

Marriage Dissolution through Divorced Women's Voices: New Insights from Bangladesh

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Abstract

Divorce is widely recognized as one of the most stressful life experiences, with far-reaching effects on individuals, families, and society. At the same time, for some women, it may offer relief from oppression and a route to restored autonomy and dignity. This study aimed to explore how divorced women perceive the dissolution of their marriages and how they evaluate the decision to divorce in Bangladesh. Using a qualitative design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with divorced women, and their narratives were analyzed thematically. The findings suggest that marital breakdown is shaped by a cluster of social and relational drivers, including women's access to education and formal employment, rising expectations for autonomy and empowerment, polygamy, extramarital affairs, interference by in-laws in personal and family life, addiction to social media, and the influence of a wife's parental family. Although divorce was sometimes framed as a necessary response to persistent inequity and conflict, many participants also reported regret and self-blame for the breakdown of their marriages. The study concludes that prevention efforts should balance respect for women's agency with initiatives that strengthen mutual respect, communication, and boundary management within extended family systems. This research contributes women-centred evidence to the divorce literature in comparable socio-cultural settings. Implications include expanding community education and couple- and family-focused support services that address polygamy, infidelity, and technology-related tensions while promoting equitable gender relations.

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Introduction

Marriage is a long-standing social institution found in nearly all societies. In Bangladesh, it remains the only socially accepted and legally recognised route to forming a family, providing legitimacy to intimate relationships and anchoring responsibilities such as child-rearing, nurturing, and socialisation. Cultural norms emphasise the sanctity of marriage, encourage spouses to sustain marital bonds, and uphold family preservation as a moral and social ideal. Yet when marriages become strained or unsafe, spouses may find themselves bound to incompatible partners, and families may struggle to function as supportive units. In such circumstances, divorce becomes a lived reality rather than a distant social exception.

Divorce is widely recognised as one of the most stressful life events, often bringing emotional, psychological, and social disruption not only for spouses but also for children, extended families, and broader communities. The divorce process typically begins when one or both partners feel disillusioned, dissatisfied, or unable to sustain autonomy in the face of persistent marital conflict (Akter and Begum 2012). Within Islamic tradition, divorce is commonly understood as a right of the husband, though a wife may initiate divorce if this authority is granted in the marital contract. At the same time, Bangladeshi law provides women with avenues to seek dissolution through the family court or union council, with procedures guided by legal provisions. Although divorce is discouraged socially and religiously, it may, in some cases, protect both women and men from ongoing physical or psychological harm and from relationships that are unhealthy or dangerous (Patoari 2020). This dual reality, divorce as both a socially stigmatised act and a potential form of protection, frames the complexity of marital dissolution in Bangladesh.

Over the last few decades, Bangladesh has experienced notable social transformation, particularly in women's lives. Gains in social development since the late 1990s have been accompanied by persistent poverty and vulnerability for many households. Improvements in key indicators, namely declining population growth, reduced child and maternal mortality, rising life expectancy, expanded primary enrolment, and increased gender parity in schooling, have also coincided with greater participation of women in economic, social, and political spheres. These shifts have influenced traditional values, gender relations, women's status, and family structures. Increased education and employment for women, the diffusion of Western cultural norms, materialistic attitudes, and the growth of individualism have all reshaped family life and marital expectations, with implications for divorce practices (Khan 2004).

Consistent with broader Asian trends, divorce rates have risen in Bangladesh in recent decades (Ahmed and Riyaz 2024; Tahira et al. 2023; Rubab et al. 2023). Evidence suggests that women's formal education, participation in paid employment, economic independence, and awareness of rights are associated with increases in divorce (Trivedi, Sareen, and Dhyan 2009). Financial autonomy may reduce women's willingness to accept patriarchal norms, while education may sharpen awareness of unequal marital dynamics and strengthen capacity to exit harmful relationships. Recent research in Bangladesh identifies age differences between spouses, dowry demands, lack of mutual respect, drug addiction, extramarital relationships, the influence of Western culture, and forced or pressured marriages as contributing factors to marital breakdown (Tanvir and Mostofa 2024). Together, these studies indicate that divorce in Bangladesh is shaped by both structural changes and intimate relational conflicts.

At the same time, a substantial body of scholarship underscores the gendered consequences of divorce, particularly in resource-poor contexts. Ending a marriage can produce long-term psychological distress for both men and women, and parental divorce can negatively

affect the psychosocial adjustment of children and adolescents (Bajwa, Razzaq, and Majeed 2023). However, women in Bangladesh often face disproportionate burdens after divorce. In collectivist cultural settings where marriage acts as a form of social security, marital dissolution can leave women economically and socially vulnerable (Momen, Bhuiya, and Chowdhury 1995; Akter and Begum 2012). Research documents how divorced women may encounter financial hardship, social stigma, weakened support networks, emotional strain, and uncertain futures, with effects that may manifest in both physiological and psychological wellbeing (Amato 2010; Akter and Begum 2012; Jan and Hyder 2018; Afroz 2019; Ahmed and Riyaz 2024). Women raising children under impoverished conditions are especially likely to struggle with livelihood and social adjustment, experiencing loneliness, depression, and isolation. These findings point to divorce as not only a personal rupture but also a social and health-related risk shaped by gendered inequality.

Despite the growing literature on determinants and consequences of divorce, less is known about how divorced women themselves interpret the dissolution process, make sense of the decision to separate, and evaluate their choices within shifting social and legal landscapes. Much of the existing research highlights causes and outcomes but does not sufficiently centre women's subjective accounts of marital breakdown, the pathways through which divorce decisions unfold, or how women negotiate agency amid persistent patriarchal expectations. This gap is increasingly important as women's rising education and workforce participation appear to be changing patterns of marital power and divorce initiation, particularly in urban contexts.

Against this backdrop, the present study addresses the problem of limited empirical understanding of divorced women's own perceptions of divorce in Bangladesh. The study aims to examine how divorced women perceive the dissolution process of their marital relationships and how they understand and evaluate their divorce decisions. Specifically, it seeks to (1) identify the perceived

causes of divorce from the perspectives of divorced women and (2) explore how they view their decision to divorce within the social, familial, and institutional contexts that shape their lives.

By foregrounding women's voices, this study contributes to the state of knowledge in three ways. First, it deepens understanding of divorce as a lived, gendered experience rather than only a demographic trend or legal outcome. Second, it clarifies how broader social transformations such as education, employment, and evolving gender expectations intersect with intimate conflicts to influence women's decisions. Third, it offers evidence that may inform policy, legal practice, and social support interventions aimed at reducing harm, addressing stigma, and improving wellbeing for divorced women and their children in Bangladesh.

Method

This study adopted a qualitative design to explore divorced women's perspectives on the dissolution of marital relationships. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 13 purposively selected women who had been divorced for at least five years. The inclusion criteria required that participants (a) were divorced at least five years prior to the interview, (b) resided in the Sylhet City area, and (c) were currently remarried or living alone.

Sylhet City was selected as the study site because of its social and demographic diversity. The city attracts people from across Bangladesh for education, business, and employment due to its economic potential, access to government offices and medical facilities, opportunities for higher education, and patterns of international migration—particularly to Europe and other Western countries. These characteristics provided a context suitable for recruiting a diverse sample of divorced women.

Participant recruitment drew on multiple local sources. The initial pool of potential participants was identified through the researcher's connection with a social service agency in Sylhet

that provides legal and social support to divorced and destitute women. In addition, a list of cases was obtained from the Sylhet City Corporation, where couples apply for marital dissolution. Local councillors also assisted in locating and verifying information relevant to potential participants.

A research assistant contacted eligible women and provided a participant information sheet describing the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and what the interview would involve. Participants were encouraged to read the information sheet carefully, consult with someone if they wished, and ask any questions before deciding to participate. After receiving written or oral consent, the research assistant arranged interview appointments at times and places convenient for participants. Most interviews were conducted in participants' homes, while two took place at their workplaces. All interviews followed a semi-structured interview guide and were audio-recorded with participants' permission. Recruitment continued until data saturation was achieved. After the ninth interview, responses became repetitive and no substantially new insights emerged; however, three additional interviews were conducted to confirm saturation.

Data analysis followed a thematic approach. The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and then translated into English. To ensure trustworthiness, the transcripts were checked against the recordings and reviewed for accuracy. The research team read and reread the transcripts to become familiar with the data, generated initial codes, and then clustered these codes into broader categories. Themes were developed through an iterative process of comparison across interviews, with continued refinement to ensure that themes reflected the participants' accounts of divorce, decision-making, and post-divorce experiences.

The study followed the ethical guidelines of the Social Science Research Council. Participation was voluntary, and all participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any point without consequences. They were also assured that the data would be used

only for academic purposes and that their identities would not be disclosed. Pseudonyms were used in all transcripts and reports to protect participants' privacy.

Results

This section presents findings from 13 semi-structured interviews with divorced women living in Sylhet City. The analysis focused on how participants explained the deterioration of their marital relationships and how they understood the circumstances that led to divorce. Themes were generated through iterative coding and thematic development across transcripts. The results highlight the interplay between intimate marital dynamics and broader social forces shaping gender relations in urban Bangladesh.

Participant Profile

As seen in Table 1, participants were between 24 and 44 years old (average age 32). Nearly half were under 30, five were between 30 and 40, and two were over 40. Only one participant had remarried after divorce, while the others were living alone. This profile suggests that divorce is occurring relatively early in the life course for many women in this sample and that remarriage was uncommon, which may reflect persistent social barriers and stigma around divorced women.

Table 1. Demographic Information of the Participants

Participant Name	Age	Marital status	Number of children	Education	Occupation
Rubaiya	44	Divorced	1	Primary	Unemployed
Happy Akter	38	Divorced	3	Primary	Sewing work
Sumaiya	27	Divorced	2	Secondary	Unemployed
Nazmin	38	Divorced	1	Class 4	Domestic worker

Table 1. (Continued)

Participant Name	Age	Marital status	Number of children	Education	Occupation
Tinni	32	Remarriage	1	Bachelor	Dentist
Sharmin	36	Divorced	2	Secondary	Cleaner
Lupa	28	Divorced	1	Higher Secondary	Unemployed
Kulsum	24	Divorced	1	Class 8	Unemployed
Lucky	32	Divorced	2	Primary	Unemployed
Sadia	29	Divorced	2	MBA	Unemployed
Sokhina	37	Divorced	3	Class 7	Sewing
Ratna	29	Divorced	2	Bachelor	Unemployed
Sonia	26	Divorced	1	Class 8	Unemployed

Dissolution of Marriage: Perspectives of Divorced Women

Participants described divorce as emerging from a combination of their husbands' behaviour, in-laws' influence, tensions around gender expectations, and changing social conditions. While each woman's pathway to divorce was distinct, several patterns appeared repeatedly across narratives.

Polygyny as an immediate trigger

Many participants identified their husbands' remarriage as a decisive reason for leaving. Even when women had endured earlier hardship—such as dowry pressure or physical abuse—the decision to take a second wife was described as a turning point that made continuation of the marriage feel impossible. One participant explained:

My relationship with my in-laws was not good from the beginning of our marriage. They do not like me. I stayed with them despite physical and mental torture... However, he suddenly brought a girl and told me she was his second wife... Then, I thought there was no point in staying with him. I left home forever and decided to get a divorce.

Another woman described how polygyny intensified existing dowry-related violence:

My in-laws' family constantly mentally tortured me and insisted on convincing my father to fulfil the dowry demand... My husband often drank alcohol. He even tortured me physically... After two years of our married life, he remarried. I then left the house with my one-year-old son. I thought divorce was a better option.

These accounts suggest that polygyny functioned not only as a marital rupture. It also exposed power imbalances already present within the household.

Infidelity and the erosion of trust

Extramarital relationships were repeatedly described as central to conflict, emotional exhaustion, and eventual divorce. Several participants framed infidelity as a form of betrayal that also escalated violence and long-term disconnection. One woman noted:

My husband had an affair with his colleague... Sometimes, he does not come home at night... For the last two years, we have constantly quarrelled. He even physically tortured me... We have not even had a physical relationship for the last two years.

Another suggested that a husband's premarital attachment continued after marriage and became a persistent source of distress:

My husband's cousin was the main problem... That girl once told me they had a physical relationship and were planning a marriage. I did not find any reason to stay with him.

These narratives show how emotional insecurity, suspicion, and repeated conflict can intensify over time. When trust becomes unrecoverable, this tension can end in separation.

Migration-related distance and vulnerability

Participants also described how long-term physical separation, often tied to overseas work, created conditions for mistrust and unmet emotional or sexual needs. Some women framed their husbands' extramarital relationships as being justified by absence, though they rejected this reasoning. One participant who had worked abroad explained:

Considering my poor financial condition, I went to Saudi Arabia... I provided them with all my income for two years... after two years, I heard that he remarried. He told me he needed someone for his physical needs since I was abroad... I then decided to get a divorce.

Other accounts indicated that wives could also become vulnerable to suspicion or to emotionally complicated dependencies in the husband's absence:

My husband stays abroad and visits me for one month every year... I depended on my cousin for shopping and other household necessities... I do not know how our intimate relationship transformed into a physical one... Then, family members discovered it, and he divorced me.

Another participant justified her own involvement with another man through the experience of prolonged abandonment: "We were married for six years. However, my husband stayed with me for no more than six months. You should understand why I engaged with another man."

Taken together, these stories suggest that migration can strain marital stability. It does so by reshaping everyday intimacy, surveillance, and trust within families.

Social media as a new site of conflict

Participants described social media, especially Facebook, as a space that could spark suspicion, emotional distance, or new relationships outside marriage. Some women emphasised that even harmless

online socialising was interpreted by husbands as misconduct: “I used Facebook to spend time... I chatted with my friends... However, he thought I had relationships with people. Then, quarrelsome relationships arise.”

Others narrated how loneliness during a husband’s overseas employment made online connections more emotionally significant:

I used to spend time on Facebook while my husband was in the Middle East... Once, an unknown man messaged me... After a few months, we met, and I do not know how I became engaged to this man.

Another participant described leaving her marriage for a relationship formed online and later regretting the decision: “I had a close friend. We were introduced on Facebook... My husband was very busy... At one point, I left home... I married my friend. Now I realise I made a mistake.”

Technology may not be a standalone cause of divorce. However, it can intensify loneliness, misunderstanding, or relational neglect, especially when emotional needs are already unmet.

Mistreatment by in-laws and household control

Many participants described persistent conflict with in-laws as a major pressure point in marital breakdown. Women recounted being criticised for household work, pressured over dowry, or abused when husbands were absent. One participant shared:

My husband’s younger sister was always expected to wash her clothes and prepare meals... She complains to my mother-in-law and husband. Then, they rebuked me and even tortured me physically. My husband never understands my needs.

Dowry-related abuse remained a visible driver. One participant said: “My father paid 20,000... However, they want 1 lac more... my mother-in-law and sister-in-law constantly torture me mentally. My husband beat me several times”.

Several women framed the absence of husbands, often due to overseas work, as a period when vulnerability to in-law abuse increased as a participant said:

They behave very politely when my husband comes home... However, their behaviour changes when he goes abroad... They forced me to do all the household chores... My husband does not believe...

One woman also reported severe sexual intimidation within the extended family:

My brother-in-law proposed to me for a physical relationship since my husband has been abroad... That is why he started to tell everyone that... I engaged in relationships... At one point, divorce happened.

These experiences underscore how divorce can emerge not only from spousal conflict. It can also result from hostile and unsafe extended-family environments.

Women's employment, autonomy, and suspicion

Participants linked rising female employment with growing friction around control, mobility, and trust. Several described their husbands' discomfort with workplace interactions involving men as a participant said: "Since I work in an NGO, I must interact with many people, including men. He does not like this... Finally, I decided to divorce and stay on my own."

Others highlighted surveillance of earnings and daily movement as a participant said:

I work all day in the tailor's shop... my husband and in-laws constantly monitor me... I protested against their attitudes, which led to conflict.

Another participant said: "I earn money... However, they want me to explain where the money is spent. I did not like that... Finally, I decided to get a divorce."

These accounts suggest that women's economic participation can shift household power dynamics in ways that some husbands and in-laws struggle to accept. This can intensify conflict over authority and independence.

Influence of the wife's natal family

A smaller but notable subset of narratives highlighted the role of the wife's family of origin. Some participants felt that excessive guidance or interference, particularly from mothers or siblings, escalated tensions with in-laws and pushed marriages closer to breakdown. A participant said: "I always shared with my mother what happened in my in-laws' family... my mother often prevented me from establishing a good relationship with my in-laws."

One participant described an exploitative dimension in which relatives encouraged divorce to access financial gains: "After the divorce, they took 2 lac Bangladeshi taka from the dower... Now, they do not return my money."

These accounts suggest that family support is not uniformly protective. It may also be entangled with financial or relational interests.

Discussion

This study explored divorced women's interpretations of marital dissolution in Sylhet City. The results show that women framed divorce as a multi-layered process rather than a single event. Polygyny, infidelity, extended-family mistreatment, migration-related distance, and conflicts over women's autonomy emerged as major perceived causes. Social media also appeared as a contemporary mechanism that can intensify suspicion, loneliness, or relational neglect. Importantly, women did not present themselves only as victims of marital breakdown; many articulated divorces as a reasoned response to repeated disrespect, insecurity, or harm.

Comparison with Previous Research

The findings align with broader evidence that divorce is increasing in Bangladesh and other Asian contexts and that changing gender roles are reshaping marital stability (Ahmed and Riyaz 2024; Tahira et al. 2023; Rubab et al. 2023). Participants' emphasis on women's education, employment, and autonomy as sources of conflict echoes earlier arguments that women's economic independence and rights awareness can reduce tolerance of patriarchal control and raise the likelihood of divorce when marital relations become oppressive (Trivedi, Sareen, and Dhyani 2009).

The reported causes (e.g., dowry pressure, lack of mutual respect, drug addiction, extramarital relationships, and forced or pressured marriage) also correspond with recent Bangladeshi findings on marital discord (Tanvir and Mostofa 2024). Women's accounts of severe in-law interference and abuse reinforce evidence that household power struggles, dowry disputes, and joint-family tensions remain central to women's marital vulnerability (Akter and Begum 2012; Rahman 2018; Das et al. 2015).

The migration-related narratives extend previous observations that physical and emotional distance can destabilise marriages by leaving needs unmet and creating suspicion on both sides (Tanvir and Mostofa 2024; Tahira et al. 2023). The present study adds a more intimate angle by showing how women experience this distance not only as loneliness but also as a shift in everyday dependency arrangements that may invite rumours, surveillance, or coercion.

Finally, participants' discussion of Facebook-related conflict resonates with Bangladeshi research linking excessive social media use with marital misunderstandings and the formation of relationships outside marriage (Jahan et al. 2017; Haque, Muniruzzaman, and Haque 2022). The study broadens this literature by showing that women may also experience regret when online relationships are pursued as emotional substitutes for neglectful marriages.

Why these findings matter

These results help clarify how structural transformation and intimate marital dynamics intersect in urban Bangladesh. They show that marital instability cannot be understood only through individual choices, because wider social and economic changes are reshaping expectations inside the home.

The study suggests that divorce is increasingly shaped by tension between two moral systems: a traditional family order emphasising women's obedience and extended-family authority, and an emerging social reality where women's education and income strengthen their expectations for dignity, independence, and emotional reciprocity. When men or in-laws respond to this shift with surveillance, coercion, or polygyny, women may interpret divorce as a necessary form of self-protection and self-respect.

Theoretical and practical implications

From a theoretical perspective, the findings support gender-and-power frameworks that view marital conflict as an outcome of renegotiated authority within households. Divorce in this context appears less about individual incompatibility alone and more about contested legitimacy: who has the right to decide how a wife works, spends, socialises, or belongs within the family hierarchy.

Practically, the results point to several areas for intervention: 1) legal and counselling services should address not only spousal conflict but also the role of in-laws and the expanded risks women face when husbands migrate or live away; 2) public awareness programmes could emphasise the harms of dowry demands, normalised domestic violence, and coercive control of working women; 3) workplace and community support for divorced women may help reduce isolation and economic vulnerability, concerns widely documented in earlier studies on the gendered consequences of divorce (Akter and Begum 2012; Jan and Hyder 2018; Afroz 2019); and 4) digital literacy and

relational education could help couples manage expectations and boundaries around social media use, reducing conflict driven by suspicion rather than evidence.

Study limitations

This study has limitations that should inform interpretation. The sample was relatively small (13 participants) and limited to divorced women in Sylhet City, which may restrict generalisability to other regions.

The reliance on self-reported narratives may reflect retrospective interpretation shaped by current experiences. Finally, the study did not include husbands, in-laws, or legal actors, which may have provided a fuller picture of contested accounts of marital breakdown.

Conclusion

This study explained how divorced women in Sylhet City perceive the dissolution of their marital relationships and how they interpret their decision to divorce, including the causes they consider most significant. The findings show that participants located marital breakdown in a mix of personal, relational, and structural pressures. They highlighted polygyny, infidelity, mistreatment by in-laws, migration-related distance, dowry-related conflict, and the disruptive role of social media as direct triggers of spousal conflict and separation. At the same time, many women connected divorce to wider social change: as access to education and formal employment expands, women's expectations for dignity, autonomy, and mutual respect are rising, while some husbands and in-laws continue to seek traditional forms of control. Participants' narratives therefore reveal divorce as a painful and emotionally costly experience, yet also, for some, a necessary step to escape oppression and reclaim self-respect. Notably, a number of women expressed regret and self-blame, suggesting that divorce decisions are often layered with

ambivalence rather than being framed as simple acts of liberation.

These conclusions should be read alongside several limitations. The sample was small and drawn from one urban setting, and the study relied on women's retrospective accounts without including perspectives from husbands, in-laws, or legal and community actors. Future research could address these gaps through larger multi-site studies that compare urban and rural contexts, as well as couple- or family-based designs that examine how competing narratives of conflict develop over time. Longitudinal research would be particularly valuable for tracking women's wellbeing, economic recovery, and social reintegration after divorce, including differences between those who remarry and those who remain single. Further work could also explore how digital practices and migration reshape intimacy and suspicion in contemporary Bangladeshi marriages, helping to inform more grounded counselling, legal support, and community education initiatives.

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