

Demanding Partners And Divorce As A “New Normal”: Accounts From South Punjab, Pakistan

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Abstract

The phenomenon of divorce is getting more attention of the scholars of social science in the context of Pakistan with the changing socio-cultural dynamics of the country. This study aims to investigate the interplay of demands from the marriage partners and divorce. Further, it investigates that how the perception of the society is changing about the phenomenon of divorce in South Punjab, Pakistan in the context of modernity and attaining social acceptance.¹ For this purpose, qualitative approach of inquiry was employed. In-depth interview method was used for data collection. Data was analyzed through deductive thematic analysis and the findings of the study showed that body shaming, demand of companionship and availability, desire to access partner’s social media, commitment failures, and dowry were among the demanding behaviors. Further, personal acceptance, family support, and support from friendship networks were the drawn themes related to social acceptance of divorce.

Key words: Divorce, Perceptions, Social Acceptance, South Punjab, Pakistan.

Introduction

Marriage constitutes an institution of considerable significance within society intricately woven into the fabric of culture, religion, and social contexts (Platt, 2017). Traditionally, marriage encompasses mutual dependence, familial responsibilities, and societal pressures (Thomas et al., 2017). In contemporary society, the fundamental meaning of marriage has been altered as a result of significant changes in social contexts, including increased freedom, the evolution of personal values, and the influence of modern trends (Malik et al., 2024). One of the results of such alteration is increasing divorce rate. The increasing divorce rate is becoming a commonplace phenomenon, with individuals perceiving it as a regular aspect of societal dynamics rather than a cause for concern (Uprety, 2024). This research examines the perceptions of partners with elevated expectations and needs and how these elements contribute to the rising divorce rate in contemporary society particularly in South Punjab, Pakistan.

Partners with high demands significantly contribute to the rising divorce rates within society and are a primary factor in relationship difficulties (Khan et al., 2019; Wagner, 2020; Mohlatlole et al., 2018). This phenomenon arises from their elevated expectations for meeting

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personal needs, their requests for emotional support, and their persistent pursuit of approval, often without regard for their partner's circumstances (Jeong et al., 2022). The contemporary demands in today's culture have diminished the traditional concepts of love and support, encompassing emotional care, shared responsibilities, and personal growth (Steen et al., 2024). In light of the prevailing circumstances, when partners perceive that their needs are not being met according to their expectations, they may experience increased stress, which can ultimately lead to the deterioration of their marital relationship and the consideration of divorce (Abreu-Afonso et al., 2022). This conversion illustrates the significant societal shift towards prioritizing individualism and personal happiness, wherein self-actualization is increasingly regarded as more important than maintaining marital stability (Kislev, 2018).

From an anthropological perspective, the emergence of these new trends reflects the evolving relationships and patterns of marriage within the society. The expectations surrounding marriage are evolving continuously as gender roles become increasingly flexible (Fox, 1983; Awan & Shoaib, 2023). A successful marriage fundamentally relies on collaborative financial management and the fulfillment of familial responsibilities (Samadi et al., 2021); however, contemporary perspectives increasingly emphasize emotional satisfaction and personal compatibility as central components. The recent modification has altered the expectations that partners hold for one another, and when these expectations are not met, it consequently results in conflict. In the contemporary hybrid context, divorce is regarded as a typical reaction when the needs of partners remain unfulfilled, and it is perceived as a final recourse (Bruning, 2022).

This research seeks to examine the demanding behaviors exhibited by partners and the ways in which these behaviors contribute to the prevalence of separation in contemporary marital relationships. Further, the study also investigates that how and in which ways the divorce is getting social acceptance increasingly in the perspectives of separated couples and their families? How do the couples perceive the phenomenon of divorce? And how do they expect their lives to be after getting separated. The study is not about factors as already a lot of literature has been produced on factors and socio-cultural and psychological impacts etc. However, in the ever-changing society, it is important to study the process that how the phenomenon of divorce is getting changed from a setback to a somehow normal incident in the people's lives. The question of "how" is answered through narratives of the respondents.

Methodology

The primary data for the study was obtained from different localities in Multan, South Punjab. In this ethnographic investigation, the researcher employed snowball and purposive sampling methodologies to recruit the participants for data collection. Researchers gathered data from 31 participants using interview guide. The age spectrum of participants spans from 23 to 48 years. This investigation was exclusively grounded in qualitative methodologies; consequently, the researchers engaged in in-person interviews and employed direct observation techniques during the data collection phase. Among the 31 participants, 14 were male and 17 were female. The interviews were conducted in the native language and subsequently transcribed into the English language. Subsequent to the successful data collection, researchers employed the deductive thematic analysis methodology utilizing Atlas.ti 9 qualitative analysis software.

Results and Analysis

We have categorized the findings into two major themes and further sub-themes: i) demanding behavior and divorce, ii) Social acceptance of divorce. The findings and discussion answer the major research questions that how behavioral patterns of demanding partners contribute to the phenomenon of separation, and how the divorce is getting normalized in the perspectives of

the separated couples and their families, and finally, what path the separated couples follow afterwards.

Theme 1: Demanding Behavior and Divorce

Body Shaming: The phenomenon of body shaming is widely observed during interviews especially from the husbands and in-laws who consider their wives and daughter in-laws as lazy, obese, and less focused towards maintaining their bodies. One of the female participants, namely N, aged 37, described that:

We are body shamed by our in-laws, and these comments from in-laws distract the attention of husbands from us, but what will happen if we start doing the same? Then, they would know that how do we feel after listening to their comments. To be honest, I would feel a lot more comfortable with this question if the sexes were reversed. Then everyone would realize his/her importance very well. Husbands and in-laws are very demanding in this sense. One day, I could not control my patience, and I replied to my mother-in-law with the same words that she used. My husband heard that, and on the spot, he divorced me. I left his house and am now living with my mother, where nobody passes any comment about my body, and I am happy. I believe divorced life is better than married life.

This excerpt highlights the emotional and psychological impact of body-shaming and demands to be attractive within the context of marriage by in-laws. The speaker reflects on how such remarks not only hurt her self-esteem but also affect their relationship with her spouse, drawing attention to the power dynamics and gender roles at play in these situations. Through this expert, respondents collectively claim that females who are facing body shaming from their in-laws bear a lot of ignorance on part of their spouse, and these comments from the in-laws develop emotional distancing. The participant feels incompetent and belittled when their in-laws insult her, and the only way she can break it is by having the in-laws undergo the same kind of comments. The participant's statement, "The sexes were reversed," shows her wish to make her in-laws realize their actions and feel the pain she bears from such comments. The respondent claims that after her divorce, she lives happily, and now nobody passes a body shaming comment on her. She further claims that divorced life is better than married life. These types of responses show that people take divorce as a normal thing instead of a disturbing event in their lives. In the era of modernization, many people are not ready to bear those types of relationships in which they are not satisfied (Joseph & Anovung, 2018). The people view divorce as a normal thing, not a failure, and focus on improving their lives (Waite, 2002).

Demand of Companionship and Availability: Many respondents responded the lack of cooperation from the partner with respect to providing proper companionship and their physical presence enough to make the relationship work in a better way.

One of the female respondents, namely R, aged 31, said that:

He always had time for his friends but never for me. Most of the time, through his Facebook status, I found out that he would be late to come home, and it was useless for me to wait for him at dinner. So, why would I live with him? I chose the divorce option because I want to live independently, and this is quite soothing for me now.

The excerpt reveals feelings of neglect and emotional distance within the relationship driven by the partner's prioritization of social connections over the relationship. The participant feels sidelined as her partner consistently makes him available for friends but fails to offer the same attention to her wife. The situation is worsened by the fact that the participant learns about the

partner's plans not directly through communication but through his Facebook status updates. It indicates a lack of direct meaningful communication which can erode trust and emotional intimacy in a relationship; therefore, the partner demands a divorce and believes that it's better alone than to live with this type of partner who does not care about the spouse. The participant's disappointment in waiting for her partner at dinner reflects the erosion of traditional rituals like sharing meals that are often important for maintaining emotional bonds and communication within a relationship. In this vein, social exchange theory by Levinger (1976), provides a very similar analysis of the decision of divorce, and according to this theory, one partner believes that he/she can live a better life after the divorce. Many couples turn toward the dissolution of their marriage with the same perceptions in their minds in order to make their lives easy. As Bruning (2022), states that: one should initiate the divorce if the one wants to improve the life.

Desire to Access Partner's Social Media: Social media has become a regular part of the people's lives. It is impacting a lot in everyday life activities of the masses. Demand of accessing social media accounts of life partners is becoming a bone of contention now-a-days in married couples. Many respondents also responded about their partners to be involved in conversations with their illicit relationships on social media while sitting beside them.

One of the respondents, namely B, aged 26, gave this statement:

Since the day I got married, I had doubts on my husband that he might have illicit relations with someone. After observing him on many occasions, I started to keep a check on him. I also asked for password of his phone which he refused angrily. At that point, my doubts were intensified. I didn't mean to open his phone without his permission but he should have been agreed if he had no such thing to hide from me. It is not the only incident which I am mentioning here. Many such incidents have happened throughout our married life of 3 years. After being neglected for a long time, now I am thinking to file dissolution of marriage in the court.

Usage of social media decreases the quality and quantity of time among partners and this way, it affects marital relationships (Almatalka et al., 2023). Through this excerpt and many other responses of interviews, it showed that in marital relationships conflict may arise because of either the extensive use of social media or of demands from the partners about accessing social media accounts of each other. Further, the social media has also become a source of keeping a check on each other's activities on part of the partners.

Commitment Failures: One of my respondents claim that most of the partners are failed to fulfill the commitments. She further shared that:

He can't keep me if he can't keep his words. He said so many things before marriage and I came to my in-laws with many dreams. But everything scattered overtime when he could not keep his words. So, I decided that I could not live with him anymore because he was a dishonest person. I got divorce from the court and now I am living independently and I am happy to choose this option.

The excerpt above highlights the participant's disappointment and frustration due to her partner's failure to fulfill his promises. As time goes by, the partner's inability to keep those promises results in feelings of betrayal ultimately leading to divorce. The participant asserts that failing to fulfill promises is the primary reason for divorce. In most cases, a partner's relationship is based on hopes and dreams; therefore, feelings of betrayal significantly affect divorce. The breakdown of trust results in disappointment and undermines the emotional foundation of marriage. The participant's statement, "He cannot keep me if he cannot keep his words," indicated her critical focus on the importance of hope and trustworthiness in a

marriage. Throughout the discussion with the respondents, many of them just focused on their importance, believing that their demands should be fulfilled at any cost. They also tend to consider divorce as a positive decision in their lives. Modernization theory advocates that traditional values and old customs get to change as societies evolve and convert into modern cultures (Goorha, 2010). In this modern world, everyone wants freedom and want to tackle situations according to one's own wishes. modernization theory suggests in the perspectives of marriage and divorce that marital roles should be changed as society evolves in the paradigm of socio-economic development and educational attainment increased (Haferkamp & Smelser, 1992).

Dowry: Dowry is one of the common and deep-rooted social issues that prevails in the society and often leads to the end of relationships even before marriage. Regarding this issue, one of my respondent said that:

My parents already did so much for me and gave me a handful of dowries at the time of my marriage to shut the mouths of my in-laws. But instead of shutting their mouths, they opened it way more widely. The whole idea behind marrying me was my job and status. So, if I am to stay there just because of my job then why would I stay with them. I can live alone with my handsome income; therefore, I decided to take divorce and two years ago, I got separated from him and now I am living in a personal house with my children and I am happy with them.

This excerpt reveals the speaker's deep frustration and resentment regarding dowry expectations from her in-laws and her economic contribution in household. The participant highlights the different layers of exploitation, societal pressures, and how her in-laws demand more and more. The respondent's statement, “her parents provide a handful of dowries” shows that it's a cultural practice in many societies, and most people do this to ensure goodwill and make strong connections between the families. However, sometimes this dowry does not resolve the conflicts but increase the in-law's expectations. The line “they opened their mouths way more widely” symbolically demonstrates that her in-law's greed and demands increased after the marriage. The participant's further statement, “The whole idea behind marrying me was my job status,” highlights her value based on her economic contribution instead of her personal qualities or sincerity. The statement “to shut the mouths of my in-laws” indicates that her parents were aware of potential demands and attempted to preempt them, yet their efforts were ultimately going in vain. This highlights the emotional and financial strain placed on families due to dowry customs, perpetuating cycles of exploitation and inequality. In the final remarks, the participant claims that if my income is everything to them and on the basis of my income, they consider me a part of the family in their house, then I think it is better to live alone instead of living with those greedy people. Therefore, she claims to get separated from her husband and lives independently with her children happily. These changes show that society is moving towards modernization, and individuals of the society emphasize that separation is not a big deal if partners are unhappy or do not fulfill the expectations of each other (Dommaraju, 2016).

Theme 2: Social Acceptance of Divorce

Personal Acceptance: The study finds that an interesting feature that was present amongst divorced people was the acceptance of the truth that they are no longer in this relationship. After passing through all challenges of life, now they can breathe in the air of freedom. Freedom or liberty to a person means that they are now making their own choices. Few of the respondents also claimed that they used to always thank the God for making them separated from their partners.

One of our male respondents, namely E, aged 27, said that:

I still remember the feelings when I signed the divorce paper. It was like someone had lit the bulb in the darkness, and now I can see the view easily. I feel that I am released from the cage, and now I can spend my life according to my own choices, not bounded by anyone.

The respondent's description of signing the divorce papers reflects a profound sense of liberation and emotional clarity. By comparing the experience to a light being switched on in the darkness, he conveys that the divorce brought about a new level of awareness allowing him to see his life and circumstances more clearly. This metaphor of illumination suggests that, prior to the divorce, the respondent may have felt confused, constrained, or unable to understand their own desires and situation within the marriage fully. The feeling of being "released from the cage" symbolizes a deeper emotional and psychological confinement experienced during the marriage. This suggests that the relationship may have involved control, limitations, or feelings of entrapment, where the respondent's autonomy and personal freedom were compromised. The phrase, "now I can spend my life according to my own choices" highlights the significance of personal agency and independence, emphasizing how the divorce enabled the respondent to reclaim control over his own life decisions and pursue a path that aligns with his desires, free from the influence or expectations of his ex-partner. The respondent's perspective reflects a positive emotional transition after divorce, where the respondent considered that the act of separation is not a failure but rather a step toward self-realization and empowerment. The respondent's experience shows the contradiction between the traditional narratives of divorce as solely painful or traumatic. Instead, he considered it as a necessary step to achieve personal freedom and growth. According to Malik et al., (2024), divorced individuals feel freedom and improve their life experiences because they are free from domestic abuse and focused on personal development. This can be understood through the perspective of cultural change. It explains that through the advent of cultural change, people change their ideas, values, customs, and traditions as well, and they take these things as modern changes to ease their lives (Varnum & Hampton, 2021).

Family Support: The support provided from the family in case of divorce was crucial specifically for the females.

One of our female respondents, namely S, aged 31, said that:

My parents were the ones who supported me fully to be separated from my husband because only parents feel the pain of their children. After the divorce, I felt that if I had spent a little more time with my ex-husband, I would have become a psychological patient. Therefore, I think it is the best decision of my life to get a divorce from that wild human being. Taking divorce is better than living with an illiterate person.

The respondent in this excerpt presents a clear and emphatic view of her divorce as the best decision of her life, strongly justified by the emotional and psychological impact she felt that marriage was inflicting on her. The statement begins by emphasizing her parent's crucial role in supporting the decision to leave the partner. The respondent credits her parents with understanding her pain on a deep emotional level, positioning them as a key source of comfort and guidance. It emphasizes that parental support is invaluable, particularly in navigating such challenging life decisions. The respondent's reference to potentially becoming a 'psychological patient' if she had remained in the marriage indicates a severe mental and emotional strain she went through. This implies that the relationship had a highly detrimental effect on her well-

being, leading her to a breaking point where divorce became not just a preference but a necessity for preserving her mental health. This sense of relief and self-preservation is a prominent theme in the excerpt where leaving the marriage is portrayed as an act of self-defense against emotional harm. Furthermore, the respondent's characterization of her ex-husband as a 'wild human being' and 'illiterate' suggests deep dissatisfaction and incompatibility in the relationship. Overall, the respondent's excerpt reflects a strong stance that divorce was a means of escaping a harmful situation, reinforced by the unwavering support of her parents. The excerpt highlights the importance of mental health, emotional support, and personal growth with divorce which is being framed as a positive, even life-saving, decision in the face of an untenable marriage. In this advanced era, most people are aware of their rights; therefore, they continuously question traditional values and they make decisions that align with their personal choices including the decision of marriage or divorce (Abalos, 2017). Modernization perspective shows how the concept of marriage is changing with the advent of modernization, and people feel happy and compatible with the contemporary concept of marriage instead of traditional marriage commitments (Cuno, 2015).

According to a male respondent, namely H, aged 33:

If I had a bottle of poison in my one hand and the choice to reunite with my ex-wife on the other hand, I definitely would drink the poison happily because she is very stubborn and rude to me and my parents also. Even I am not going to that city where my ex-wife lives, so that I may have no chance to see her again. My whole family is with me regarding this decision.

The respondent in this excerpt expresses extreme aversion toward the idea of reuniting with his ex-wife using a vivid and dramatic statement to illustrate the depth of his resentment. By stating that he would "happily drink the poison" rather reuniting with his ex-wife, the respondent conveys not just dislike but a profound emotional rejection of any possibility of reconciliation. This indicates that the experience of being with his ex-wife was deeply negative to the extent that it evoked feelings of extreme discomfort or even emotional distress. The characterizations of the ex-wife as stubborn and rude to the respondent and his parents propose that conflict within the marriage went beyond personal disagreements and extended to family dynamics. The respondent also emphasizes his determination to avoid contact with the ex-wife stating that he would not visit the city where she lives under any circumstances. The idea of no chance to interact with her reinforces the respondent's clear boundary and commitment to moving forward away from a relationship that he views as toxic and harmful. Overall, this excerpt shows that the respondent's divorce was perceived as a necessary escape from a negative and perhaps emotionally challenging relationship. The excerpt reflects a sense of personal liberation and finality in his decision to avoid further interaction with his ex-wife seeing it as a means of self-preservation. As Crowley (2018) said that after getting a divorce, most people believe that they have saved themselves from the bad times and are free from the cage which is why divorce benefits them.

Support from Friendship Networks: Social and emotional support from friendship circles is very important to proceed with life further after divorce or even when the things are getting towards it. As one of the female respondents, namely I, aged 35, stated that:

The behavior of my husband was getting extremely negative after every passing day. It seemed as if he was interested in someone else. I used to remain very busy due to the nature of my job and this thing was always a problem between us. I couldn't understand

what did he want because whenever I tried to compensate the problem of my presence in the home, he used to pick something else to create arguments. In all this mess, I used to remain sad and felt lonely. One of my friends noticed it and she helped me a lot to get out of the relationship. Initially, I hesitated to accept separation from him but later on, I myself put this idea of divorce to him which was suggested by my friend and my x-husband got agreed.

This excerpt shows two interesting things. One is the, act of putting the idea of divorce to the husband of the respondent by herself and her husband being agreed to it showed the settlement being agreed upon amicably which is not the tradition in Pakistani society. The marriage, most of the times, ends with many episodes of conflicts and usually it terminates in fits of anger, by the involvement of the family or through the court. The second noticeable thing is the help provided by the friendship networks to reach the decision of divorce if the life is not being spent smoothly. It shows that the friendship networks are vital to such understanding about divorce that it may be the solution to the problems of marital life if these are not sorted out by any other way.

Conclusion

In the contemporary world, most societies preferred more individualistic values, and this individualistic perspective preferred personal satisfaction which leads to their social acceptance collectively. The phenomenon of divorce is also based on personal satisfaction which is communally getting its acceptance in the locale. The study has discussed through personal narratives that how the demanding behavior from the marriage partners is facilitating divorce which is further leading towards its social acceptance. Additional qualitative studies are also required on this topic as the society is rapidly passing through social change related to family life.

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