



Exploring the Lived Experiences of Divorced Women in Gilgit-Baltistan: A Case Study of Causes, Consequences, and Coping Strategies within Sociocultural Contexts

Dr. Nasim Khan Mahsud¹, Nasima Ali²

1. Assistant Professor-Department of Sociology-AIOU, Islamabad, Pakistan.
(Corresponding author): nasim.khan@aiou.edu.pk
2. Scholar of Sociology-Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad, Pakistan.

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Abstract

Divorce is an emerging social issue in Gilgit-Baltistan, where changing family structures, cultural expectations, and socio-economic pressures intersect women's lives. This study presents a sociological analysis of divorce among females through a qualitative case study of 13 divorced women across 05 different districts of Gilgit-Baltistan. The research explores the underlying causes, social consequences, and coping mechanisms associated with divorce, situating the phenomenon within the region's cultural and structural framework. Data were collected using interview guide to get the personal case histories, focusing on variables such as educational background, economic status, reasons for marital breakdown, family dynamics, and post-divorce experiences. Qualitative analysis revealed that the most common causes of divorce included financial insecurity, domestic violence, lack of compatibility, and interference from extended family. Social stigma and community labeling emerged as major challenges faced by divorced women, often leading to psychological distress, social isolation, and limited opportunities for remarriage. However, some participants demonstrated resilience through economic independence, educational advancement, and support from natal families. The study highlights that divorce in Gilgit-Baltistan is not merely a personal matter, but a deep social phenomenon influenced by patriarchy, economic structures, and traditional norms. The findings underscore the urgent need for awareness campaigns, counseling services, and supportive policies to protect the rights and dignity of divorced women. This paper contributes to the sociological understanding of gender, family, and social change in peripheral regions like Gilgit-Baltistan, offering recommendations for policymakers, social institutions, and community leaders to reduce stigma and provide sustainable support mechanisms for women navigating post-divorce realities.

Keywords: Divorce, Patriarchy, Domestic Violence, Social Stigma, Family Dynamics, Economic Insecurity, Gender Inequality

Introduction

Divorce has become an increasingly visible social issue across the world, reshaping established ideas about family, gender roles, and marital responsibility. While in many Western societies divorce has gradually become normalized, in conservative regions, especially in South Asia, it remains heavily stigmatized. In places such as Gilgit-Baltistan, marriage continues to be viewed

not only as a personal relationship but also as a social contract in which family honor, kinship expectations, and cultural norms are deeply embedded. As a result, when marriages collapse, women often bear the heavier burden of blame, shame, and social exclusion. Although divorce may relieve women from abusive or incompatible marriages, it frequently exposes them to new vulnerabilities economic hardship, strained family relations, and community scrutiny. Labels such as “failed wife” or “problematic woman” often follow them, limiting opportunities for remarriage and restricting their social participation. Despite growing awareness about women’s rights in Pakistan, the lived realities of divorced women in remote and mountainous regions remain under-documented. Understanding divorce within such a distinct cultural setting therefore requires a contextualized sociological perspective that considers the intersections of patriarchy, kinship, religion, and socioeconomic change.

Statement of the Problem

In Gilgit-Baltistan, divorce continues to be viewed as a taboo, particularly when initiated by women. Divorced women face multiple forms of marginalization ranging from social ostracism and economic dependency to emotional distress (Qadir et al., 2005; Malik & Zahra, 2021). Despite the prevalence of divorce cases and growing social change, there is a notable lack of sociological research addressing women’s post-divorce experiences in this region. Recent studies suggest that social stigma, limited legal literacy, and absence of community support exacerbate women’s vulnerability after marital dissolution (Ahmad & Fatima, 2022). This absence of empirical evidence restricts policymakers, NGOs, and community leaders from developing informed interventions and gender-sensitive policies. The current study seeks to fill this gap by exploring the lived experiences of divorced women in Gilgit-Baltistan, examining the underlying causes, social consequences, and coping mechanisms within a patriarchal and culturally bound society.

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the sociological understanding of family and gender relations within a South Asian, Islamic, and mountainous context. By focusing on divorced women in Gilgit-Baltistan, the research highlights how patriarchy, cultural rigidity, and economic dependency intersect to shape women’s social realities (Desai & Andrist, 2010; Hussain & Shafiq, 2023). The findings are expected to benefit academics, policymakers, and NGOs engaged in women’s welfare and empowerment initiatives. Moreover, this study provides localized insights that can inform social welfare programs, legal reforms, and counseling interventions designed to mitigate the stigma and economic hardships faced by divorced women in conservative societies (Farooq & Khokhar, 2024).

Objectives of the Study

The study aims to:

1. Identify the major causes of divorce among women in Gilgit-Baltistan.
2. Analyze the socio-cultural and economic consequences of divorce on women’s lives.
3. Examine how community norms, family structures, and gender roles influence divorce and its aftermath.
4. Suggest policy and community-based strategies to support divorced women in their reintegration and empowerment.

Review of Literature

Global scholarship shows that changing economic patterns, modernization, and shifting expectations between spouses have contributed to rising divorce rates (Amato, 2010; Parker,

2021). In many developed countries, social services and legal structures help reduce the negative consequences of marital dissolution. However, in collectivist societies where extended families, communal reputation, and patriarchal authority play a strong role, divorce remains a sensitive matter especially for women. Studies across South Asia reveal that factors such as domestic violence, interference from in-laws, financial stress, infertility, mistrust, and unmet emotional needs frequently contribute to marital breakdowns (Ali & Gavino, 2008; Zafar, 2016). Women often face disproportionate criticism regardless of the actual cause, reflecting deep-rooted gender bias. Research also indicates that as education levels and exposure to global media increase, individuals' expectations of companionship and emotional fulfillment in marriage rise, sometimes clashing with traditional norms (Jamal, 2017; Ahmad & Fatima, 2022). The consequences of divorce are multifaceted. Women commonly experience financial instability, psychological distress, and community gossip (Shaikh, 2018; Malik & Zahra, 2021). Children from separated families may also face emotional insecurity and social challenges (Amato, 2001). Sociological theories offer different lenses: functionalists emphasize the impact on family stability, conflict theorists highlight power imbalances and gender inequality, and feminist scholars see divorce both as a product of patriarchy and as a pathway for women's liberation from oppressive relationships. In Pakistan, although overall divorce rates remain low, they are gradually rising due to urbanization, education, and greater awareness of legal rights (Khan, 2015). Yet, in regions like Gilgit-Baltistan where community monitoring is intense and cultural norms are strongly preserved divorced women continue to face stigma, limited support, and restricted mobility. This makes it crucial to examine their lived experiences within this unique sociocultural landscape.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design complemented with insights from case studies to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issue. This approach provided depth through personal experiences and narratives regarding the causes, consequences, and coping strategies of divorced women. The research aims to describe the patterns of divorce and analyze the social, cultural, and economic factors influencing it. The study is cross-sectional, capturing data from women divorced within the past five years across 05-five districts of Gilgit-Baltistan: Gilgit, Hunza, Nagar, Ghizer, and Skardu. A purposive sampling technique is employed to select participants who meet the inclusion criteria divorced females aged 18–50 years residing in the selected districts. The sample size consists of 13 case studies, with at least 2–3 participants from each district, providing a balance between depth and geographical representation. This sample allows for a detailed examination of individual experiences while also identifying common patterns and socio-cultural factors influencing divorce. Data is collected using interview guide to capture personal narratives, lived experiences, and contextual factors influencing divorce. Open-ended questions allow participants to express their challenges, coping strategies, and perceptions of societal attitudes.

Results and Discussion

Current study results are based on personal narratives, lived experiences, and contextual factors influencing divorce among selected women from GB. Analysis reveals their challenges, coping strategies, and perceptions of societal attitudes. The case studies analysis helped create a framework for constructing detailed and representative cases/themes based on reasons, consequences, influences of family and community on divorce, which are discussed in the following sections:

Case Study#1: Love, Tradition, and Consequences: The Story of Alina

The story of Alina and Rahil from Skardu, Gilgit-Baltistan, reveals how rigid traditions, emotional neglect, and social judgment can destroy lives. Their love marriage, seen as defiance of tribal norms, faced intense family and community disapproval, leaving Alina emotionally isolated. Rahil's long working hours created a growing emotional distance, pushing Alina into vulnerability and ultimately into an affair with their driver, Naeem. When she eloped, her family disowned her, and the community shamed both spouses, reflecting the harsh intolerance of conservative social structures. Though Alina sought freedom and happiness, her life in the city turned into hardship and regret, ending tragically in a fatal accident. The consequences on her life were devastating loss of family, community rejection, emotional instability, and ultimately death underscoring how rigid traditions, lack of marital communication, and absence of social support leave women like Alina without compassion, rehabilitation, or a second chance.

Case Study#2: Intelligence, Trust, and Betrayal: The Story of Rabia from Nagar

Rabia and Amin's marriage from the Nagar district illustrates how emotional distance and poor communication can slowly erode even a seemingly stable relationship. Amin, an IT professional known for his discipline and strong work ethic, married Rabia despite his family's initial disapproval. Although the couple began their married life with affection, Amin's demanding routine left him absorbed in work and largely unavailable at home. Rabia, dealing with increasing loneliness and unmet emotional needs, gradually became vulnerable to outside attention. During this period of emotional void, she entered into an inappropriate relationship with a household servant, Zeeshan. When Amin later uncovered the betrayal through home surveillance, he chose to end the marriage quietly, avoiding scandal but carrying deep emotional wounds. The incident affected both families, who suffered embarrassment and community criticism. Rabia's downfall was equally severe she lost trust, respect, and stability. The case reflects how emotional neglect, weakening moral boundaries, and lack of supportive communication can dismantle marriages, regardless of education or social background.

Case Study#3: The Tragic Divorce Story of Minal from Hunza

Minal's story from Hunza portrays how insecurity, social gossip, and patriarchal double standards can destroy a woman's life and marriage despite her innocence and achievements. Born into an upper-class, educated family, Minal embodied modern womanhood intelligent, ambitious, and independent. Her marriage to Sohail, a wealthy man working abroad, began as a dream union but soon suffered from emotional distance and Sohail's growing jealousy. In a conservative environment where women's behavior is constantly scrutinized, Minal's confidence and professional success made her an easy target for gossip. Rumors and mistrust deepened until a manipulated video engineered by a deceitful business partner triggered a scandal that led Sohail to divorce her without verifying the truth. The consequences were devastating: Minal was publicly shamed, socially isolated, and emotionally shattered, while Suhail faced no comparable stigma. Her children suffered from social rejection, yet Minal's resilience and continued work to support them turned her into a symbol of strength. Her story exposes how patriarchal societies often equate a woman's independence with immorality, showing that distrust, gossip, and gender inequality not love are the true causes of many marital breakdowns.

Case Study#4: Kiren's Struggle from Poverty to Independence

Kiren's life story from Hunza demonstrates how poverty, patriarchal norms, and property-related pressures can shape women's marital outcomes. Born into a financially struggling family with no sons, she was married off at eighteen primarily to safeguard family land and honor. Her husband,

considerably older and known for his temper, subjected her to years of physical and emotional abuse. Alongside the violence, he exploited her financially, often confiscating money she earned or gifts given by her family. The situation worsened when he fraudulently transferred her family's land into his own name. Feeling betrayed and unsafe, Kiren sought legal help an act that many in her community condemned rather than supported. In retaliation, her husband divorced her and kept the children, leaving her alone and socially isolated. With limited options, Kiren moved abroad to work as a domestic helper. Through effort and determination, she rebuilt her life, eventually remarrying someone who valued her. Although she lost daily contact with her children and endured emotional pain, she regained dignity and self-reliance. Her case reflects the harsh realities of forced marriage and abuse but also highlights women's capacity to reclaim independence.

Case Study#5: The Journey of Rabia: From Betrayal to Empowerment

This case tells the story of another Rabia, raised in a loving upper-middle-class family in Gilgit. Her marriage to Zeeshan, a Pakistani man living in the United States, was arranged with the hope of securing her future. Soon after the ceremony, he returned abroad, and over time, his contact with her was reduced. Rumors eventually reached Rabia's family that he had remarried in the U.S. Determined to know the truth, Rabia travelled overseas and discovered that Zeeshan had indeed entered into a second marriage without her knowledge. The revelation pushed her to seek legal action, and a U.S. court confirmed the bigamy and granted her divorce. Though her decision was courageous, she faced criticism and gossip upon returning home. Choosing not to let social judgment confine her, Rabia stayed abroad, completed her education, and secured employment. Later she married a supportive partner and established a peaceful life. Her story reflects the vulnerabilities associated with transnational marriages as well as the strength women can exhibit when betrayal forces them to rebuild from the ground up.

Case Study#6: Naila's Journey: A Case Study in Autonomy and Consequence

Naila's experience from Ghizer reveals the tension between personal emotional needs and societal norms. She entered an arranged marriage with Abbas, a man who treated her respectfully but gradually became distant as financial responsibilities grew. Feeling emotionally neglected, Naila sought companionship elsewhere and developed an intimate relationship with Imran, a household worker who showed her warmth and attention. Overcome by frustration and longing for emotional recognition, Naila left her husband and three children to marry Imran—a decision heavily condemned by her community. Her second marriage brought emotional comfort but severe financial hardship. She struggled to support her new family, eventually seeking help from NGOs that offered training programs. Through persistent effort, she started a small business and achieved financial independence. Nonetheless, her earlier decision left lasting consequences: her first children endured emotional distress and social stigma, and Naila herself became the subject of community judgment. Her journey shows how unmet emotional needs can lead to difficult choices, and how empowerment gained later in life may still coexist with personal loss.

Case Study#7: The Story of Fari: A Journey of Strong Will and Single Parenting

Fari, an academically gifted woman from Gilgit, moved to Islamabad for higher education, where she met Umar from Chilas. Despite their vastly different backgrounds, she trusted his affection, unaware that he was already married with children. Umar concealed his marital status and convinced Fari to marry him while they were pursuing studies abroad. Initially, their life seemed stable, especially after the birth of their daughter. However, Umar's guilt and divided responsibilities began affecting their relationship. Over time, conflicts intensified until one day he abandoned Fari and their child on a busy street in the United Kingdom, leaving them with no money or shelter. The incident shattered her emotionally, but Fari refused to remain helpless.

Supported by members of the Pakistani community and strengthened by her educational qualifications, she secured a job and gradually re-established her life. As a single mother, she worked tirelessly to provide security and dignity for her daughter. Her story exemplifies resilience and the transformative power of education, especially when betrayal leaves women vulnerable.

Case Study#8: The Story of Roomana: A Journey Through Divorce, Struggle, and Self-Reliance

Roomana's story illustrates the emotional, social, and psychological challenges faced by women in traditional arranged marriages. Born into an educated and supportive family in Gilgit, she entered a marriage with Ahsan, arranged through family consent rather than personal choice. Initially peaceful, the marriage deteriorated due to emotional distance, poor communication, infertility, and Ahsan's eventual extramarital affair. The lack of emotional understanding, combined with societal pressure and verbal abuse, left Roomana emotionally exhausted and compelled her to seek divorce. Her parents' support and her professional employment were crucial in helping her navigate the social stigma, emotional trauma, and financial independence challenges that followed. Over time, she rebuilt her life, finding empowerment through work, self-respect, and emotional resilience. Roomana emerged stronger, emotionally mature, and self-reliant, demonstrating that dignity and inner peace can surpass societal judgment. Her case highlights the need for premarital counselling, recognition of emotional abuse, equitable treatment regarding infertility, and support for divorced women. Ultimately, Roomana's journey is one of courage, transformation, and the reclaiming of autonomy, illustrating the resilience of women who overcome adversity to rebuild their lives with dignity.

Case Study#9: Azra: A Struggle for Dignity and Survival After Divorce

Azra's case study highlights the struggles and resilience of a woman from Skardu who faced cultural discrimination, gender bias, and emotional neglect in her marriage. Married into a Punjabi family, she endured years of disrespect and pressure for not bearing a son. Her husband's indifference and her in-laws' constant criticism led to emotional exhaustion, forcing her to seek a divorce for the sake of her dignity and her three daughters. After divorce, Azra faced severe financial hardship, social stigma, and emotional trauma but remained determined to raise her daughters with love and strength. Despite limited resources, she worked hard to provide education and stability for them. Her parents' support and her own perseverance helped her gradually recover emotionally. Azra's story underscores how cultural differences, patriarchal attitudes, and lack of spousal support can destroy marriages, yet it also shows that courage and resilience can rebuild life after adversity. Her journey calls for economic empowerment, legal protection, and educational opportunities for divorced women to live with dignity and independence.

Case Study#10: Bilqis: A Story of Forced Marriage, Abuse, and Emotional Recovery

Bilqis's story illustrates the profound challenges faced by women in traditional, patriarchal societies where family honor and social reputation often outweigh personal choice and safety. Born into a respected family in Ghizer, she was married at a young age to a man her family did not know well, reflecting the cultural norm of prioritizing arranged matches over personal compatibility. Soon after marriage, she faced her husband's immoral behavior, domestic violence, and verbal abuse, compounded by a lack of support from her in-laws. The relentless mistreatment caused deep emotional trauma, leading her parents to intervene and pursue a divorce to protect her. After separation, Bilqis returned to her family home, where she experienced emotional and psychological distress, loss of confidence, social stigma, and dependence on her parents, while facing barriers to education, employment, and remarriage. Her case underscores the critical role of

family support in mitigating the consequences of abuse, highlights the impact of societal norms on divorced women, and emphasizes the need for education, skill development, psychological counseling, legal awareness, and community sensitization to empower women like Bilqis to rebuild their lives with dignity and independence.

Case Study#11: Zohra: A Story of Devotion, Betrayal, and Resilience

Zohra, raised in a respected zamindar household in Nagar, grew up accustomed to responsibility and hard work. She entered marriage at 35 after persistent pressure from relatives who believed she was “running out of time.” Her husband, a widower with children, initially treated her kindly, and the couple formed a modest but stable life. Trouble emerged gradually when relatives began interfering, criticizing Zohra for not conceiving. Despite her efforts to maintain peace, emotional distance developed in the marriage, and her husband eventually became involved with another woman. The situation worsened when he sold their home without her consent, leaving Zohra and her adopted daughter vulnerable. After the divorce, Zohra experienced financial difficulty, declining health, and periods of depression. Yet, support from siblings and community members helped her navigate the challenges. Although her daughter struggled emotionally, Zohra slowly began rebuilding her life through small income-generating activities and renewed social connections. Her story shows how societal pressure around fertility and family honor can destabilize marriages and deeply affect women’s wellbeing.

Case Study#12: Alisha: A Journey Through Broken Marriages and Social Neglect

Alisha’s story illustrates the devastating impact of repeated marital failure, emotional dependence, and lack of self-reliance on women in traditional societies. Born into a respected zamindar family in Skardu, she enjoyed a privileged and loving upbringing, yet her life took a tragic turn after two marriages ended in divorce. Her first marriage to an older man from the UK collapsed due to emotional incompatibility and poor communication, while her second marriage to a man from Kashmir was marred by abuse, infidelity, and verbal humiliation. Following these failures, Alisha faced severe social stigma, economic hardship, and psychological distress. With no education, skills, or willingness to work, she became homeless, dependent on charity, and unable to provide adequately for her two children, who suffered neglect and emotional trauma. Her case underscores the consequences of family pressure, patriarchal norms, and societal judgment, highlighting the critical need for psychological counselling, skill development, community support, and legal protection. Alisha’s experience serves as a cautionary tale, emphasizing that emotional resilience, self-reliance, and social support are essential for women to recover dignity and stability after marital breakdowns.

Case Study#13: Samina: From Oppression to Dignity

Samina’s story highlights the profound impact of forced marriage, domestic abuse, and patriarchal pressures on women in traditional societies. Born into a respected zamindar family in Hunza, she was married at 17 to her cousin under family pressure, primarily to retain property and honor, without her consent. The marriage quickly became a site of emotional and physical abuse, as her husband’s possessiveness, violence, and lack of respect trapped her in fear and humiliation. With no support from her family and facing societal pressure to endure, Samina eventually escaped to Gilgit city, where she rebuilt her life by resuming education and seeking independence. Despite social stigma and community gossip, she formed a respectful, trusting relationship with a new partner, ultimately marrying again and becoming a mother of two sons. Her journey demonstrates both the severe consequences of forced and abusive marriages including trauma, social isolation, and loss of family support and the potential for emotional recovery, resilience, and empowerment when women can exercise agency, access education, and find supportive relationships. Samina’s

case underscores the need for education, awareness, counselling, and community support to protect women from oppression and help them reclaim dignity and stability after marital trauma.

Conclusion

The thirteen case studies collectively reveal the profound and multifaceted challenges faced by women in traditional, patriarchal, and conservative societies of Gilgit-Baltistan and surrounding regions. Across cases, recurring causes of marital breakdown included forced marriages, lack of consent, emotional incompatibility, domestic violence, spousal infidelity, family interference, and societal pressure prioritizing honor over individual well-being. The consequences of these marital disruptions were severe, ranging from emotional trauma, psychological distress, social stigma, and isolation to financial hardship, health decline, and intergenerational vulnerability among children. These narratives highlight how women's agency is often constrained by patriarchal norms, limited education, and economic dependence, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and neglect. Yet, the case studies also demonstrate resilience, courage, and the transformative potential of education, skill development, and social support. Women like Kiren, Fari, Roomana, and Samina exemplify that with access to resources, community support, and opportunities for autonomy, women can reclaim dignity, rebuild their lives, and achieve emotional and financial stability. Sociologically, these stories underline the critical interplay between structural inequality, cultural norms, gendered expectations, and individual agency in shaping the experiences of women navigating marital failure and divorce.

Recommendations:

Following are the recommendations based on study findings:

- Ensure girls and young women receive education and awareness on gender equality, personal rights, emotional intelligence, and marital compatibility to prevent forced or ill-prepared unions.
- Strengthen dissemination of information on women's legal rights regarding marriage, divorce, domestic violence, property, and custody of children. Legal literacy campaigns should target rural and traditional communities.
- Establish counseling centers and mental health support services for women experiencing marital trauma, domestic abuse, or divorce-related distress. Early intervention can mitigate long-term psychological effects.
- Provide access to vocational training, microfinance, and income-generating opportunities to foster financial independence, reduce dependence on family, and enable women to rebuild livelihoods.
- Engage local leaders, elders, and social organizations to challenge stigmatization of divorced women, promote empathy, and encourage supportive attitudes toward survivors of marital abuse.
- Develop safe houses and community support networks for women escaping abusive marriages, offering temporary shelter, legal aid, healthcare, and skills training.
- Ensure children affected by marital breakdown receive emotional support, education, and counseling to mitigate intergenerational trauma.
- Encourage families and communities to prioritize emotional compatibility, character assessment, and personal consent in marriage arrangements to prevent conflicts and abuse.
- Provide access to healthcare, including treatment for stress-related conditions, reproductive health, and trauma care for women affected by abuse and marital disruption.

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