

After-Divorce Experiences: A Case of Educated and Economically Independent Women in Chittagong City, Bangladesh

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Abstract

Divorced women in Bangladesh feel under control and excluded because of being married is an essential social norm in here and it is not easily sympathized when individuals do not conform to this norm through act of divorce. Even if a woman being educated keeps her economic independence after divorce and experiences some positive outcomes which makes divorce an experience of relief, this may not be true for her social life. She may have to develop strategies to overcome social challenges and the grief emanating from these difficulties. The kind of experiences these women face are not only influence their attitudes toward society but also affect their own feelings and self esteems. I came to see that self esteem did correlate with many factors. My finding here is minority feel grief due to facing societal attitudes whereas majority celebrates it as a way of getting relief especially in the case where women suffer severe physical and mental torture within marital relationship.

Introduction:

In recent years one of the major social trends in our family life has been observed in the rising divorce rates. Divorce make women face monumental challenge of making sense of their lives within a

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context of multiple losses and transitions (Bisagni, 1999). In Bangladesh, divorced women, in particular, feel under control and excluded. The logic behind this might be the fact that keeping up marriage is an essential social norm in our society and it is not easily sympathized when individuals do not conform to this norm through act of divorce. Even if an educated and employed woman in an urban area keeps her economic independence after divorce and experience some positive outcomes which makes divorce an experience of relief, this may not be true for her social life. She may suffer being socially stigmatized and therefore have to develop strategies to overcome social challenges and the grief emanating from these difficulties. Through the lens of literature, it has been recognized that research on various domains among divorced women's lives in Bangladesh has almost become an untouched area except for a few studies¹. In this article², my main focus is divorced women, no matter how educated³ and economically independent⁴, are not free from facing societal negative attitudes. In my account, our patriarchal social system and marriage itself are responsible for this where higher social identity is created for male and female are deemed as weaker and male-dependent. In this context, I try to explore, formal and informal strategies by which this categorize women try to conform social repercussions rather than criticize the whole system. When it comes to analyze self-esteem of divorced women to explore their feeling about divorce, my finding here is minority feel grief due to facing societal attitudes whereas majority celebrate it as a way of getting relief especially in the case where women suffer severe physical and mental torture within marital relationship. Here the reason for gaining relief is education which gives majority women aspiration to recognize their individualities. On the other hand, economic independency lead them believing that they should have equal statuses both in society and domestic spheres.

Methodology:

The overall methodology of the study is qualitative and collecting oral history by in depth interviewing. Since divorce is a quite sensitive and private topic, I was concerned to find a way to access the lived experience of the informants as much as possible. Oral history method was useful for my study as a tool to access the everyday experiences of the informants and to bring out the experiences as seen from their own perspective. My target group for the study was urban middle class⁵, educated and economically independent divorced women. The reason for choosing this category was that this class has seldom been the subject of research in Bangladesh (Parvez, 2011). I choose Chittagong city, as my field, because Chittagong is the major center of development, education and employment as Dhaka. As a result, this city has also become the center for the middle classes where they seek to fulfillment their needs and aspirations. Moreover, I choose the city as the study of my field work also based on the consideration of my familiarity with the place and thereby easy accessibility to the informants. I took 20 educated and economically independent divorced women as informants by using snowball strategy. In snowball sampling, each informant is asked to nominate some other informants who would be relevant for the purpose of the research (Denscombe, 1998). I got in contact with every informant with the help of another informant. Since, divorce is a very sensitive issue, I was very careful when contacting the informants. First I talked to them on the cell phone for long periods and tried to give them an impression of the subject matter of my study. Later I shared my plan to work on a similar sort of topics and asked their consent to participate in my study. Coincidentally, all of my informants are Muslim. I had selected informants between the age of 25 and 45 years so that different point of view based on different ages possibly come out.

Centrality of Marriage for Making Social Identity in Bangladesh:

In Bangladesh, marriage is an important social and cultural norm. It is thought that marriage is the pathways to achieve personhood with new social identity, namely husband and wife. In our society, without marriage men and women cannot, generally (in social norms), engage in sex and cannot maintain their intimate sexual and other relations (Aziz 1979; Alam 1995; Maloney, Aziz and Sarker 1991; Naher 1985; Sarker 1997; Uddin 2006). But responsibility, roles in the family and societal attitudes are not same for male and female within this new social identity. According to Kandiyoti (1988), Bangladesh belongs to *patriarchal belt*, where manipulation and subservience of women are prevalent. In our society, man's primary role is that of breadwinner and decision-maker and women's primary role is that of family caretaker, that is keepers of the family responsible for the health, education and well-being of their children and husbands. According to Kabeer (1988), the key mechanisms of the patriarchy to maintain the social control of men over women are the organization of family, kinship and marriage. In our society, patrilocal and patrilineal system posits women in subordination to men. Women's physical separation from their natal family after their marriage results in losing the control over their father's patrimony (Kandiyoti, 1988). A woman as a young bride enters her husband's household as an effectively dispossessed and subordinate individual and gains power in new place by producing male offspring. Over time, they adopt and internalize the norms of patriarchy and become experts of negotiating their life. Within this context, when a woman sought to divorce or got divorced by her husband face enormous problems in her personal as well as social life. In Bangladesh, divorce exposes both men and women to distress and stigma in their post divorce lives. But the consequences of divorce are more severe for women across class, location, and socioeconomic conditions in the post-divorce period.

For divorced women, the existed social norms within patriarchal system lead them to the exclusion from their social networks, and even sometimes by their family, because of the social stigma of divorce. Their decision to divorce makes society question their womanhood. They are often treated as a different class (a defect class) by their relatives and social circle. It is thought that it is solely women's responsibility to retain marital relationship. So when the relationship collapse, all blame goes to women. No matter how educated and economically independent they are, divorced women are not free from confronting societal attitudes and stigma. For that reason, they have to apply various strategies to cope with that situation. What types of social attitudes are imposed on divorced women and how they confront with their strategies are discussed in the next section.

Societal Attitudes and Copping Strategies:

In Bangladesh, the increasing number of divorce made it more familiar to people. However, this does not mean that negative attitudes disappeared and the divorced are free of blaming and judgmental approaches. What type of social attitude face a divorced woman is closely related to reasons for divorce. The reasons of divorce are multi-dimensional for women and societal reactions are related with those variations (Parvez, 2011). Dowry, for example, is one of the major factors for divorce. The practice of the dowry contributes in marital tensions and divorce (Alam, Saha & Ginneken, 2000). I found one women, who told me that she was blackmailed often by her husband to bring dowry from her parent's house. When she resisted it, her husband exposed him with mental torture and very often physical torture. That's why she divorced her husband. When I asked what type of social attitude she faces after her divorce, she told that hearing the news of her divorce, her younger sister's marriage proposal had been broke up! To them, her divorce indicated that her family is a defect family. Sexual incompatibility of the spouses after marriage is

another major cause of marital disruption (Acharya'2005, cited by Parvez). One informant of 32 years old told how she tried hard to explain and convince people that she wanted divorce on the ground of unhappiness emanating from lack of sexual and emotional intimacy with her ex-husband. Moreover, her parents are very religious and conservative and blamed her not to keep such level of patience to maintain marital relationship though they knew everything of her marital conflict. Furthermore, the relation between her father and mother deteriorated because they were blaming each other for her immature decision of love marriage and divorce as well. Even her family members ashamed socially because of her divorce and they prefer not to tell the others anything about divorce. Here I found religious background and religiosity of the family play an important role to shape social attitude toward divorced women.

In most accounts, people hold women responsible for a failing marriage, such sayings as —*man make houses, women make homes; a good woman is a sacrificial mother for her family; a good woman keeps her man...* ... all manifest the social expectations of women. Whether a woman was summarily divorced or sought out divorce presumably makes a difference in her perspective and responses. Our society expresses sympathy when a woman get divorce by her husband but blame her for failing to save marital relation. On the contrary, all blame goes to such a woman who divorced her husband, mainly because she violates patriarchal societal norms. Among those interviewed a big fraction of the informants, 14 women, who divorced their husband, stated that they face serious allegation from their family and acquaintances for sought out divorce. For some cases, their relation with their family was deteriorating after they moved back to their family after their divorce. They tried to find a separate house for themselves but being a divorced and single woman, they were refused to get a separate house. Therefore, many of them tried to find alternatives to maintain good relations with their family members by staying away from their families. On the other

hand 6 of my informants who divorced by their husband, stated that their story was not such different from the women who sought out divorce. At first people express their compassion toward divorced women but soon after they started to blame them. People think it is women's responsibility to keep marital relationship intact; it is women who have to sacrifice everything to keep uphold marriage. So when a marital relationship broke up, people point finger to the women. Similarly mothers who decide leave a marriage, no matter how abusive their conjugal life, are invariably stigmatized, especially if they have young children. One informant was indignant with the fact that being a divorced mother, she was deemed as incomplete or aberrant:

I perceive sound very often that I made a mistake by divorcing because I have a 5 year old child and I am supposed to set it right, with another marriage. People think in this way I will be normalized soon and become a good mother (laughs) — but do anybody ask me whether I want to or not? Or is there an eligible man who will look after my son as a father... ..

In some other cases, some women limit their presence in social gathering because of social stigma. In every sphere of life they face problem. As quotation of Tania, 28 years old, lecturer of a private university shows the attitudes that are associated with stigma emerge spontaneously in everyday interactions:

My ex-husband had no source of income and showed negligence to provide me...I gave him many chances and do something better in life. Because I was also concerned about children's future without their father. But he did not use the opportunity. Finally, I had to think of divorce. Now I was very shy in my work place; you can't imagine what people say about divorced women! even if I am at university, even if people around me are all educated, they still treat me in a different way, make me feel I am abnormal, they think now that she is divorced she can do mistaken any time... .. For this reason I pull out myself from people.

For some informants, devaluation of the divorced in society was thing of a past and therefore it was something they did not expect at all. Two informants stated their disappointment at the existing stigma when their parents warned them against a possible reaction they might face from people. One informant was telling her experiences regarding social attitudes:

My mother is an educated women, she is not a traditional women thinking those stuff, when I came delayed for a couple of times and she warned —you should be careful because our neighbors know that you got divorced, and we are here for years, be more cautious and don't subject yourself to gossips and rumors□ I was really offended when she said so, even though I say I don't care what others think, still, I guess people have a certain attitudes toward a divorced woman, I don't know how to put it but, yeah, I presume I have to consider this more and act more carefully.

Another informant articulated her resentment at someone's calling her —divorced when differentiating her from another colleague in her office, this was a sign for her to believe that —what they supposedly say was true indeed, people really label the divorced. Another informant, a Marketing Assistant, Amena, 30 years old, spoke about how she gained a vantage point upon divorce where she can analyze people and society in a more crystallized way, in her own words:

I think I start seeing realities more clearly, I truly understand my place in society, I see the looks in people eyes. Also I cannot anticipate what will be happen when I don't choose to go back to live with my parents and rent a separate flat. The work place was no different, I was working when I was married, right after my divorce, I noticed changes in people's behaviors, and I become a divorced woman so that male colleagues and boss especially treat me differently.

Trying to come to term with their experiences, the informants were searching for explanation to the attitudes people espouse. One

informant, for instance, was correlating the attitudes with education level indicating that as far as she observed people tend to have more approving attitude as their (surrounding people) education level increase. She clarify her position stating that - education gives people sense of equity by which they can explore existing discrimination against women within society. A second narrator related stigma to the socioeconomic level of people. Her suggestion was that the divorced from lower social classes must have faced more repressive behaviors because they posses little resources. Another informant recounted that she had hard times when she was asked about her marital status, because divorce is not acknowledged as a marital status in society. She also challenged the fact that society conceives divorce as a social decision that will have immediate implications on the society, and therefore, does not accept individual happiness as a ground of divorce.

Informants of my study take various informal strategies in order to avoid people's reactions as well as cope with emotional distress and demoralization. Some common behaviors emerged including not telling people about the divorce; distancing themselves from friends, the married in particular, dressing or behaving more conservatively even try to maintain a luxurious life style more than the average standard of middle class women to make a certain distance from many people just to avoid any kind of unpleasant situations. The first common behavior not telling about their divorce turned up quite often. Several women stated that they did not tell about their divorce to their colleagues, friends, customers, neighbors for a long period of time. An even more surprising finding I encountered was that one informant did not even tell her family for a while and pretend to wear an engagement ring to hide her status; fearing their immediate reactions, she informed her parents some time after divorce. This entire situation indicates that women in our society mainly hid

their divorced status in social spheres in order to avoid harassment.

Another common strategy was distancing themselves from the people around them, specifically from the married couples. Feeling outsiders and abnormal the women simply did not want to attend gatherings of the married. Some of them even suggested that married couples may feel threatened by the divorce, for the divorced are deemed as —sexually available. The following quotations from Rina, at the age of 30, a Sales Executive, summed up the underlying views behind withdrawal from people:

I concern some people make me feel like as if I were going to chase after their husbands. Normally I am not sort of person who has these weird worries but anyway I start concerning about these things.

In most of the cases women themselves worry about societal attitudes and develop their own ways of evading this, however, for a minority of women in the sample, the main driving force was their parents. The parents reminded women of the societal expectations and sanctions so that they should prepare themselves and should not feel insulted or chagrined. One informant for instance, told how she was laughing loudly yet after divorce, she tried hard to change that and became a soft spoken person. Another informant spoke of giving up wearing skirt. In some instances silence is preferred as a strategy. When asked how they react, when they are openly criticized, a minority of women stated that they simply ignore, which indicates that even though the women are indignant about the societal repercussions of their divorce, their main motivation is to conform to the society rather than criticizing the social order.

An interesting finding, in this sense, is that several women interviewed expressed disinterest in traditional views and negative attitudes towards divorced women, but paradoxically altered their behaviors in accordance with societies expectations like dressing

more conservatively, limiting their contact with male colleagues, keeping their husbands surname so that the people around would not know of their divorce. For instance, Sonia's case. At first she says-

My divorce did not affect my social relationships totally, in other words, I think I am blessed in this sense because my surrounding environment and the people around me are not ill-saying people; I was not excluded in social life. Do you know how it happens when people call someone widow? It never happened to me, nobody considered me as a threat to their marriages, and no one stigmatized me in a different way.

At the end of the interview when the question is reframed and asked her, this time she told me that she no longer wears jeans, nor comes home late even never invite her male friends. These attitudes counter the fact that she simply discredits all those previous ideas. One informant's (Mili, a Lawyer) account was quite compelling in this sense, being a lawyer and living in Chittagong, she told how it is unlikely for her to face any stigma or any attitude that imply her —sexual availability, however, through the end of the interview she stated that in an attempt to protect herself from —the male world, she did not tell her client that she was divorced and she added that she never intended to disclose it to them.

Perhaps surprisingly, people's negative attitudes are closely related with the age of the divorced women. As Nipa, a 25 year old, was blamed for her impatience and young age to lead her divorce. On her language-

Very often people blaming me saying- you had a good man, you could have been a bit more tolerant, or —this is how the new generation is; once they start earning money they think they can manage everything, —in our times we were dealing with tougher problems but we were not even considering breaking up our homes....., yes! I hear all these things too but what can I do? My ex-husband was impotent and I tried to help him by consulting

with doctors and seek medical treatment but he did not serious about the matter, rather very often he bit me seriously. At the end, I terminated the marriage!

To the contrary, when people get older they don't seem to be held accountable for their divorce. One informant, 45 year old, spoke of how she was free of any mind probing concern in their relationships with men and women in work or in their neighborhood:

After divorce I found a job in this company, the company is mostly made up of young people. The people you saw were really very kind to me; they treated me like I was their mother.

Above these findings, I came to realize that though women become well educated and they have a source of income, they are not free from societal negative attitudes regarding divorce. Rather they are suffered from distinctive way where humiliation and social rejection penetrates differently. To adapt with this situation they had to take several measures, most of the time they hide their identity as divorced women or narrow their acquaintances and wear conventional dresses. However elder women face little of this situation and tend to enjoy better status.

Self-Esteem: Grief or Relief?

Self-esteem is a term used in psychology to reflect person's overall emotional evaluation of his or her own worth. It is a judgment of oneself as well as an attitude toward the self. Self-esteem encompasses beliefs (for example, *I am competent, I am worthy*) and emotions such as triumph, despair, pride and shame (Hewit, 2009). The self-esteem is the positive or negative evaluations of the self, as in how we feel about it (Smith and Mackie, 2007). Self esteem is also an excellent indicator of divorce adjustment (Bonnington, 1988). Literature, however, presents mixed findings with respect to the positive or negative effects it might have on the self. In her literature review, Nunez (1999) documents studies which indicate

that self-esteem is lowered by divorce. On the other hand, Garvin (1988) illustrates the link between easy adjustment and self esteem as interactive and further states that —Self esteem does not only contribute to good social adjustment, but it may also help constitute-be a component of- good social emotional adjustment. In this section I tried to explore how the feeling of being divorced affect one's sense of self esteem as well as the process of reconstructing an identity independent of marriage. In my study I got mixed findings where some women repentant and perceive their divorce as a matter of grief, while there are many who feel relief after getting divorce.

In my study, I found 6 informants, though feeling guilt for either allowing injustice, abuse or causing conflicts during marriage, they could not get over their feelings and carried it into their life even after divorce. One informant saying:

You get divorced when you really feel that you lose yourself but after divorce this time you feel like a fish out of water. Like it or not, be strong or not getting divorced is being like a fish out of water in our society.

Divorce can be seen as a matter of regret when a divorced woman monologue why she married such a person or carrying his child and after then why she made decision to end that relationship. The social attitudes, which I discussed previous section forced her to realize that her decision over marriage is not right which drop her confidence to a lower level. As one of my informant expressed:

Charge him (ex-husband) would be the easiest thing instead I chose the tough way; I turned to myself and questioned where I wronged, I thought many things, the point I reached was that it was my fault. I am not good at choosing the mate that I can be happy with; I blown up a bit and I start thinking that I will never have a proper relationship! If I let myself, I may fall in love and break again, besides I have a sonnow I haven't

regained my confidence yet, nor my beliefs in marriage. I think, the divorce opened a wound and it doesn't seem to be mending easily.

Another informant saying:

I have done everything I've wanted to in life, why I can't keep my marriage alive? I mean even the uneducated, ignorant, poverty-stricken women are able to keep their marriages alive and I, as a successful and strong woman, will not be able to do this. How is that possible? I just could not come to grips with it. I just kept blaming myself for years.

Even though divorce was an end to the tribulations faced during the marriage, we find there, for some women, divorce and its aftermath were no dissimilar. Despite the amount of time passed since the legal separation, the divorce was still important element in their thinking and shaping of life. In this regard, some divorced women in my study find nobody to stand beside them whom with they can share their life. So, getting divorce or not reflect no difference to them. They start to blame themselves and spent their rest of the life with such a pessimistic way.

On the contrary, for many women divorce is a desirable event. Despite lots of negative aspects evolving around divorce, the interviews to these women showed that it is also possible to gain positive sense out of a break up. When asked about any possible gains they commented that they experienced self-growth in addition to the relief in the aftermath of the divorce. The relief became more significant especially by women who were subject to domestic violence within their conjugal life. For these women, marriage itself was a source of grief while divorce was a way out of the physical sufferings. For these women, the first thing is gaining self-esteem back in order to restore their rights. As is articulated by one informant:

I lost my self-respect; right after divorce —I want to see how people are behaving with me, I want to test whether I am a person such as

this man (refers her ex-husband) describes. My family did not understand, they even discouraged me, but I went any way. And I saw that I am not a worthless person. That was the beginning, from then on I started taking meditation courses, I learned how to behave with my family and with people around me, of course, and all these things helped me to pull through.

For educated women marital satisfaction is not solely achieved through monetary means (Kavas, 2010). When a husband denied his wife's freedom by all means, restricted her rights and tried to hegemonies her showing macho attitude, the women may seek her life's control back again giving divorce. What was important for these women was recognition of their individualities. Being highly educated and employed they tend to believe that they should have distinctive statutes both in society and domestic sphere. Despite living through difficult experiences, constraints for divorce, the women do not consider themselves as victim, they simply look for meaning in things other than their marriages. As is revealed by the following quotations:

Divorce altered me in a very positive way. I was not horrified at all, for me it was regain control of my life. Many things I did that I never could have done in married life; I went to language course, did two masters, I was accepted for the project which was very important for me. Yes I had periods of depression but they were while I was married to him, not after divorce.

Because it is seems that involving too much with marital conflicts and problems of kids, women sometimes forget that they have a life of their own. So divorce in this sense may serve to discovery of oneself. Nahrin, a lecturer of reputed public university, stated that divorce for her was enlightening in that she discovered herself; clarify her expectation from life, from a marriage and a partner that she can love:

I to some extent gave up everything, I was totally dependent on him, for example I was not making any preparations for students

before going into class, I was not even concerned about if the students understanding or not, I was just doing my job and immediately returning home, doing quarrel each other,From now on I am very determined not to allow somebody to trample on me, because I have my self confidence now, I have enough confidence to express myself.

All of these narratives, I came to realize that many women achieved their self-growth because of their education and employment. For them divorce brought a satisfactory relief in their life. It was the end of all those problems they were coping with in the past. Although they admitted they have ongoing problems or difficulties emanating from divorce, they, nevertheless, think that the divorce is a new beginning. They expressed their appreciation of discovering new avenues and interests, making their own decisions, controlling their own finances. In this context, though being occupied with problems and challenges, getting divorce may have helped many women to liberate themselves from the constraints of their particular marriages and helped them discover a whole new world.

Conclusion:

In this article, I try to represent after divorce experiences of educated and economically independent women in Chittagong city, Bangladesh. By selecting this type of women, I try to explore that neither higher education nor good occupations eliminate the stigma of divorce from women. They may not face problem in a same way as other women⁶ do but their sufferings are equally considerable. In my research, women developed wide ranges of survival strategies (such as hiding their divorce identity, not going to wedding ceremony, keeping their marital surname etc.) to cope up various difficulties and challenges which they face in their everyday life. The kind of experiences these women face are not only influence their attitudes toward society but also affect their

own feelings and self-esteem. Many women after divorce, attempt to redefine their identities and work toward reinstating their self-esteem. While for some, self esteem was hurt during marriage, for some other informants the act of divorce in itself was a mean toward regaining it. All in all, for a minority of informants divorce caused grief while for many it was a relief even though they had to face difficulties after divorce.

Notes

¹ There are some works which deal with after divorce various experiences of Bangladeshi women. These studies are not exclusively explored the self esteem and other aspects which I discussed but they have some points. Examples of these are.. Ahmed, N. (2007). *Divorced Women in Bangladesh: Psychological and Economic Conditions*; Parvez, Kazi Nadira (2011) *Social Changes and Women-Initiated Divorce in Dhaka, Bangladesh: Gaining or Losing Power?* Pothan, S. (1986). *Divorce: Its causes and Consequences in Hindu Society*, Shaikh, K. (1998). *The Social and Demographic Correlates of Divorce in Rural Bangladesh* etc.

² This article is an extended part of my research dissertation titled- "Divorce in the Muslim women's Life: Observed in the Family Domain of Bangladesh" as a partial fulfillment of my BSS (Honor's) examination. All data articulated to this article are collected from the 3 months long field work which I conducted for that research work. I would like to express gratitude to my supervisor Dr. Ahmed Fazle Hasan Chowdhury, Professor (retired), Department of Anthropology, Chittagong University who provided me sufficient guideline, anthropological insights and encouragements. I would also like to thank my teacher Sadaf Noor E Islam, Associate professor and chair,

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- ³ Here I used the term educated women to refer those who completed their graduation. In my study, 10 out of 20 were completed their graduation, 8 of them were post-graduated and 2 informants were completed their PhD.
- ⁴ I am aware that being employed is not always indicated women as economically independent. There are many women in our society who have very good position in working sector but do not have power to take their economic decision independently. But in my research, I found all, 20 informants are employed as well as taking their decisions and they referred themselves as economically independent. So I use the term economically independent to refer them.
- ⁵ I use the tem according to Weberian sense. In Weberian socio-economic terms, the middle class is the broad group of people in contemporary society who fall socio-economically between the working class and upper class. See Weber, Max, 1978, *Economy and Society (2 vols)* (edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich) Berkeley: University of California Press.
- ⁶ Here referring other I indicate those women who are financially dependent to others (Usually male members of their family) and are not as much educated as my informants.

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