Woman's experiences of applying for a divorce

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ABSTRACT

Background: Divorce is one of the most controversial and damaging social issues. Since the divorce rates are increasing rapidly, the current study evaluated the effects of factors leading to divorce application.

Materials and Methods: This qualitative content analysis used purposive sampling to select 10 female divorce applicants at Isfahan Department of Justice (Isfahan, Iran). In-depth interviews were used for data collection. The contents of the interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using a phenomenological method. The reliability and validity, i.e. real values, applicability, stability, and fact-based results, were ensured through relevant measures.

Results: Overall, 110 codes were extracted from the interviews. The codes were organized in 18 subthemes and seven main themes. The main themes included experiences of violence, cultural factors, family factors, financial factors, safety factors, experiences of promiscuity, and social factors.

Conclusion: Different individual, social, and cultural factors may lead to divorce. The first step in reducing divorce rates is to identify the most important and influential risk factors for divorce. Community health nurses will then be able to help the families solve their problems. In general, eliminating the causes of divorce can prevent its severe consequences at individual, family, and social levels.

Key words: Divorce, experiences, Iran, qualitative research, women

INTRODUCTION

Divorce is a controversial and catastrophic social issue in Iran and many other societies. Technological advancements and increased urbanization have elevated the rates of various problems including divorce.[1] Divorce will in turn cause behavioral deviations, crime, murder, and suicides.[2] Research has shown that the numerous crises faced by families affect women and children the most. Since the overall health of the society depends on physical, mental, social, and spiritual well-being of women, attention to their well-being will ensure the health of not only a half of the world's population but also the entire human race.[3]

Confronting unsolvable problems results in anxiety and inability at both individual and family levels. Taking ineffective measures to solve the problem may even impose greater distress on the family. Families with experiences of physical and psychological abuse are faced with great crisis.[4]

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As family is a social system, impairments of each member can disrupt the whole system. An impaired system will consequently intensify impairments of the members and causes new issues.[5] Applying for a divorce is generally viewed as an act of help-seeking from individuals incapable of direct expression of their issues which can also be a solution to their family problems. In fact, people will never apply for a divorce if they find another way to cope with their issues.[6] Family conflicts are one of the biggest problems of modern societies. They weaken family structure and jeopardize the psychological health of its members.[7] Since women constitute 75% of Iranian teachers, most Iranians learn appropriate behavior and lifestyle from women.[8]

Family is the most stable and effective institution in preserving cultural properties and transferring them to future generations. However, according to sociologists, divorce can destroy the structure of this fundamental section of the society and is thus a social damage.[9] Islam emphasizes marriage and encourages Muslims to marry in many different ways. On the contrary, it strictly prohibits unnecessary cases of divorce. Various reasons such as rapid social, economic, and cultural changes have drastically changed the sacred institution of family. As a result, 2.3% of marriages in the US end in divorce.[10] Trent (USA) reported the rate of divorce in first marriages to be as high as 67%. In other words, two out of every three marriages end in divorce.[11]

Similarly, family disputes and divorce are the most critical issues of the Iranian society. A research in Iran categorized

divorce in the 10 important stressful life events.[9] It has stated that Isfahan, Najafabad, and Shahinshahr have the first, second, and third highest numbers of marriages and divorces in Isfahan Province (Iran). Moreover, based on available statistics, divorce rates in Iran have increased from 6.3 in every 10,000 people in 1996 to 9.4 in every 10,000 people in 2001.[9] The National Organization for Civil Registration reported increments in the number of divorces during 2012 (16.3%) compared to the rates in 2011 (15.9%).[12] This rapid growth of divorce rates in Iran has raised concerns among social analysts.[9]

Divorce is a multifactorial phenomenon. Being a complex individual as well as social experience, divorce has many consequences. Therefore, identifying its main causes can help authorities take appropriate steps to stop this social process and to plan pre-marriage and divorce prevention counseling programs. Such measures can eliminate causes of divorce, prevent its related social pathologies, and ultimately lead to more stable families. Hence, the current study tried to explore the experiences of divorce applicants.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

In this qualitative content analysis, purposive sampling was used to select 10 female divorce applicants at the Department of Justice, Isfahan, Iran. Individuals were only included if they had sufficient experience about divorce and were willing to participate. After explaining the nature, aims, and procedure of the study and the role of each participant, women were asked to provide informed consents.

In-depth interviews were used for data collection. The researcher first assured the confidentiality of the information and asked for the permission of the participants to record the interviews. Each interview lasted for 20-60 min. The content of the interviews was then transcribed verbatim and compared with the recorded information to ensure consistency.

As suggested by Rew et al., reliability and validity of this study depended on real values, applicability, stability, and being fact-based.[13] In order to confirm real values, the participants were asked to verify the written statements. For the results to be applicable to other groups, we described the research location and interactions and processes of observation. We also selected the participants from a wide range of ages and social and cultural backgrounds. Stability was achieved when participants gave consistent and similar responses to similar questions with different formats. Finally, since no type of prejudice was involved either before or after the interviews, the research was based on actual facts.

Colaizzi's phenomenological method was used to analyze the data. All content of the transcribed interviews was first studied and reviewed in detail to understand the feelings of the participants. After extracting the key phrases, the meaning of each phrase was explained through recording and categorizing 110 codes. Accreditation of the obtained categories was then performed based on the initial protocols. In the next stage, the results were combined to form a comprehensive, unambiguous description of the studied phenomenon. At last, the results were referred to the participants for final approval.

RESULTS

Violence, promiscuity, and family and social safety were the most important concepts that explained the issues experienced by our participants. The concept of divorce consisted of seven main themes: Experiences of violence, cultural factors, family factors, financial experiences, safety-related experiences, experiences of promiscuity, and social factors [Table 1].

Experiences of violence

This theme consisted of three subthemes of violence toward the individual, toward the individual's family, and toward the process of life. "*We used to fight all the time. He was always complaining and hitting me,*" stated a participant.

Table 1: Themes and subthemes derived from the statements of female divorce applicants about the risk factors for divorce

Themes	Subthemes
Experiences of violence	Toward the individual
	Toward the individual's family
	Toward the process of life
Cultural factors	Arranged marriage
	Forced marriage
Social factors	Addiction
	Relations with friends and acquaintances
Family factors	Related to the individual
	Related to the individual's family
	Related to the process of life
Safety factors	Related to the individual
	Related to the individual's family
Experiences of promiscuity	Related to the individual
	Related to the individual's family
Financial factors	Failure to pay nafaqa
	Imprisonment of the spouse
	Inability to pay family and treatment costs Theft

Cultural factors affecting divorce

This theme comprised two subthemes of arranged marriage and forced marriage. "*My husband says he was forced to marry me against his will*," said a woman. "*My father used to say he would kill me if I did not marry this man*," reported another participant.

Social factors resulting in divorce

This theme was made up of two subthemes of addiction and relations with friends and acquaintances. "*He used to show his disability card and traffic in drugs. He threatened me to cooperate with him*," mentioned a subject. "*My husband was a drug addict and would do anything for drugs. He even wanted me to prostitute myself*," said another participant. These findings emphasize the role of social factors such as prostitution, promiscuity, and drugs in divorce.

Family factors causing divorce

This theme consisted of three subthemes affecting the individual, her family, and the whole process of life. "*I could never go out with my husband. He said he was ashamed to go out with a woman*," explained a woman. "*He disrespected me while respecting his brother's wife*," said a participant. Disrespect and conflict within the family will make individuals unable to tolerate the family environment and will result in divorce.

Safety factors leading to divorce

Safety of the individual and safety of her family were the two subthemes of this theme. "*I had to help my husband carry drugs because my life was in danger*," mentioned a subject. "*My father said he would kill me if I did not marry this man*," reported another divorce applicant. Therefore, being under pressure at the time of marriage, and threats and fears in family will evoke a feeling of insecurity and lead to divorce.

Experiences of promiscuity

The two subthemes of this theme were promiscuity affecting the individual and promiscuity affecting the woman's family. "*He used to bring his friends home and asked me to sit near them while they were smoking opium,*" explained a participant. "*My husband does not love me. He has relationships with other women*," reported another subject.

Financial experiences

This theme comprised four subthemes of failure to pay nafaqa (the money a Muslim husband has to pay his wife during marriage), imprisonment of the spouse, inability to pay family and treatment costs, and theft.

"*My husband did not have a good job. He left the house early in the morning and returned very late but he was extremely poor. Our love gradually disappeared,*" stated a divorce applicant. "*My husband is very poor. He does not have a job most of the time and we barely have enough to feed ourselves. We had covered the windows with plastic instead of glass*," said a woman. "*My father-in-law was wealthy, but my family was not. So they treated me like their servant. I had to do everything and if I did not, they beat me*," expressed another participant. Hence, financial problems play a significant role in divorce rates.

DISCUSSION

Based on our findings, family-related and cultural experiences can substantially increase divorce rates. Unsolvable problems cause tension in families and their members. Probable ineffective measures to solve such problems may in turn impose greater distress on any family. Families with experiences of physical or psychological abuse are faced with an enormous crisis.[4] Moreover, the well-being of every society depends on the psychological and physical well-being of its women.

Since divorce is a major event that splits the most fundamental structure of the society, i.e. family, sociologists consider it as a social pathology.[13] Social experiences involved in divorce include prostitution, promiscuity, and drugs. Similarly, our participants mentioned lack of love and affection, being forced by family members, being under pressure, and lack of respect from their spouses.

Financial factors are also responsible for a number of divorces. Rew *et al*. stated that poverty and domestic violence cause personality and mood disorders and low self-esteem.[14] Some women in the present study were worried since their unemployed husbands sought relief in drugs and were soon involved in infidelity.

It is better that families have to provide the opportunity for a man and a woman to get familiar with one another's mentality and behaviors before getting married. This may prevent divorce to some extent.

Many factors can damage a marriage. It is, however, crucial to identify the factors that influence the highest number of couples. It can then be possible to reduce the risk of divorce by informing families and individuals about careful selection of the right person and educating the couples on appropriate behaviors. Furthermore, counseling is of high importance before and during marriage and even in the process of divorce.[9] Some of our participants considered lack of love and affection, forced marriage, imposed pressure, and immaturity and unawareness at the time of marriage as the cultural factors leading to divorce.

Kalantari *et al.* analyzed the rates of divorce in Iran from 1997 until the ninth month of 2012. They found 40.5% of marriages to last less than 3 years and 15.5% to occur before the couples live together.[10] Submission of about 56.0% of divorce applications during the first 3 years of marriage can indicate lack of maturity and awareness of the couples at the time of marriage. It also highlights the necessity of raising the awareness of young people and holding pre-marriage counseling sessions.[14]

Our participants frequently emphasized the effects of financial issues and poverty on divorce. They reported poverty, housing problems, and unemployment as the major financial problems leading to divorce.

According to the divorce applicants in the present study, hasty and ill-considered marriages, high expectations of couples from each other, irresponsibility, family differences, social corruption, and illegal entertainments were the most important social risk factors for divorce. A crucial cultural factor in divorce is differences in the couples' beliefs and worldviews. Roebuck Bulanda and Brown showed that cultural and ethnic differences and extreme interest in pleasure can result in divorce. They also reported 30.0% of married couples referring to counseling centers to have mental disorders such as drug addiction (9.9%), mood disorders (4.5%), anxiety (3.0%), and personality disorders (2.7%).[14,15]

The State Welfare Organization of Iran suggested increased rates of divorce during recent years to be associated with financial factors.[12] In the current study, 90% of the participants were young women who had applied for a divorce due to their spouse's lack of understanding, domestic violence, poverty, and addiction. Furthermore, Gill showed that about 50% of marriages end in divorce in the United States, and identified violence, financial factors, unemployment, cultural differences, sexual incompetence, sexual deviation, addiction to drugs, absence of one of the partners, criminal action, and imprisonment as the main reasons involved in divorces.[16]

In a longitudinal study by Plotnick, 20% of the couples reported their marital issues to be resulting from the husband's anger. Men, on the other hand, complained about their wives' annoying emotions, criticism, petulance, and jealousy. Women considered their spouse's jealousy and disturbing behavior to be the cause of their marital problems. Overall, physical abuse had the strongest negative effect on marriages.[17] Fu concluded that social immaturity is an important risk factor for divorce.[18] Eldar-Avidan conducted a qualitative research on the experiences of female divorce applicants who had been beaten by their husbands. The main themes provided by the women were personal, interpersonal, organizational, social, and cultural factors.[19]

CONCLUSION

Cultural differences between the families of couples and drug and alcohol abuse are the most important social risk factors for divorce. Moreover, divorce rates are greatly influenced by lack of commitment to ethics, infidelity, insufficient communication skills, instable personality, changes in lifestyle, dishonesty at the time of marriage, lack of forgiveness, false pride, lack of mutual respect, desire for revenge taking, excessive sensitivity, increased verbal distance between the couples, aggression and constant bickering, and financial factors such as poverty, low income, unemployment, and inappropriate housing.

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