demand for learning life skills in the form of pre or post marital education. Since pre marital education is currently presented for newly weddings through governmental health care centers aiming other special objectives in the shortest time, so it is suggested to provide couples with post marital education in these centers and then assess the effectiveness of it on couples' marital life.

Women's health plays a fundamental and special role in securing and continuity of family and society health. Considering that Shahrood was a city with one of the highest rates of divorce in Iran in 2011, adverse consequences of divorce on women's health including physical, mental, and venereal diseases, and other serious social problems should be considered as the main and most important priority of the country

by the authorities. Paying attention to the major and underlying grounds of divorce, also the most important problems of youth, including addiction and its educational, cultural, and economic grounds, superficiality, negligence of basic criteria in marriage can be helpful to solving the problem of divorce.

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