

# General Health and Alienation Status of Divorced Women in Bangladesh

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper is part of a broader research study on “Psycho-social and Economic Conditions of Divorced Women in Bangladesh” conducted by the author. The study tries to explore the general health and alienation status of divorced women of Bangladesh using two scales namely General Health Questionnaire and Alienation developed by Goldberg and Hiller, 1979, and Kureshi and Dutt, 1979 in order to assess the health and alienation status. These scales measured on somatic symptoms, anxiety and insomnia, social dysfunction, severe depression, despair, disillusionment, psychological vacuum, unstructured universe and narcissism. The findings of the study revealed that only 5.5 per cent divorced women are normal. Among the 200 divorced women 31.0 per cent had all kinds of psychiatric problems. All most all (94.5 per cent) divorced women had alienation problem. The researcher drawn two hypotheses firstly, divorced women who are working are psychologically depressed than that the women who are not. Secondly, women who are divorced by their spouses have experienced greater sense of alienation implying that self divorcees are not greater alienated. Chi-square and t test has been used to prove the hypotheses. Results indicate in first hypothesis is that there is no significant difference at the level of psychological depression. The second hypothesis was statistically significant indicating that self-divorcees are less alienated than the divorced were initiated by their spouses (the women who were divorced by their spouse).*

**Key Words:** Marriage, Divorce, Women, Alienation

## INTRODUCTION

Marriage is a legal relationship between a man and a woman. Though it is a legal contract in almost all societies, it is also a social relationship.

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Indeed, in all societies, marriage is generally social. It is relatively a stable relationship between man and woman including social norms evolved for having children. It is an old institution, common throughout most of the civilized world. Traditionally, marriage was more than a linkage of two individuals, and even now. In our culture, girls actually marry the whole family. The psychological framework views marriage as an occurrence that makes it possible to have a close intimate relationship with a number of the opposite sex. In addition, the case for early marriage lies in the fact that the nature of each spouse is such that it gives rise to a congenial relationship between husband and wife unlike in the case of late marriages when the man and woman will have developed set attitudes. But from the physiological point of view Velde (1976) maintains that marriage is the permanent form of monogamous erotic relationship. Sexual urges can't be ignored from marriage. It is one of the marital and duties.

Like marriage, divorce is a universal phenomenon. It is a socially sanctioned arrangement whereby marriage is formally terminated and the family group dissolved (Bertrand, 1967). It is practiced in most societies but varies in the conditions that must be met, the sanctions it if's, the frequency with which it is used. The disposition of and responsibility for the care of children, the disposition if family property and effects, the status assigned to divorced persons, and the rituals, procedure and ceremonies that legalize it. The magnitude and trends of divorce may also differ from one society to another and from one religion to another religion. And also, the perceptions of divorce are not similar in many Countries. For example, in countries like United States, Australia and some European countries, the rates of divorce are high as compared with other countries. The problem of divorce is much more seven in those countries. In fact, marital bonds in those countries are not generally strong. Moreover, the sacramental aspects of marriage are not found in those western countries. In fact, marriage is absolutely a civil contract. So dissolution of marriage like divorce can take place on certain grounds.

In Asia, the rates of divorce have not been increasing rapidly in many countries due to several reasons. In a country like India, among Hindus, marriage is a sacrament. Though, divorce is permitted according to the Hindu Marriage Act 1955, the rate of divorce is increasing only slowly. Some cases, divorce are prohibited according to their internal customs and values. But in the Muslim community in allover the world, divorce is permitted according to their respective personal and state laws. However, it varies from country to country. The conditions under which divorce is granted vary from painless procedure to long drawn out, traumatic

experiences etc. In extended family structures, where the individual is surrounded by a large group of kin and his Status is well defined and protected, divorce involves little change in regular behavior and hardly any emotional upset. In a society where there is a strong emphasis on attachments within the conjugal family unit, divorce is likely to mean emotional shock, social stigma, and economic problems for at least one if not both spouses, as well as for children (Bertrand, 1967). Marriage is not only an erotic harmony. But a union of many sided ever-developing non- erotic functions of affection. a community of traits, and feelings of interests, aliening conman, a probability of shared parenthood and often an economic upon.

It is a fact that in most cases, divorce precipitates problems to both the partners though the degree and nature of problems differ. But the problems are more severe for women than men because of the social cultural circumstances. Society is generally male-dominated. The male counterparts irrespective of religion, castes, and creeds, dominate women in the society. Women are vulnerable in general, and divorced women in particular in our society. Problems of divorced women start during the process of divorce ad continue till their death if the remarriages do not take place. There are several issues, which are associated with divorce. Omen like maintenance, custody of minor children, future life, sexual and social needs etc. As a human being, she has the right for economic social, emotional help from the family and the society. In our general social customs, husband is the breadwinner of the family. Wife's responsibilities arc towards rearing the children and maintaining household activities.

According to every religion, it is the duty of the wife to please her husband properly. Otherwise, the purpose of marriage will not be fulfilled. In Muslim Religion too males dominate the females and the religion upholds the husbands. Moreover, the personal laws regulate personal matters like, marriage, divorce etc. Some laws are against the women and in favor of men. Men are taking advantages by depriving women of their rights. Indeed, it is invariably the law that deprives women. Women's identity after divorce in our society usually changes. They are considered as divorced women. Immediately after divorce, she needs support primarily for sustenance. Who will give this support, if nothing had been provided by the husband? If parents are not in a position to look after them, where will these women go for the fulfillment of basic needs? Apart from physical needs, these women have sexual, social and emotional needs. If the family and society do not look after these women, their problems will remain unabated till their death.

In Bangladesh, women are mostly dependent on their male counterparts for the fulfillment of basic needs. But the situation of urban women is somewhat different. Due to urban socio-economic conditions, women are working outside their home as paid workers. They interact with other people outside, of the family. Women are acquiring new knowledge, technology and skills. They can determine what is good or bad and have their own likes and dislikes. Traditional norms and customs have been changing substantially. Sometimes urban women do not bother the domination by their husbands. Women have a lot of limitation in the process of divorce among Muslims in Bangladesh. A husband can divorce his wife at his own will without the intervention of court through the Arbitration Council but women cannot. Though it has been said that marriage is a civil contract, there is no strict provision for marriage registration. There is also no provision for the maintenance of divorced women. The provision of maintenance is only for minor children of the divorced women. However, in few a cases, divorced women are getting proper maintenance from their spouses. The structure of Bangladeshi family is mostly a joint one. But, urban family is mostly a single one; usually women can take shelter in their parent's houses. But for these women, shelter is not sufficient when social, psychological and emotional needs are grossly denied.

## **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The main objective is to know the health conditions of divorced women. In this line, the following objectives are framed;

1. To understand the psychiatric problems of divorced women and
2. To examine the alienation status of divorced women.,

## **HYPOTHESES OF THE STUDY**

The following hypotheses have been formulated with the help of a review of literature and consultations with different experts on the field of the study.

1. Divorced women who are not working are psychologically depression the divorced women who are working,
2. Women who are divorced by their spouses have experienced greater sense of alienation implying that self divorcees are not greater alienated,

## **Methodology**

Two hundred divorced women were purposively selected from four organizations dealing with divorced women. Two scales were administered in order to find out the psychiatric problems and alienation problems. They are as follows;

### **General Health Questionnaire**

The 28 items of G.H.Q (Goldberg and Hiller, 1979) consisted of 4 sub-scales: somatic symptoms: anxiety and insomnia, social dysfunction and severe depression. A score was derived for each of the sub-scales and the total G.H.Q. score was then found. The scaled version of G.H.Q was intended for studies in which an investigation required more information than was provided by a single severity score. This questionnaire is a scaled version of the 60 item self-administered screening questionnaire designed for use in consulting settings aimed at detecting those with a diagnostic psychiatric disorder (Goldberg. 1972). It concerned itself with two major classes of phenomenon: inability to carry out one's normal health functions and appearance of new phenomenon of a distressing nature. It was a quick and easy method to identify possible psychiatric cases' in the community. As a screening device, it gave reliable information at the first stage screening process in the community mental health services. Subjects were asked to respond to the question in terms of their present and recent complaints, not those that they had in the past. Responses of the subjects to each question were considered on a four-point scale. This was a scale, which covered health problems mainly psychiatric problems of human beings. The scale was a comprehensive one which has been widely used on both clinical and non-clinical population. The scoring method used was (0-0-1-1). Scoring interpretations of the GHQ category A if an individual score was 0 (not at all), B: 0 (not more than usual), C: 1 (rather more than usual), D: 1 (much more than usual). Then an individual score obtained on a particular scale was compared to the cut off point of 4. Those who obtained the cut off point and above were said to have an inclination in that category.

### **Alienation Scale**

The Alienation Scale (Kureshi and Dutt, 1979) comprised of 21 items to be answered by agreeing to one of the four alternative response categories according to the intensity of feeling. It measured five factors like despair,

disillusionment, psychological vacuum, unstructured universe and narcissism. The items, which had to be answered against always, often, sometimes and never, were scored as 4, 3, 2 and 1 respectively, while for rest of the items (3, 12, 18 and 21) it was in the reverse direction 1, 2, 3 and 4. The scale was based on several scales measuring the dimension of the validity of which had already been established. The items in the scale represented the extracted factors, and so the validity of the scale was self-evident and split-half reliability = .85 (N = 100). The scoring method was based on Median split factor. For example, the highest score of Alienation scale was 84. The Median of this score was 42. Those who obtained 42 and about scored were said to be having a sense of alienation.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To find out whether the divorced women had any somatic symptom or not, the researcher had administered seven questions. It is seen from the above table that when the question was asked that whether divorced women were in perfectly well and good health, 104 (52.0 per cent) stated that they are perfectly well and good health. Out of 200 divorced women, 103 (51.5 per cent) felt the need for a good tonic and 98 (49.0 per cent) felt rundown and out of sorts. The highest number of divorced women (126 or 63.0 per cent) felt hot or cold spells. Regarding feeling ill, 96 (48.0 per cent) had felt ill. As many as 102 (51.0 per cent) and 106 (53.0 per cent) had felt pains in head and tightness or pressure in head respectively. It is assumed by the researcher that because of short span of marital life more than half of the divorced women were not physically well. It is natural that when divorced women were not socially well, it would affect on their physical health.

Divorced women's anxiety and insomnia were also investigated by using seven questions. It is evident from the study that divorced women had anxiety and insomnia. Out of 200 divorced women, 159 (79.5 per cent) were nervous and strung up. Only 41 (20.5 per cent) were not nervous and strung up all the time. As many as 155 (77.5 per cent) and 156 (78.0 per cent) were constantly under strain and getting edgy and bad tempered respectively. As many as 148 (74.0 per cent), and 149 (74.5 per cent) had lost sleep over worry and difficulty in sleeping respectively. A majority of the divorced women (151 or 75.5 per cent and 149 or 74.5 per cent) were scared or panicky for no reason and everything getting on top of them respectively. It indicates that divorced women were not socially well treated. So they were nervous and strung up more and constantly under

strain and getting edgy and bad tempered. It also indicates that because of economic dependence on father and uncertain future life, they lost sleep and remained awake rather more or much more than usual. Because of fear of their divorced identity and criticism, they were scared or panicked for no reason.

When a question whether divorced women kept themselves busy or occupied was asked, it is found that 155 (77.5 per cent) were not kept busy and occupied. It signified that they had social dysfunction. As many as 156 (78.0 per cent) divorced women had taken longer time over doing things well. The same number of divorced women had found things being done well. Relatively less number (111 or 55.5 per cent) were less satisfied with the way they had carried out their tasks. The highest number of divorced women (173 or 86.5 per cent) felt that they were playing useful part in things, followed by 167 (83.5 per cent) who felt capable of making decision about things. Only 50 (25.0 per cent) of the divorced women enjoyed their normal day-to-day activities. It indicates that a majority of the divorced women were in high social dysfunction. They were largely unable to get along with others. It is assumed by the researcher that due to their inability to cope with others, they experienced social dysfunction problem.

The researcher tried to find out the incidence of depression among divorced women by using seven questions. When the question whether their idea of taking one's own life was asked, a majority (160 or 80.0 per cent) of the divorced women stated that the idea of taking their own life kept on coming into their mind. As many as 147 (73.5 per cent) and 151 (75.5 per cent) felt themselves worthless and entirely helpless persons respectively. One hundred and fifty (75.0 per cent) of the divorced women felt that life was not worth living. It also indicated from the table that 55 (27.5 per cent), of the divorced women thought of the possibility that they might make away with themselves. Fifty (25.0 per cent) of divorced women found at time they couldn't do anything because their nerves were too bad and 46 (23.0 per cent) found themselves wishing to be dead and away from it all. The study reveals that a majority of the divorced women had depression problem. Divorce affected every sphere of life social, sexual etc. It was a dramatic change in life. During this stage it was very difficult to cope with others when people did not accept them cordially. It indicates that due to these reasons most of the divorced women were depressed.

Of the total divorced women, 87 (43.5 per cent) had scored 5 and above. So, it is an indication that 87 (43.5 per cent) of the divorced women

had somatic symptoms. It indicates that a large number of divorced women had somatic symptom problems. It might be because of their coping problem with others. Divorced women were well treated by their close kin but not well treated by others. Moreover, they had lost a good biological and emotional relationship. They were living without opposite sex partners'. Due to these reasons, they had somatic symptoms problem. Out of the total subjects, 133 (66.5 per cent) had scored 5 and above. It gives us that 133 divorced women had anxiety and insomnia problem. The present study indicates that a majority of the divorced women had anxiety and insomnia problem. Sometimes, social and emotional life affected on the mind and physical health as well. It is assumed by the researcher that divorced women had expected huge amount of love, affection from their male counterparts. They also believed their husbands fully. But they got bad treatment from their husbands. So they felt anxiety and insomnia.

Out of total subjects, 147 (73.5 per cent) had scored 5 and above, can say that they had social dysfunction problem. It reveals from the present study that a majority of the divorced women had 'social dysfunction. Ashely and Kessler (1993), Davies et al (1997); Doherty et al (1989); Gove and Shin (1989); Marks and Lamben (1998), Shapiro (1996) Tschann et al.) (1989) conclude in this connection that divorced individuals experienced lower level of psychological well-being than did married individuals. It is assumed by the researcher that divorced women felt alone with others because of lack of social support, love and affection, recreation in day to day life.

It is observed from the present study that 66.0 per cent of the divorced women had severe depression problem. It indicates that a majority of the divorced women were depressed. In this regard, Kitson and Holmes (1992) find that in western society divorced women were more distressed than their married counterparts immediately after divorce/separation. Menaghan and Lieberman (1986) find that divorced men and women were more depressed 4 years after their divorce than they were before the divorce. It is assumed by the researcher that because of irritability to cope with others, thinking life is meaningless, economic problem and uncertain future. Divorced women are more depressed in their lives. In the study, 5.5 per cent of the divorced women were normal. Among the 200 divorced women, 62 (31.0 per cent) of them had all kinds of psychiatric problems like somatic symptom, anxiety and insomnia, social dysfunction and severe depression. It is assumed by the researcher that the consequence of divorce was more on personal life than social life.

When social treatment, social adjustment, social relationship and social support were good, divorced women could overcome mental disturbances. But in the present study, it is seen that divorced women were not happy from the other sections of the people in our society so that they had severe psychiatric problems.

The median score of alienation scale was 42. The lowest score of alienation scale was 21 and highest was 84. But not a single divorced woman had found highest and lowest score. The lowest score of divorced women was 25 and the highest was 83. Only one-divorced woman had scored the highest and one other the lowest score. The highest number (15 or 7.5 per cent) had scored 56 followed by (10 or 5.0 per cent) each who had scored 54 and 63. It is evident from the above table that almost all (189 or 94.5 per cent) divorced women scored 42 and above and experiences a sense of alienation. Only a few (11 or 5.5 per cent) of the divorced women were not alienated. It indicates from the table that the highest number (11 or 5.5 per cent) scored in the range of 43.-63. They were not more alienated. But a significant number (78 or 39.0 per cent) scored the range of 64-84. They were more alienated. It is evident from the present study that a majority of the divorced women were alienated. Sahar et al. (1991) in their study on alienation among Muslim divorced women and men in Aligarh and Delhi conclude that divorced women were more alienated than divorced men and locality was not a factor of any significant consequence in alienation.

In Bangladesh, husband can divorce his wife on his own will. There is no provision of maintenance after divorce. Provision of maintenance for children exists but in many cases mother is the maintainer of the minor children. They do not get financial assistance from the husbands. Dower money is also not paid by their former husbands. There is no government and non-governmental organizational economic support especially for divorced women in Bangladesh. Divorced women are mostly dependent on their parents. Apart from physical needs, they do not have social support from the secondary and tertiary levels, although they have good support from the parents. In these situations, it is assumed by the researcher that a majority of the divorced women are having a sense of alienation. It is observed in the study that among the 121 (60.5 per cent) non-working divorced women, 79 (65.29 per cent) had depression as compared with 79 (39.5 per cent) working divorced women, while 53 (67.08 per cent) had depression. It is indicated that regarding depression, working and non-working factors did not make any difference. The hypothesis that was

divorced women who are not working are psychologically depressed than the divorced women who are working is not proved ( $\chi^2:0.068$ ;  $df = 1$ :  $p > 0.05$ ). Marriage is a good intimate relationship between two opposite sexes. When it breaks down, it affects every sphere of life. It impacts more on mental health than physical health. In this view, it can be said that it cannot bring happiness to the divorced women.

It is found in the present study that those women who were divorced by their husbands had experienced greater level of social alienation than those who volunteered divorce. The hypothesis which was women who are divorced by their spouses have experienced greater sense of alienation implying that self divorces are not greater alienated is accepted. In Bangladesh Muslim community, the husband has unilateral power of divorcing his wife through Arbitration at his own will. There should be a strong reason for divorce. In many cases, wife does not know under what cause, her husband divorced her. It is a shock for women in Bangladesh. This severs shock may expedite the sense of alienation. So, therefore, women face more / greater alienation when they are divorced by their spouses. But when women are repeatedly torture by their husbands and take divorce decision, it will not shock them. In fact women will feel that they are free from the torture and get a sigh of relief. In this situation, they do not feel any sense of alienation.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The psychological conditions of divorced women are not good which is revealed from the study. Women are divorced status are having somatic symptoms, anxiety and insomnia, social dysfunction and depression. A majority of divorced women have a sense of alienation. It may be because of social stigma of divorce. The need of the hour is to regain their earlier life, accept the reality and give a better life. Specific family counseling provision can help them properly. In this regard, the government and non-government organizations should come forward to set-up more and more counseling centre for divorced women. The duty of counselor will be to bring the divorced women into reality. Human beings particularly divorced women and family members of divorced women should accept the reality. Counseling should start from this point of view. Moreover, counseling is needed not only to the divorced women but also to the family members of the divorced women.

## CONCLUSION

Divorce is a reality as it is also a general solution of marital conflict but people still look down upon it. The present study shows that people do not properly treat divorced women. In Hindu religion, though divorce is permitted according to law the people generally look down upon it. Among the Muslims community, divorce is not desirable. We live in a society where we need peace, harmony, mutual interaction and understanding. Collective efforts should be made for greater interests of the society even in the family life. When family breaks down everything breaks down. Though generally we believe that divorce is the primary solution of marital conflict, but after divorce problems are most acute and to a large extent intolerable. Divorced women and their children are becoming vulnerable within vulnerable in our society. The need of hour is to protect peace, harmony, understanding etc. In this light, divorce should not be encouraged and desirable. It is the responsibility of every conscious citizen of the country to do his or her level best to protect the marital bond at any cost. This should be a message to the people at the end.

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