

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Post-Divorce Regret among Iranian Women: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

Background: Post-divorce regret is a context-based phenomenon and in every community it is affected by the personal, social and cultural factors of that community. This study was conducted to investigate the post-divorce regret among Iranian women.

Methods: This qualitative content analysis study was conducted from November 2015 to December 2017 in Tehran. 15 divorced women were selected through purposeful and snowball sampling. The data were collected through in-depth individual semi-structured interviews. Interview with participant no. 13 was conducted in two sessions (not having enough time for a long interview). Data were analyzed using Graneheim and Lundman's proposed method. The MAXQDA 10 software was used for the management of data.

Results: Four main categories and 12 subcategories of data were extracted. The main categories and their subcategories were identity threat (stigma, becoming a sex object, discrimination), loss of independence (economic dependence, lack of independence in choosing a place to live, being controlled), vague future (concerns about children's future, little chance of having an appropriate remarriage, fear of loneliness) and the absence of the husband and his role (emotional and sexual needs, children's need for their father, need for a supporter and security).

Conclusion: The findings of this study showed that many of the participants had got involved in multiple social, economic and support problems after divorce. Most of the participants were not able to adjust to life after their divorce and consequently regretted their decision to divorce. Therefore, it is necessary to provide the appropriate social and economic support for these women based on the culture of the society.

KEYWORDS: Divorce, Iran, Qualitative study, Regret

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INTRODUCTION

Divorce is the reason for the disintegration of the most fundamental part of the society, which is family and requires the highest personal and social changes to readjust for the involved parties.¹ In the United States, 50% of the first marriages lead to divorce.² During 2004-2013 the rate of divorce was increasing in five most populated municipalities of Iran including Tehran, Isfahan, Tabriz, Mashhad, and Shiraz.³

Divorce is a means of being released from marital problems and conflicts; on the other hand, it creates many problems for the couples; sometimes these problems are even worse than before the marital conflicts.⁴ Women, compared to men, face additional changes and challenges after divorce.^{5, 6} Economic problems, depression, decreased satisfaction with life, adoption of multiple roles, suicide, addiction, prostitution, theft, isolation, disturbed social interactions, problems caused by the custody of the children, heavy-heartedness, and loss of mental and physical health are some of the problems that divorced women encounter.⁷ Therefore, many couples suffer post-divorce regret.^{4, 8} Some experience ambivalent feelings after divorce and think about their decision and start having doubts.⁹ Several studies have shown that a short while after divorce, some women regret their decision.^{10, 11} The person who lives with regret has a pitiful view toward his/her past and feels remorseful about the situation in which he/she could have acted differently.¹²

Post-divorce regret is one of the factors that inhibit mental reconstruction after divorce. These people always feel regretful about their past and are not able to make appropriate communication with others in future.^{10, 11} People's unsuccessful adjustment with life after divorce has many negative personal, social, familial and economic outcomes for them and the entire community.¹³

According to the theory of Ambert (2009), considering the variety of the contexts of the divorce, experiences would have a wide range of varieties.¹⁴ Also, post-divorce regret is a

context-based phenomenon and is affected by the personal, social and cultural factors of each community. Therefore, the present study was conducted to explain post-divorce regret among Iranian women.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This qualitative content analysis study was conducted from November 2015 to December 2017 in Tehran. Qualitative studies aim to improve the understanding of a phenomenon through human experiences.¹⁵ 15 Participants were selected through purposeful sampling from the lawyers' offices, family courts, and by recommendation from friends and relatives; then, sampling was continued using the snowball method.

The inclusion criteria were experiencing divorce, being able to speak Persian, having Iranian nationality, and being willing to participate in the study. Exclusion criteria were lack of willingness to participate in the study and inability to communicate verbally. Efforts were made to choose the participants with the maximum variation in age, occupation, educational level, number of children, duration of the marriage, the time passed since the divorce, and economic condition.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used for gathering the data. A few general questions were designed as the guide for the interviews which had open interpretive answers and the participants' answers guided the procedure. (For example: What changes occurred in your life after divorce?, Do you regret your divorce decision? Since when? Why?) In total, 16 interviews lasting from 40 to 120 minutes were conducted. Interview with participant no. 13 was conducted in two sessions because of not having enough time for a long interview. The place of data collection was the law office, workplace, and the participants and researcher's place of study.

The data were analyzed using content analysis approach. It is a systematic process of coding large amounts of textual data

for determining the trends and themes.¹⁶ Data were analyzed using Graneheim and Lundman's proposed method.¹⁷ Immediately after each session, the interviews were transcribed verbatim and read several times to get the sense of the whole. The related meaning units were labeled with codes which were then sorted into categories and subcategories based on their similarities and differences. Lastly, similar categories were abstracted and labeled with the themes indicating a latent meaning in the text. The MAXQDA 10 software was used for the management of data.

The credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability criteria suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were used to ensure the rigour of this study.¹⁸ Credibility was strengthened through the prolonged engagement with the participants. In this regard, the researchers were engaged with the participants for an extended period to gain their trust and collect in-depth data. Also, discussions among research team members regarding the findings contributed to this part of rigor. Other considerations were member checking, peer checking, and researchers' immersion in the collected data. For member checking, 6 participants (p: 1, 4, 5, 8, 13, 14) were asked to read a brief report containing transcripts and initial findings and send feedback to ensure that their real thoughts were reflected. Three qualitative researchers were asked to independently analyze a part of the data, and their results were compared with the authors' findings. In the case of disagreement, discussions were held to reach a consensus. Transferability was enhanced through purposive and maximum variation in sampling in terms of demographic characteristics. A detailed description of the data collection and analysis processes was provided. Dependability was strengthened by engaging more than one researcher in the data analysis process. In other words, one author collected and analyzed the data (A.P), and the two other researchers (R.N. & Z.KH.) discussed, checked, and verified

the findings. Confirmability was enhanced by keeping an easy to follow audit trail of all research activities, methodological decisions, and analysis notes.

The proposal was reviewed and approved by the ethics committee of Tehran University of Medical Sciences (ethical code: IR.TUMS.REC.1394.132). Other ethical considerations in this study were obtaining written informed consent, getting permission to tape record the interviews, keeping the confidentiality of the data, observing anonymity in publication of the data, and ensuring the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

RESULTS

In the present study, 15 divorced women were enrolled. The age range of the participants was from 28 to 51 years old; their educational level varied from illiterate to medical student, and the duration of their marriage was from 2 months to 28 years; also, the time period passed since their legal divorce was from 2 to 20 years. 12 participants were employed. 11 of them had children and 4 did not. Nine of them were living in a separate house after divorce, while 6 were living at their parents' house. 11 participants regretted after divorce (Table 1).

Four main categories and 12 subcategories of data were extracted. The main categories and their subcategories were identity threat (stigma, becoming a sex object, discrimination), losing independence (economic dependency, lack of independence in choosing a place to live, being controlled), vague future (concerns about children's future, little of having an appropriate remarriage, fear of loneliness) and the absence of the husband and his role (emotional and sexual needs, children's need for their father, need for a supporter and security) (Table 2).

1. Identity Threat

Identity threat was the category extracted from the data which includes stigma, misjudgment by others, becoming a sex object and discrimination.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the participants in the research

No	Age (Year)	Duration of marriage (Year)	Duration of divorce (Year)	Regret of divorce	Current employment status	Education	Number of children	The status of marriage is now	Place of residence after divorce
1	34	4	7	Regret	Secretary	Bachelor's degree	1	Single	Independent home
2	33	3	2	Regret	Unemployed	Diploma	1	Return to previous marital life	Paternity home
3	47	17	11	Regret	Cleaner	Diploma	1	Single	Independent home
4	42	17	7	Regret	Unemployed	Elementary education	3	Single	Independent home
5	50	22	13	Regret	Stylist	Diploma	2	Single	Independent home
6	43	18	5	No regret	Stylist	Diploma	2	Single	Paternity home
7	28	8	2	Regret	Unemployed	MA	1	Return to previous marital life	Paternity home
8	44	4	15	Regret	Secretary	Diploma	1	Single	Paternity home
9	36	5	5	No regret	Midwife	Medical student	0	Single	Paternity home
10	47	13	20	Regret	Cleaner	Diploma	4	Single	Independent home
11	51	28	2	Regret	Cleaner	Diploma	3	Return to previous marital life	Independent home
12	30	2 Months	13	Regret	Elderly care	Diploma	0	Single	Independent home
13	28	8	2	No regret	Office employee	Bachelor's degree	1	Single	Independent home
14	28	1	3	Regret	Secretary	Bachelor's degree	0	Single	Paternity home
15	32	8	7	No regret	Elderly care	Diploma	0	Single	Independent home

1.1 Stigma

In general, stigma indicates the community's look at and feedback of these women as divorced individuals and their social problems. Most of the participants mentioned that stigma was one of their fundamental problems in adjusting to life after divorce and had a significant role in their regret after divorce.

“When I go to a party, everybody points at me and says, look, she is that divorced woman. We (divorced woman) are exactly

like those mentally disabled children in the society.” (P. 14).

“After the divorce, the looks and opinions of everybody were really bad toward me. Women always thought that I would steal their husbands.” (P. 12)

1.2 Becoming a Sex Object

Becoming a sex object in the family environment, at the workplace and even in jurisdictions was the most repeatedly mentioned problems by the participants.

Table 2: Categories and subcategories emerged from the data analysis

Category	Subcategory	Primary codes
Identity Threat	Stigma	Divorce label
		Divorced woman as a woman abandoned in society
		Bad divorce in traditional Iranian culture
		The divorced woman makes a reverence family
	Becoming a Sex object	Panic for married women from divorced women
		Abuse of divorced women in society
		Becoming a Sex object to marry men
	Discrimination	Becoming a Sex object divorced women in the workplace, judicial authorities
		Becoming a Sex object by family men
		Exclusion from specific ceremonies (marriage)
Pity and compassion		
Loss of Independence	Economic dependency	Discrimination in the job and promotion of a divorced woman
		Discrimination in remarriage for divorced women
		High cost of living
		Difficult to get a living cost
	Lack of independence in choosing a place to live	Lack of financial support
		Economic dependence on the family
		Not having the economic power to provide Independent home.
	Being controlled	Lack of permission for the father's to live at Independent home.
		Not having security in a home independent
		Monitoring and controlling life and behavior by family members.
Vague Future	Concerns about children's future	Intervention in divorced women's decisions
		Destruction of personal-familial space
		Concerned about the educational status of the child
		Fear of improper child upbringing
	The remote chance of having an appropriate remarriage	The destructive effect of divorce on child behavior
		The existence of a child is a barrier to remarriage
		The value of virginity in Iranian culture
	Fear of being alone	Undervalued divorced woman
		Marriage of a single man with a divorced woman in Iran is not customary
		Little chance to remarriage
The absence of the husband and his role	Emotional and sexual needs	Rejection by family and friends
		Growing up children and going home.
		Woman's Emotional Need for Man
		Need for companion and companionship
	Children's need for their father	Feeling lonely without a wife
		Belief in sexual relations within the family
		The importance of having sex
		The father's educational role in independence and the formation of the child's personality
	The need for a supporter and security	Absence of father in child's life
		Father as a model and hero for a child
Need of child and supporter		
Emotional need of child to father		
The need for a supporter and security	The need for a woman to support and accompany	
	Being a bad man is better than his absence	
	Feel safe with the husband	
	The necessity of being a man in life	

Therefore, women preferred to hide their divorce in their workplace or places where no one knew them, for maintaining their own

security.

“Wherever I looked for a job, after they saw the divorce stamp on my birth certificate,

the first thing was to ask me for a sexual relationship.” (P. 15)

1.3 Discrimination

Most of the participants mentioned that, after divorce, they had been subjected to different types of discrimination in the family and society. Misunderstanding the behaviors, relations, and clothing for divorced women are some aspects of discrimination against divorced women, which could be effective in their regret after divorce.

“When I go to a wedding, I should be completely different from the others; I should wear a simple covered dress with no makeup.” (P. 4)

2. Loss of Independence

The category of loss of independence includes different dimensions such as economic dependency, lack of independence in choosing a place to live, and being controlled.

2.1 Economic Dependency

After the divorce, women with no job and income would be financially supported by their parents, and in many cases, if the parents do not have sufficient financial resources, they would feel like a burden and an intruder.

“Most of the time, I feel like an extra burden on my parents, but I have no other choice because I have no financial resources.” (P. 13)

2.2 Lack of Independence in Choosing a Place to Live

Most of the participants mentioned that returning to the parents' house is a bitter experience and all of them preferred to live independently after divorce. Some women had to live with their parents due to lack of sufficient financial resources; however in many cases, despite their financial ability, their family did not allow them to live separately, a result of the negative approach of the society toward divorced women and the family's fear of scandal.

“I bought a house for myself and preferred to live there with my daughter, but my father did not allow me to live there and insisted that I must live in their house.” (P. 8)

2.3 Being Controlled

Returning to the parents' house changes the divorced women into dependent people dominated by their family, not like the time that they were single, but with a stigma that has been put on them by the society. This stigma intensifies the fear of scandal in the parents significantly and causes many problems for the divorced women at their parents' house. Controlling and putting restrictions on her appearance and clothing, commuting time and also relationships were some of the issues that were mentioned by the participants.

“I had to ask my brother's permission to come here, which really upsets me. When he asks me about where I am going, I have to tell him.” (P. 4)

3. Vague future

The category of vague future includes concerns about children's future, little of having an appropriate remarriage and fear of loneliness.

3.1 Concerns about the Children's Future

One of the major concerns of divorced women is the future of their children. The father, besides being the breadwinner of the family, has a nurturing and supporting role, too. In most cases, mothers get the custody of the children, so their children are deprived of their father and this deprivation could affect their future life.

“My child was 6 months old; I didn't want to ruin my child's future. I went back to my previous marriage because of my son.” (P. 7)

3.2 Little Chance for an Appropriate Remarriage

The stigma of divorce changes these women into worthless creatures who do not deserve a desirable and appropriate marriage. Thus, they would become the target of inappropriate marriage proposals such as

temporary marriage and hidden marriage to married men or problematic men. Also, having children and women's age would decrease their chance for remarriage.

"There will be no appropriate suitors after divorce. Most cases for marriage after divorce have many problems, such as addiction or mental problems, etc...." (P. 13)

3.3 Fear of Loneliness

Loneliness and fear of being alone in the future was one of the issues mentioned by the participants.

"I have my child now, but when he/she grows up and become independent in his/her life, what should I do. I'm afraid of being alone." (P. 1)

4. The Absence of the Husband and His Roles

The category of the absence of the husband and his role includes emotional and sexual needs, children's need for their father, and the need for security and supporter.

4.1 Emotional and Sexual Needs

One of the women's problems after divorce is the lack of a partner to satisfy their sexual and emotional needs. Some divorced women start emotional and sexual relationships in the context of friendship. Some women suppress their emotional and sexual needs, or by getting involved in their work or spiritual matters women with fewer emotional and sexual needs and those who have found a method for managing these needs tend to have a better adjustment to life after divorce and, consequently, feel less regret.

"I have sexual needs, but I would calm myself by remembering God." (P. 12)

"I feel like having sex, but I entertained myself with my job so that I would forget everything." (P. 8)

4.2 Children's Need for Their Father

Since after divorce children are deprived of their father, most of the women try to fill the empty place of the father for their children or the children's grandfather or uncle try to

compensate for this shortage. However, in practice, no one can take the father's place for the children and this emptiness would always be felt.

"The presence of the father in the house is really good for daughters; it can increase their sense of responsibility. I tried to be nice all the time and buy her whatever she wanted, but I cannot fill her father's place" (P. 8)

4.3 The Need for Security and Supporter

After the divorce, women lose the security state that has been provided by their husband with a painful stigma and become the target of insecurities from the society; although they have been hurt by men, they prefer to have such a security provided by a man to remove the stigma placed on them by the society and have their security back.

"If my husband was, nobody dared to disturb me. Although he was not a good husband, his presence was better than his absence." (P. 11)

DISCUSSION

The results of the present study revealed that divorced women have reported different experiences of negative feedback of divorce from their relatives and the society and this negative feedback had many outcomes for them. These women perceived discrimination wholeheartedly and due to being divorced, they become the sex object for others. All of these factors contribute to their identity threat and directly or indirectly causes post-divorce regret. Traditional societies by positive valuation of marriage and being married would deprecate coming out of married status and this leads to the social stigma for divorced women. It must be noted that the stigma of divorce has been eliminated in Western societies for many years,¹⁹ and most of the studies about the stigma of divorce are conducted in traditional patriarchal societies. Therefore, it could be concluded that stigma in every society is rooted in the cultural and social characteristics of that society.²⁰

In Iranian society a women is defined in the

frame of the family while having a husband and children. Therefore, coming out of this position through getting a divorce would be associated with a kind of marginalization by the society and stigma.²¹

The results of multiple studies in similar societies have also shown that women's identity would be compromised after the divorce and they would be stigmatized.^{11, 22, 23} On the other hand, women would suffer from the personal, social, cultural, economic, emotional and parental problems after divorce and it affects them more than men.^{24, 25}

Divorced women were a threat for the others' marital relationships that has caused social exclusion and loss of social capital; in traditional societies, this negative feedback is more commonly observed for women than men.¹⁰ Results of another study stated that divorced women after returning to the single condition again would face a challenge for establishing their past relationships with others and instead of being supported by their friends and family, they would be negatively judged.¹¹

The results of the present study showed that "becoming a sex object" would cause additional problems for divorced women in the society. Becoming a sex object could happen in the family, in the workplace and even in jurisdictions. Some studies have shown that sexual harassment of divorced and single women at the workplace is more prevalent than of married women.²⁶ Some of the national studies have revealed that sexual harassment is one of the challenges that women encounter in their relationship with others and at different places after the divorce, and unfortunately, divorced women are considered an object for responding to the sexual desires of men. Thus, the participants believed that being divorced was an effective factor in being sexually harassed.^{11, 23}

"Discrimination" was one of the concepts that was reported to threaten the identity of the divorced women. One of the outcomes of divorce for women was suffering from discrimination in the society.²² It is worth

noting that gender discrimination has always been an issue in all communities, but divorced women experience additional discrimination. Issues such as gender stereotypes, discrimination in employment, payments and job promotion, effective gender discrimination on the participation of women in the workforce, and unequal wage are some of the problems that exist in every society.²⁷ There is a difference between a married woman who has applied for a job and a divorced woman who has done so for the same job.²⁸

Loss of independence in the economic dimension, choosing a place to live, and commuting and social relations were some of the issues that were mentioned by the participants. After the divorce, location changes and loss of the provider of the family would cause economic problems for women. For managing this economic problem, women were mostly financially supported by their parents, which took away their independence.

Studies in different parts of the world have also shown that after the divorce, men and women would encounter various economic problems^{29, 30} and such problems take longer and are harder for women than men.³¹⁻³³ The reason for this difference is that women have less working experience before the divorce than men, and due to their responsibility toward their children, they encounter more conflicts between their job and their family; it is also more probable that they would be subjected to occupational and income discrimination.³⁴

Most of the women could not choose their place of living after the divorce freely and independently. Sometimes, due to economic problems, they are forced to live at their parental house against their will and sometimes the social norms and negative approach of the society toward divorced women would lead to such a choice. One of the outcomes of living at the parental house is being controlled by the family members that would cost them their independence and freedom. Returning to the parental house

was difficult for divorced women and caused them to lose their independence and freedom, leading to a feeling of being controlled and restricted.³⁵

Turkish divorced women also expressed that returning to the parental house after divorce was a difficult experience because it caused various problems such as being controlled and loss of independence and freedom of action, which would eventually lead to conflicts with the parental family.³³ The results of a study in Bangladesh revealed that divorced women encountered bewilderment in choosing a place to live because, on the one hand, due to economic problems, social stigma and feeling of insecurity, they are forced to live at their parental house and, on the other hand, they feel like a burden and intruder there.³⁶

Fear of their own and their children's future and also fear of being alone would cause women to have a vague picture of their future. Most of the women have custody of their children after divorce; this adds to their problems. In traditional societies like Iran, men play a supporting role as the breadwinner and women have the housekeeping and parenting role. After divorce, women are forced to play a supporting role as the breadwinner, and since they lack sufficient skills in this field, they would encounter various problems. Furthermore, the dominant culture of the traditional society does not allow them to compete with men in the occupational context.³⁴ Participants in the present study stated remarriage as a way to escape from the problems. However, unfortunately, having children, aging and the value of virginity in the Iranian society would decrease the chance of remarriage for divorced women and all of these factors would increase their fear of loneliness. The results of some studies showed that women's fear of remarriage, the worthlessness of divorced women in the society, the value of virginity, having children,^{21, 33, 36} and aging were the barriers to remarriage of divorced women, while in general, divorced men usually do not

encounter such problems²¹ and these women are only able to marry divorced, widowed or older men.³⁶

The results of the present study showed that after divorce women would face challenges in emotional and sexual dimensions of life. Remarriage, friendship with the opposite sex, temporary marriage, suppression of the sexual needs, engagement in spiritual matters and working were some of the ways they coped. Women who are successful in managing these needs are more capable of adjusting themselves to live after the divorce. Many studies have indicated that adjustment to divorce has been more among people who have started new relationships^{21, 37, 38} or remarried.³⁹ After divorce, most women feel insecure and lonely in their relations with others and the dominant culture of the traditional societies, like Iran, strengthens these feelings. Sometimes, for finding a companion and support, women rely on a close relative such as their father or brother; and sometimes they try to remarry. The most divorced women had a follower and dependent identity and usually rely on a male family member for performing their activities for protecting themselves.¹¹

Another reason for regretting the decision to divorce was the children's need for their father in the present study. The role of father's upbringing and supporting is very important for personality development and role modeling for children. After divorce, most women would take the custody of the children and the children would be deprived of their father. These children would experience many problems in their process of upbringing and role modeling. Therefore, they might suffer from many psychological and behavioral disorders. The children of divorce would encounter further problems in personality adjustment, for example "The son whose father is gone finds himself surrounded by feminine patterns, with little or no opportunity for developing a masculine role."⁴⁰

The findings of this study increase the knowledge about Iranian divorced woman's experiences of post-divorce regret. However,

these findings cannot be generalized to all divorced women in other contexts and settings because of the small sample size. Future studies are recommended to be conducted in other cultures and contexts to improve the transferability of the current finding.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study showed that many of the participants were involved in multiple social, economic and support problems after divorce. Most of the participants were not able to adjust to life after divorce and, consequently, regretted their decision to divorce. Therefore, it is necessary to provide the appropriate social and economic support for these women based on the culture of the society.

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