RESEARCH REPORTS

Causes of Divorce in the Maldives: An In-Depth Socio-Economic Analysis

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ABSTRACT *Family is regarded as the cornerstone of Maldivian society; however, recent years have seen a pronounced prevalence of divorce, which has the potential for significant social, emotional, and economic disruptions for divorced couples, their children, extended families, and social cohesion at large. Despite these profound impacts, there is limited knowledge regarding the risk factors contributing to divorce in the Maldives, which hinders the formulation of comprehensive strategies to address this issue. This study, therefore, aims to investigate and document the causes of divorce in the Maldives and evaluate the efficacy of current interventions. Utilising a qualitative research design, in-depth insights were gathered through individual interviews with key informants—men and women aged 18 to 39 who had experienced divorce in the Greater Male' area. Employing snowball and purposive sampling, eight informants provided data covering 15 divorce cases. Thematic analysis of the interview data revealed nine primary factors contributing to divorce, including immaturity, infidelity, incompatibility, financial instability, congested living conditions, marrying for the wrong reasons, domestic violence, substance abuse, and women's empowerment. The findings suggest that current measures to reduce divorce rates are inadequate for maintaining family unity, highlighting the implications for policy and programmes to address these issues effectively.*

Keywords: Marital dissolution, Divorce Risk Factors, Socio-economic factors, Maldives, Social policy interventions

Introduction

The Maldives, renowned for its tropical natural beauty and reputation as a honeymoon destination, paradoxically is noted for its high divorce rate (Aboobakuru & Riyaz, 2021). There is strong evidence of the relationship between marriage and the wellbeing of individuals in a family unit, affecting their physical and mental health (Chapman & Guven, 2014). A healthy marriage benefits everyone, whereas a troubled marriage can harm both family and society.

Statistics from the Department of Judicial Administration (DJA, 2019), Maldives, show the highest divorce rates are among couples aged 26 to 39, with 58% of female and 59% of male divorcees in this group. The next highest group is aged 18 to 25. The combined divorce rate for individuals aged 18 to 39 is 70% for both men and women (DJA, 2019). Similar trends are seen in countries like South Africa and UK, where couples marrying between the ages of 18 and 35 are most likely to divorce (Mohlatlole et al., 2018).

In the Maldives, the Family Act (Number 4/2000) was introduced to reduce the high divorce rates of the late 1990s (UNFPA, 2004). This Family Act made

the divorce procedure stricter, requiring husbands not divorce their wives unless in the presence of a judge, with penalties for non-compliance. Cases where only one partner seeks divorce are referred to the Conciliation Division for Family Matters. Although these measures initially reduced divorce rates, divorce remain high (Aboobakuru & Riyaz, 2021).

Research Purpose and Objectives

This research seeks to identify the reasons for divorces in Maldivian society, particularly among young adults, assess the importance of mediation programmes in reducing the divorce rate, and understand the prevailing negative impacts. The study addresses a research gap by providing an in-depth understanding of divorce causes, focusing specifically on individuals who experienced divorce between the ages 18 to 39.

The objectives are to determine the primary reasons, as perceived by divorced men and women, for their marriage breakdown, examine the Family Act (2000) and related policies to identify necessary amendments, and assess existing measures and strategies to propose a multi-dimensional approach for fostering more satisfying relationships. The shortage of literature on this topic, from the Maldives perspective, underscores the need for research. The findings can contribute to strengthening the Family Act (2000), creating awareness programmes, and introducing relationship counselling as a public service.

Literature Review

This section introduces the causes of and attitudes towards divorce, drawing on international studies, outlines divorce in the context of Islamic culture, and discusses the limited knowledge and policies regarding divorce in the Maldivian context.

Reasons for Divorce: A Global Perspective

Divorce is a life-altering decision, often causing family and social issues, and impacting mental health (Eslami et al., 2018; Zandiyeh & Yousefi, 2014). Understanding the causes of divorce can assist in developing effective intervention programmes (Eslami et al., 2018). Various studies (e.g. Apostolou et al., 2018; Gunay et al., 2019; Lowenstein, 2005) have identified factors contributing to divorce, such as demographic variables, psychological traits, and family dynamics.

Key factors contributing to marital instability, as highlighted by previous research, include early marriage, limited intellectual and social skills, financial insecurity, parental divorce and its generational impact, unconventional family values, premarital pregnancy, women entering the workforce, lenient divorce laws, dissatisfaction with emotional and sexual aspects of the relationship, conflicting roles, alcoholism, substance abuse, risky behaviours, incompatibility leading to hostility, religious or cultural influences, casual attitude towards divorce, mental health issues, and infidelity (Apostolou et al., 2018; Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 2007; Eslami et al., 2018; Gravningen et al., 2017; Zandiyeh & Yousefi, 2014). Gravningen et al. (2017) note that cultural and historical contexts influence divorce and highlights that trends in the UK and Europe show a shift towards

cohabitation over marriage, contributing to declining divorce rates. The following sections provide detailed insights into specific divorce factors based on international research.

Early marriages are linked to high divorce rates, indicating that young couples often lack the maturity and social skills needed to navigate relationship complexities (Widyastari et al., 2020). They may struggle with marital responsibility conflict resolution (Wolcott & Hughes, 1999). Early marriages often reciprocate low education and financial setbacks, further deteriorating the chances of a successful marriage (Lowenstain, 2005). Research show that individuals without formal schooling are 13% more likely to be divorced (Wilkinson & Finkbeiner, 2020). Additionally, early marriages can also lead to early pregnancies, which may further strain relationships. Furthermore, according to Wolcott and Hughes (1999), a lack of communication stemming from poor intellectual skills is a significant risk factor for divorce.

Economic instability can also contribute to divorce. Financial difficulties can increase isolation, emotional stress, and lower self-esteem, leading to marital tensions (Wolcott & Hughes, 1999). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2011) states that a balance between work and personal engagement is vital for well-being. Employment disparities and work-life balance are central issues, as excessive work can harm personal relationships (OECD, 2011; Thompson et al., 1999). In Finland, higher husband income lowers the divorce risk, while higher wife income increases it (Finnas, 2000, cited by Lowenstein, 2005).

Women's empowerment and economic independence are rising globally, and is often linked to higher divorce rates in unstable families (Apostolou et al., 2018). According to Lowenstein (2005, citing Ogawa and Ermisch, 1994), since the mid-1960s, Japan's divorce rate has more than tripled, attributed to the steady increase in women's employment. Notably, women are increasingly reported to file for divorce more often than men. In Tehran from 2006 to 2007, 90% of the divorce applications were filed by women (Bolhari et al., 2012). Employment provides women with financial stability, enabling them to leave abusive or unhealthy relationships. Research shows that differences in gender beliefs and expectations between spouses can lead to marital instability and divorce (Lowenstein, 2005; Apostolou et al., 2018). While studies such as Wolcott & Hughes (1999) indicate that financial assistance to single parents is linked to higher divorce rates, further exploration of the underlying factors is needed.

Reasons cited for divorce varies depending on the location. Research by Scott et al. (2013) identified infidelity, aggression or emotional abuse, and substance use as key factors for divorce in Denver. In Cyprus, addictions are deemed more critical than poor communication (Apostolou et al. 2018), while poor communication is identified as the primary factor in Australia. In Korea, incompatibility, differing mindsets, and economic bankruptcy are the most common determinants of divorce (Chun & Sohn, 2009). Lowenstein (2005, citing Allen and Brinig, 1998) explored how disparities in sex drive between spouses influence divorce bargaining power, particularly regarding adultery. In Australia, only 2% of respondents cited sexual incompatibility as a divorce factor, yet 20% acknowledged that infidelity poses a significant risk to marriage (Wolcott & Hughes, 1999).

Kim and Kim (2002) found that in Asian countries, a once-divorced person

may hesitate to divorce again due to the stigma of being labelled as pathological or abnormal. This contrasts with regions where individualism and empowerment are more prevalent. For instance, in America, 67% of all second marriages end in divorce (Corcoran, 2011). When marital quality declines, those with favourable attitudes to divorce are more likely to take that step (Lowenstein, 2005). Parental divorce, childhood experiences, and the historical backgrounds of spouses, along with physical, verbal, and emotional violence, as well as alcohol and drug abuse also contribute to divorce (Lowenstein, 2005; Wolcott & Hughes, 1999).

In Cyprus, participants identified lenient family laws as a cause of high divorce rates (Apostolou et al., 2018). For instance, if a respondent does not appear at the first hearing, the divorce process can be expedited, often resulting in finalisation within just one week if the requirements are met during the second hearing (Apostolou et al., 2018). Such an approach lacks the foresight needed to promote reconciliation, often leading to hasty decisions and the premature dissolution of relationships.

Divorce in Islamic Countries

In Islamic Shariah, divorce is legal but discouraged. The Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him) emphasised that while divorce is permitted, it is among the most disdained actions and should not be taken lightly (Bani & Pate, 2015). Consequently, divorce rates in Islamic countries tend to be lower compared to those in other parts of the world (Ramzan et al., 2018). However, when a marriage becomes untenable and reconciliation is impossible, divorce is considered preferable than maintaining a toxic relationship (Bani & Pate, 2015).

Despite traditional discouragement, divorce rates in Islamic countries have been rising in recent years (Al-Bahrani, 2021; Aboobakuru & Riyaz, 2021; Asgari, 2012, Bolhari et al., 2012; Mendoza et al., 2019). A study in Tehran identified key factors contributing to divorce as incompatibility, unmet psychological needs, violence, and sexual issues (Bolhari et al., 2012). In Iran, the primary causes for divorce were cited as personal issues, communication styles, and social problems within the couples (Habibi et al., 2015). In Pakistan, key factors contributing to divorce are reported as illiteracy, unemployment, financial difficulties, impatience, misunderstandings, intolerance, and mistrust between spouses (Ramzan et al., 2018). As reported by Habibi et al., (2015), these findings highlight the importance of premarital counselling and life skills training for spouses to prevent abusive marriages.

The divorce situation in the Maldives based on existing literature along with the local legal framework surrounding divorce will be address in subsequent sections.

Negative impact of divorce

Divorce is a complex process that affects not only individuals but also familial and community dynamics (Eslami et al., 2018). According to Gunay et al. (2019), divorce encompasses legal, emotional, economic, social, and psychological dimensions. It can lead to severe consequences such as depression, reduced life expectancy, and increased poverty (Eslami et al., 2018). Research by Fagan and Churchill (2012) indicates that communities with higher divorce rates often

experience elevated crime rates, particularly among youth from broken families, who exhibit significantly higher rates of delinquency compared to those from intact families.

Children of divorced parents frequently face challenges in emotional, psychological, cognitive, and physical development (Fagan & Churchill, 2012). They may lose faith in marriage and perceive divorce as a normative solution to conflict rather than than pursuing conflict (Cui & Fincham, 2010). Such children often experience emotional instability, potentially leading to personality changes if they lack sufficient parental support (Fagan & Churchill, 2012).

Divorced individuals may suffer from stress and depression, struggle to fulfil parental responsibilities, or resort to substance abuse (Fagan & Churchill, 2012). This can result in a decline in the overall quality of life for family members. Children from broken homes may encounter difficulties in adjustment, exhibiting antisocial behaviour, interpersonal challenges, low self-esteem, and social withdrawal (Berlin, 2004; Cui & Fincham, 2010). In societies where remarriage is less accepted, individuals may engage in behaviours such as promiscuity or have children outside of marriage (Fagan & Churchill, 2012).

Promoting Healthy Marriages

To foster family unity and reduce divorce rates, many countries have adopted diverse strategies (United Nations, 2009). These include strengthening divorce laws and enhancing conflict resolution measures. In Western Europe, comprehensive childcare support facilitates women's workforce participation and promotes shared caregiving responsibilities that improve marital communication (Mortelmans, 2020). Flexible work policies, such as flexitime, part-time work, and remote work contribute to balancing work and family life (OECD, 2011).

Effective premarital education programmes enhance interpersonal skills and relationship satisfaction (Carroll & Doherty, 2003). Post-marital programs, such as the Preparation and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) and relationship counselling are essential for maintaining harmonious marriages. Couple counselling is essential for addressing relational dysfunction and mental health issues; and integrating family life education into school curricula helps raise awareness and develop essential life skills. (Snyder et al., 2006).

Divorces in the Maldives

Although family is the fundamental unit of society in the Maldives, divorce is common and carries no stigma (UNDP, 2011). A typical Maldivian woman is reported to marry three times by age 30 (UNFPA, 2004). Despite this, systematic studies on the high divorce rate in the Maldives are scarce (World Bank, 2014), though recent research has focused on various aspects of divorce, such as post-divorce adjustment in women and men in Maldives (Aboobakuru & Riyaz, 2021; Mohamed & Riyaz, 2024), the impact of parental divorce on children (Shazra & Riyaz, 2022; Shanoora et al., 2021, 2023), divorce versus conflict (Shanoora et al., 2020), and marital longevity (Naila, 2022). None of these studies addresses the root cause of the high divorce rate.

According to Hussain (2016), citing an interview with a prominent local clinical

psychologist, socioeconomic problems likely contribute to divorce, with causes varying between the capital city and remote islands. The sparce literature indicate several factors contributing to divorce in the Maldives, including congested living conditions, extended families cohabiting, and lack of readiness for marriage and parenthood (Hussain 2016; World Bank, 2014). Financial instability, domestic violence, and lenient marriage and divorce laws also play a role (Hussain 2016; World Bank, 2014).

In the capital, Male', high living costs often require both spouses to work, reducing time for intimacy and increasing family tensions (World Bank, 2014). About 85% of Malé's population lives in congested conditions, exacerbating interpersonal conflicts (HRCM, 2008). Unemployment or underemployment further stresses households, leading to family breakdowns. Women increasingly juggle household and work responsibilities, which can lead to stress and potential marital breakdowns (IFES, 2015). Further, men often work away from home, while young women's dependence on their families causes conflicts among young couples (World Bank, 2014). A survey conducted by the World Bank (2014) found that 52% of young men and 46% of young women continue to live in their parents' homes even after their marriage.

Societal pressure significantly contributes to early marriage and subsequent divorces (World Bank, 2014). In a talk show organised by UNFPA (2018), a young Maldivian noted, with audience agreement, that many young people marry to escape crowded living conditions, seeking privacy away from family and the hope of at least a separate room. Societal expectations also push individuals into marriage, even when they are ill-prepared for the responsibilities of marriage and parenthood (World Bank, 2014). While early marriages have become less common, historically, parents often married off their daughters early to stabilise their economic conditions or prevent culturally dishonourable premarital sexual activity (Shafeega, 2018). Mohamed (2016) indicates that early marriages frequently lead to unstable families due to a lack of commitment and knowledge needed to sustain a marriage. Additionally, such marriages adversely affect women's health, education, and empowerment (Shafeega, 2018).

Domestic violence is also frequently linked as a factor for divorce (Hussain, 2016). A survey conducted in 2004 found one in three women in the Maldives, aged 15 to 49, has experienced physical or sexual abuse (Fulu, 2014). Cultural norms viewing husbands as dominant can contribute to domestic violence in some situations (HRCM et al., 2020). Couples often divorce impulsively after quarrels and remarry multiple times. Before the enactment of the Family Act, divorces were performed through unilateral verbal statements by the husband, a common practice in many Islamic communities (Abdulla, 2018).

These factors collectively highlight the complexities surrounding divorce in the Maldives.

Legal Framework Governing Marriage and Divorce in the Maldives

The Maldives legal system follows Islamic Shariah and common law, as per Article 10(b) of its Constitution, which prohibits laws conflicting with Islam (Hussain,

2008). Article 34(a) of guarantees the right to marriage and family, detailed further in the Family Law (United Nations, 2012).

The Family Act (4/2000) governs marriage, divorce, child custody, legitimacy, paternity, child support, parental support, and penalties associated with negligence. It stipulates marriage procedures, including consent requirements from both parties, witnesses, and adherence to Shariah principles. Article 85(h) of the Family Court Regulation mandates a Marriage Awareness Programme on legal, religious, social, and economic aspects of marriage (Family Court, 2011). The law sets the marriage minimum age at 18 but allows exceptions. It mandates dower payments (given by the groom to the bride as part of the marriage contract) and permits prenuptial agreements. Polygamy is allowed, with men permitted up to four wives if men are financially capable. Divorce procedures require judicial intervention, prohibiting extrajudicial divorces. Husbands initiate divorce through the court, with mandatory reconciliation efforts. Women can also seek divorce on grounds such as indignity, violence, sinful compulsion, or prolonged abstinence, with similar reconciliation efforts required. The court can annul marriages under specific circumstances.

In summary, while the Family Act (2000) aimed to reduce divorce rates in the Maldives, there appears to be a lack of systematic research on its effectiveness. The literature review indicates that despite discussions on various reasons for divorce on different platforms, the root causes behind the high divorce rate remain unclear.

Research Design

To understand the factors contributing to divorce in the Maldives and evaluate related policies, a qualitative research approach was adopted. This approach allows in-depth exploration, particularly in areas with limited prior research (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative methods facilitate detailed insights into phenomena from participants' perspectives, fostering a communicative and empathetic process.

Sample

The study focused on adults aged 18 to 39, the demographic identified by DJA (2019) as having the highest divorce rates in the Maldives. Due to logistical constraints, the research centred on divorcees in the Greater Male' area.

A qualitative analysis was conducted with a sample size based on similar studies: Akter and Begum (2012) in Bangladesh with 11 women, Klobucar and Simonic (2016) in Slovenia with 14 participants, and Asante et al. (2014) in Accra, Ghana, involving 4 male and 8 female participants. Participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling to capture insights based on lived experiences. This approach (as outlined by Creswell, 2013; Naderifar et al., 2017), facilitates accessing participants with specific characteristics, contributing to data richness and saturation.

Initially, two participants—one male and one female—were chosen from the researchers' social network and asked to refer additional participants, expanding the diversity of the sample. Despite these efforts, the sensitive nature of the topic posed challenges. An advertisement on Facebook yielded five additional female participants. Due to reluctance among male participants and time constraints, data

collection concluded with six women and two men, collectively representing 15 divorces, including cases of multiple divorces. Although the sample size was small, recurring themes emerged, meeting the study's exploratory objectives.

Data Collection and Analysis

A semi-structured interview guide based on Scott et al. (2013), focused on reasons for divorce and memories of marital experiences. The questions were adapted to the local cultural context and translated into Dhivehi, with the guide refined through pilot testing. Participants were given an information sheet and consent form at least two days before the interview. The one-to-one interviews, conducted in November 2020, lasted about 60 minutes each, with all sessions audio-recorded. Participants retained the right to withdraw until the research report's finalisation.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith & Eatough, 2007) was used to explore participants' experiences. Data were coded according to themes from the literature review, with flexibility for emerging themes. Due to budget constraints, data reduction, grouping, and analysis were handled using Microsoft Excel spreadsheets.

Results

Interviews with eight divorced individuals from the Greater Male' area provided detailed insights into their perceived reasons for divorce, views on the Family Law and related policies, including the Marriage Awareness Programme by the Family Court, and their perceptions of the importance of relationship counselling. These findings are presented as narratives, following an outline of their demographic characteristics.

Participant Demographics

The study involved six women and two men, each sharing detailed responses about their marriage and divorce experiences. Participants had between 2 and 5 divorces each, totalling 16 divorce cases, with only 15 discussed as one marriage occurred outside the target area. Participants are identified as F1 to F6 for females and M1 to M2 for males, with #D representing the number of divorces.

Table 1 shows that among the six women, four had been divorced two or more times. Participant F6 experienced five marriages, including a triple divorce ('thinfah vari') from her second husband. The other two women were in their second marriages. Both male participants, M1 and M2, experienced multiple marriages; M1 had divorced twice, while M2 was in his second marriage.

Only one participant had a child from their first marriage, while four had children from their second marriages but subsequently divorced. The second divorce of F5 is excluded as she and her spouse resided on another island throughout their marriage.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

Participant	Age	Age at first marriage	Age of Spouse at first Marriage	Number of Marriages	Number of Divorce	Divorce initiator	Employment status during marriage	Duration of marriage and number of children from the marriage										
								Marriage 1		Marriage 2		Marriage 3		Marriage 4		Marriage 5		
F1	33	23	24	2	2	D1 – M D2 - F	Both employed	1 year 9 months	0	8 months	0	NA		NA		NA		
F2	33	20	25	2	2	D1 – F D2 - F	Both employed	3 years	0	3 years	2	NA		NA		NA		
F3	35	24	25	2	1	D1 - M	Both employed	2 year 6 months	0	counting	1	NA		NA		NA		
F4	25	19	23	2	1	D1 – M	Both employed	1 year 6 months	0	counting	1	NA		NA		NA		
F5	36	22	21	2	2	D1 – F D2 - F	Husband employed	3 years	1	NA	1	NA		NA		NA		
F6	46	16	26	5	5	D1 – F D2 to 4 – M D5 - F	Employed during marriage 4 & 5	2 years	0	Triple divorce in 11 years and 5 children						6 months		0
M1	30	23	20	2	2	D1 – M D2 - M	Wives unemployed	1 year 5 months	0	1 year 3 months	1	NA		NA		NA		
M2	46	19	21	2	1	D1 – M	Were students	8 months	0	NA	2	NA		NA		NA		

Reasons for Divorce

Participants identified several reasons for their divorces, with many citing a combination of issues culminating that led to a final breaking point. These reasons are presented in the order of prevalence.

Immaturity

Most participants highlighted immaturity and a lack of responsibility as key factors, noting that early marriages exacerbated these issues.

> "I imagined marriage was like a fairy tale, living in a beautiful house and having beautiful crockery…. Our first divorce happened because of my husband's immaturity. Out of nowhere, he just casually said that 'I am not his wife.'" (F6 #D2)
> "He had a decent job but didn't know how to manage finances. He spent on unnecessary things, leaving no money for household expenses, which frustrated me." (F6 #D1)

While many participants emphasised immaturity and irresponsibility, one participant attributed her divorce to choosing the wrong partner rather than immaturity.

> "I married at 19. I don't think immaturity caused the divorce. If he'd been a good partner, we could've stayed together. Maybe I wasn't mature enough to choose the right partner. If I had recognised the red flags while dating, I might have avoided

marrying him." (F4)

Infidelity

The second most common reason for divorce cited by participants was infidelity, either by the participant or their partner.

"He always kept his phone [screen] locked. About 10 months into our marriage, I noticed the change. When I tried to discuss it, he would get angry, and eventually left." (F3)
"I suspected he had affairs with other women. Two or three women confessed their relationships with him. I never saw any signs because … On his phone, I found a degrading conversation towards me, with another girl. When I confronted him, he got furious and divorced me on the spot." (F4)

One participant noted unethical behaviour, not just infidelity, led to her divorce.

"The last straw was when I saw him peeking at my younger sister while she was bathing." (F6 #D1)

Incompatibility and Poor Communication

Many participants cited incompatibility, lack of mutual understanding, and poor communication as major contributors to their divorce.

"In almost everything we had completely different views, leading to constant quarrels and tensions, exacerbated by long-distance. He was very conservative and controlling, not allowing me to leave the house without informing him, even if I needed to go grocery shopping. His need to control intensified my urge for freedom, leading to divorce." (F2#D1)

"His ego was the main problem. He believed his decisions should be final, regardless of my input." (F2#D2)

"The biggest mistake was not choosing the right partner. Our lifestyles, beliefs, and everything else were different. He was very secretive. For example, he secretively smoked, which I hated. We often fought about issues like that. Due to a lack of trust, misunderstandings, and insecurities, we couldn't be happily together." (F5)

Inadequate Housing and In-law Conflicts

Participants noted that the high cost of living in Greater Male' area strains relationships. Financial burdens can create stress and exacerbate conflicts between spouses and with in-laws.
"I was financially dependent and had nowhere to go after marriage. We initially stayed at a friend's place, then moved to my father's house but had to stay in the sitting room with no privacy." (M2)

Financial difficulties often mean tolerating family conflicts. Participants indicated

that in-law involvement or disapproval creates an unhealthy environment, harming their marriages.

> *"My husband and I were happy, but my parents were not satisfied with him. My dad would demean him and raise issues which led to other conflicts." (F1)*

> *"My wife left for her island after hearing from a relative that my parents didn't like her. She didn't verify this, and her absence led my parents to pressure me into divorce her." (M1)*

Congested Living and Financial Instability

Participants highlighted that overcrowded living conditions and financial struggles eroded privacy and affection, fuelling conflicts. They emphasised the need for adequate policies on social housing and reasonable salaries with minimum working hours.

> *"We rented a one-room apartment. His sister moved in with us. Our husbands worked at a resort. On the days my husband came home, we had to rent a room for intimacy. Also, most of his time was spent with his siblings, leaving us no privacy or affection." (F5)*

> *"Couples don't get enough time together because of work. High living expenses force both partners to work long hours. If affordable housing and healthy salaries with fewer working hours were available, many marital problems could be solved. When we're unhappy, small issues seem like huge problems and intensify conflicts." (F1)*

Marrying for the Wrong Reasons

Half of the female participants admitted they married for the wrong reasons. Some sought freedom from conservative parents, while others married for convenience.

> *"My parents were very conservative with strict rules. We couldn't go out with boyfriends or bring them home and had to be back by 10 pm even if we were with girls. I wanted freedom and agreed to marry." (F1)*

> *"… [at the time I was living at father's home], I jumped into marriage to move to my maternal home not because I was ready for marriage." (F6)*

The study also revealed cases where spouses deceived their partners to get married. Two women divorced after discovering the deception.

> *""Three months into marriage, I found out he married me to win a bet. He made a lot of money out of it. He wanted to marry me because I belong to Male' and have a house here." (F1)*

> *""Before marriage, we had plans for managing issues from his previous marriage. He agreed until our wedding day. Despite this, I married him as we had come so far… He wanted to marry his children's mother as a second wife. He moved in*

with his previous wife, leaving me alone. There remained no purpose in staying married." (F6)

Domestic Violence

Two of the female participants experienced domestic violence from their intimate partners, and one of the two men admitted to physical fights in their marriage.

"The final straw for our divorce was violence. I locked the door to confront him about my suspicions of his affairs. In the heat of the moment, he choked me and divorced me." (F3)

"Due to misunderstandings and insecurities, we couldn't be happy together. Initially, he would hurt himself out of anger, but later he started physically and mentally abusing me. He kicked my backbone on two different occasions, and on another he ripped off my clothes during a fight, that was when I decided to leave. He also checked my phone secretly and broke it several times." (F5)

Substance Abuse

Some participants mentioned substance abuse, including drugs and alcohol, as factors contributing to marital breakdowns. One participant emphasised the need for stronger policies on rehabilitation to help substance abusers reintegrate as productive members of society.

"He was an alcoholic. He tried to hide it from me. Every weekend, he claimed to work but went to nearby resorts or safaris to drink and party, which led to affairs and ultimately our divorce." (F4)

Women Empowerment

One participant's decision to work outside the home caused conflict with her husband, while another participant said her controlling husband opposed her employment.

"Since my husband started using drugs, our financial difficulties increased, and I had to find a job to support our family, but he didn't like it. But I didn't resign from my job because I had to take care of four children, and I was pregnant with the fifth child." (F6)

Regrets and the Impact of Divorce

Among the six female participants (13 cases of divorce), women initiated seven divorces, while the two male participants (with 3 divorces) initiated all their divorces (see Table 1). When asked about regrets, all six women expressed no regrets about their divorces, viewing them positively.

"I cannot imagine having a family with such a person." (F1)

> *"Though I have a child with him, he was not a good father or husband. I believe I can raise my child better away from him." (F5)*

Conversely, the two male participants regretted their first divorces.

> *"I later realised we could have solved the issues and continued our marriage. If we had ignored issues with other family members and focused on each other, we could have been happy." (M1 #D1)*

Despite not regretting their divorces, most participants faced emotional and financial hardships post-divorce. Three women reported societal stigmatisation.

> *"I was very depressed after my first divorce and later diagnosed with depression. Things worsened after my second divorce, and I even had suicidal thoughts." (F1 #D1 & #D2)*

> *"We were both shattered by the divorce. It took one and a half years to recover." (M2)*

> *"I faced financial difficulties and societal judgement when I initiated divorce. People would say, 'He spends on you and the kids, what is wrong with you?' Others would claim, 'For the sake of kids, their dads are the best option.' Such comments were hard to tolerate." (F2)*

> *"Our society needs to be more civilised. There is pressure on divorced women to remarry quickly, and many see divorced women as having low value ('not-marriage material'), approaching them only for sexual purposes." (F5)*

Measures to Minimise Divorce Prevalence

The Family Act (4/2000) was introduced to reduce divorces in the Maldives. This section covers participants' views on the family law and related policies, including suggestions for amendments, reconciliation services, marriage counselling, and awareness programmes.

Legal Framework on Marriage and Divorce

Participants were asked whether stricter family regulations could lower divorce rates. Most believed it would not help, as it could force individuals to remain in unhealthy relationships. They suggested that policies should address the root causes of divorce and be effectively implemented:

> *"Tightening the divorce process won't help. Couples should be allowed to divorce easily, even with children, as staying in an unhealthy relationship negatively affects everyone." (F6)*

> *"Even if the law is strict, it's not implemented well in here." (F3)*

One participant suggested amendments to the legal framework.

"Judges should adhere strictly to the Family Act. Also, the current insufficient child maintenance payment (MVR 2000) should be increased. Fathers who don't pay should have their payments deducted directly from their salaries. The Court should follow up on such negligence without burdening the children's mother to lodge a separate court case." (F5)

Participants had mixed views on the reconciliation services provided by the Family Court:

"Judges should attempt reconciliation more effectively. When I mentioned in court that my husband was having an affair, the judge didn't even ask about reconciliation. My divorce might have been avoided if the judge had intervened." (F5 #D2)

"When someone decides to divorce, it's difficult to change their mind, especially without positive change from the other spouse." (F3 D1)

Marriage and Relationship Counselling

Participants further emphasised the importance of relationship counselling services external to the Family Court and the need to make these services available in the islands:

"Currently, we solve problems through family and friends, who are often biased. Professional counselling would be more effective." (F2)

"Counselling could help couples facing issues without ending their marriage." (F4)

"Counselling should be professional and available in the islands, not just in the city." (M1)

"To be effective, counselling should be introduced with well-trained professionals." (M2)

"Our community stigmatises therapy. Awareness is needed to make these services socially acceptable. The service should also be affordable." (F1)

Awareness on Marriage and Family Building

Participants criticised the Family Court's awareness programme on the marriage and intimate partner relationships as ineffective.

"The day we went, only two facilitators were available. They conducted two sessions, and we received certificates. The sessions were boring, merely lectures with no discussions--one covered marriage from a religious perspective, and the other focused on family building." (F1)

"Instead of lecture format, it would be more engaging to use real-life situations or

discussions based on video clips." (F3)

Despite these criticisms, participants acknowledged the programme's potential value.

"I didn't attend as I wasn't informed, but I think it could be useful at some point. A little knowledge is better than none." (F6)

"It should be mandatory for anyone getting married, even for a second marriage, if they haven't completed the programme." (F2)

Further suggestions emphasised inclusivity and improved timing.

"We married on the island, but his programme hasn't been introduced there. According to my friends, the four-hour session is dull." (M1)

"One of my friends married a foreigner, and they both participated in the programme. He mentioned that he informed the facilitators his to-be-wife didn't understand Dhivehi, but they suggested he explain the content to her later. I would suggest conducting the programme in other languages, at least English." (M2)

Participants highlighted the need for different approaches and better timing for awareness sessions.

"In addition to the current programme, awareness should target those over 18 and cover what to consider when choosing a partner." (F4)

"Attending the programme just days before the wedding leads to a focus on completion rather than engagement with the material. The timing and format aren't ideal. Some may want to ask questions but feel hesitant in front of strangers. … Information about marriage and family life should start earlier, such as in Grade 10 or senior high school, or at least in higher education, to increase its effectiveness." (F1)

Many participants noted they or their spouses did not fully understand the responsibilities of making a marriage work. They felt that greater awareness of the possible challenges could have made a difference in their relationships.

"I believe I married too early and was unaware of what a marriage entails, including its responsibilities." (F2)

"I wish I had been more aware of what married life entails, and how to choose a compatible partner. I gave my 100 percent to all my marriages, adjusting to every situation, but our marriages failed due to incompatibility." (F6)

"I wish I knew more about problem-solving, handling issues more maturely, and communicating effectively to resolve conflicts, instead of exaggerating them." (M1)

Discussion

Analysis of Contributing Factors for Divorce

This study identifies several social, cultural, and individual factors contributing to divorce in the Maldives, consistent with previous research elsewhere (e.g. Gravningen et al., 2017; Gunay et al., 2019). Key factors include immaturity, infidelity, incompatibility, financial instability, congested living conditions, marrying for the wrong reasons, domestic violence, substance abuse, and women's employment. Notably, congested living conditions and marrying for inappropriate motives were more pronounced in this study, highlighting unique societal challenges in the Maldives.

Immaturity and Early Marriage

Immaturity among young adults entering first marriages emerged as a significant factor. This aligns with research findings elsewhere (e.g. Wolcott & Hughes, 1999; Lowenstein, 2005), and local reports from the World Bank (2014), which notes that many young people in the Maldives face pressure to marry early without adequate preparation. Participants often cited societal expectations or a desire for independence from restrictive family environments as reasons for marrying early, only to find themselves unprepared for the realities of married life. This reflects a lack of understanding of the sanctity of marriage and its responsibilities.

Financial Instability and Living Conditions

Financial difficulties and cramped living conditions are significant stressors in marriages, consistent with existing literature (HRCM, 2008; UNFPA, 2018). Many couples live in extended family setups or in small spaces, which intensifies conflicts. The need for both partners to work long hours to make ends meet exacerbates these challenges, as highlighted by participants and also evidenced by prior research (e.g. Wolcott & Hughes, 1999). Addressing these issues requires policies promoting affordable housing and financial support for young couples.

Societal and Cultural Factors

Apart from early marriage pressures, cultural norms favouring extended family involvement and in-law interference significantly contribute to marital conflicts. Consistent with previous research conducted in several Asian countries (Apostolou et al., 2018), this finding highlights the need for cultural awareness programmes and legal reforms to protect individual rights within marriages. Findings highlight the undue involvement of in-laws—whether direct or indirect—can provoke conflicts, exacerbating marital discord.

Infidelity and Domestic Violence

Infidelity, often stemming from unresolved conflicts and emotional disconnection, is a prominent cause of divorce consistent with prior research (Bolhari et al., 2012;

Eslami et al., 2018; Gravningen et al., 2017; Scott et al., 2013). Participants noted instances where infidelity led to domestic violence, reflecting broader societal issues around gender roles and power dynamics. Islam enshrines men as guardians for women in marriages but not dominators. However, it is concerning that abuse is often tolerated and justified by victims citing cultural acceptance of the husband as a dominant figure, rather than recognising marriage as an equal partnership (HRCM et al., 2020).

Incompatibility and Lack of Social Skills

In alignment with previous research such as Bolhari et al. (2012) and Habibi et al. (2015), poor intellectual and social skills were cited by the participants as contributors to marital incompatibility, leading to misunderstandings and dissatisfaction. Participants stressed the need for premarital education programmes to help in selecting compatible partners.

Substance abuse

Despite the illegality of alcohol consumption in the Maldives, the presence of at least one case of alcohol intoxication among the eight informants in this study suggests that such incidents are not uncommon locally and is consistent with findings from international literature (e.g. Scott et al., 2013). Substance abuse exacerbates relationship problems, leading to financial strain and emotional distance. This underscores the need for targeted interventions to address addiction issues within the context of marriages.

Women's Empowerment

While women's employment was not cited as a direct cause of divorce, it was often indicated as a contributing factor as all female participants-initiated divorce and had some level of financial autonomy. Women's financial independence enables them to leave toxic relationships (Apostolou et al., 2018). Existing literature suggests that women's entry into the workforce can lead to higher divorce rates in contexts where traditional gender roles and societal norms prevail (Bolhari et al., 2012; Lowenstein 2005; World Bank, 2014;). This study highlights conservative beliefs, gender inequality, controlling behaviours by spouses, and insecurities as underlying issues affecting marital dynamics. Empowering women economically through initiatives like prenuptial agreements could potentially enhance their autonomy and protect their interests within marriages.

Other Contributing Factors

Additional factors identified in international literature, such as low educational levels, non-traditional family values, premarital pregnancy, sexual dissatisfaction, role conflicts, attitudes towards divorce, responsibility for stepchildren, mental illness, financial support for single parents, and liberal divorce laws (Apostolou et al., 2018; Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 2007; Eslami et al., 2018; Zandiyeh & Yousefi, 2014;) were not highlighted in this study. These factors were not highlighted by participants in this study, suggesting a need for broader exploration

using a mixed methods approach for triangulation in future research efforts to comprehensively understand divorce dynamics in the Maldives.

Divorce Distress

While this study aimed to deeply understand the factors contributing to divorce, interviewees also reported significant distress resulting from divorce. Consistent with prior research that highlights the detrimental impact of divorce on families and communities (Fagan & Churchill, 2012), this study reveals that divorcees in the Maldives often face severe depression, emotional turmoil, and financial difficulties. One participant described her son's substance abuse following the family breakdown, attributing it to the father's irresponsibility and inadequate government policies. She explained that she had no choice but to allow the father custody of the child as she had four other children and two jobs, with no one at home to take care of them. This highlights the need for better childcare facilities for working parents.

Divorce negatively impacts emotional and psychological development (Fagan & Churchill, 2012). Participants shared experiences of children often misadjusting and their emotional distress following separation, highlighting a lack of psychosocial support during such times. However, the study also found that in some cases, divorce can provide relief by removing them from toxic environments. Cui & Fincham (2010) noted that children of divorced parents are more likely to view divorce as an acceptable solution to interpersonal issues.

While divorce and remarriages are common in the Maldives, this study identified persistent stigmatisation, particularly against women, who face character judgments and sexual harassment post-divorce. One participant noted her father's disapproval of her remarriage to a previously married man, illustrating that stigma can affect both genders.

Further large-scale research is needed to generalise these findings and develop public sensitisation programmes on divorce issues in Maldivian society.

Measures to Minimise Divorce Rates and Negative Impacts

Divorce remains prevalent in the Maldives despite state measures such as the Family Act (2000), reconciliation services, and marriage awareness programmes. The Family Act outlines clear procedures for marriage and divorce and criminalises extra-judicial divorce. Further, the Family Court Regulation (2011) mandates marriage awareness programmes targeted at reducing divorce rates. However, DJA statistics (2019) indicate these measures have been largely ineffective.

While liberal divorce laws are often cited as contributing to high divorce rates (Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 2007; Zandiyeh & Yousefi, 2014), this study found that the Family Act is not a primary cause. Participants noted its strict procedures might lower divorce rates but could also trap couples in toxic relationships. Instead, they advocated for multi-dimensional policies and programmes to comprehensively address the root causes of divorce.

The study emphasises the need to reassess existing regulations. For instance, Article 23 of the Family Act (2000) declares extra-judicial divorce an offense punishable by fines or detention. However, this measure has proven ineffective, with many husbands still divorcing their wives outside the court in the heat of the moment. Participants also suggested increasing child maintenance payments from MVR 2000 to enhance accountability for fathers and recommended that the Court manage these payments to ensure consistency, reducing the burden on unemployed mothers and potentially discouraging men from leaving their marriages.

Relationship counselling or couple therapy, widely used globally to address relationship issues, is currently largely inaccessible in the Maldives. Participants emphasised the need for such services, as professional counselling could strengthen marriages and reduce divorce rates (Snyder et al., 2006). It was recommended that such services be provided externally to the Family Court, either free of charge or at least at an affordable price. Raising public awareness about these services is also crucial for changing societal perceptions.

Internationally, pre-marital awareness programmes (Carroll & Doherty, 2003) and Preparation and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) (Berlin, 2004) strengthen intimate partner relationships. Contrastingly based on participants' perceptions, this study found the Marriage Awareness Programme in the Greater Male' to be ineffective. Participants criticised its mandatory nature, lack of responsibility from organisers, inadequate content, and poor delivery.

Recommendations

This in-depth study found that, similar to other countries, divorce in the Maldives is not caused by a single factor but rather by unresolved conflicts. The study identified multiple risk factors, emphasising the need for a multidimensional approach to policy and programme implementation. It also highlighted the inadequacy of current measures to reduce divorce rates in the Maldives.

To address broken families and mitigate social issues (HRCM et al., 2020) authorities should invest in strengthening family cohesion through comprehensive policies and programmes. The recommendations, presented in Tables 2 and 3, are based on the findings of this study.

Table 2. Policy Recommendations

Issue	Implication	Recommendation
Financial instability and working culture	Policy	Develop strategies for economic stability and flexible work policies to balance caregiving roles and work-life. Revise wage structures to ensure reasonable wages and working hours.
Congested living condition	Policy	Amend and strengthen policies on social housing. Fully implement the Decentralization Act to reduce congestion in Greater Male' area.
Substance abuse/ alcoholism	Policy/ Practice	Strengthen laws and fully implement the act on drug abuse. Raise awareness and enhance rehabilitation programmes.

Women employment and gender parity	Policy / Practice	Fully implement the Gender Equality Act. Raise awareness on gender equality, incorporate it into the curriculum, and provide childcare centres. Promote the use of pre-nuptial agreements.
Strengthening Family Act and reconciliation services	Policy	Judges must adhere to the Family Act and related regulations, ensuring effective implementation, including marriage reconciliation.
Lack of relationship counselling	Policy / Practice	Encourage external parties to provide relationship counselling services external to the Family Court at affordable prices. Educate the public on the benefits of counselling

Table 3. Recommendations on implementation and awareness

Issue	Implication	Recommendation
High rate of early marriages and lack of marital awareness	Practice	Authorities should intervene to reduce early marriages and enhance awareness about marital responsibilities for youths and adults.
In-law conflicts	Practice	Raise public awareness on honouring the spouse without dishonouring parents from an Islamic perspective.
Infidelity	Practice	Introduce awareness programmes on healthy marriages and responsible behaviour. Incorporate ethical values in the national curriculum.
Incompatibility	Practice	Develop culturally responsive interventions to enhance communication and interpersonal skills. Educate youths on selecting compatible partners.
Negative impact of Divorce	Practice	Provide psycho-social support for families and run sensitisation programmes to reduce stigma against divorcees, especially divorced women.
Effectiveness of pre-marital education	Practice	Develop a comprehensive pre-marital education programme, including provisions for second marriages and foreigners. Introduce programmes in other islands and revise current practices.

Future Research and Study Limitations

This study addresses a deeply personal subject, which may potentially lead participants to withhold information. Recruiting male participants was particularly challenging, resulting in a smaller sample size than initially planned. Additionally, while the study offers in-depth insights into divorce factors from a small sample, the qualitative approach was not intended for and generalisability of findings. Future research should focus on the following areas:

- Conduct large-scale quantitative studies to determine prevalence of causes of divorce.
- Investigate societal and cultural pressures related to early marriage.
- Study flexible work cultures for community-friendly implementation in the Maldives.
- Analyse the impact of women's employment on divorce rates.
- Examine the societal stigmatisation of divorcees.

Conclusions

The high divorce rate in the Maldives, particularly among young adults, remains a concern. This research identified nine primary causes of divorce: immaturity, infidelity, incompatibility, financial instability, congested living conditions, marrying for the wrong reasons, domestic violence, substance abuse, and women employment. The study revealed that women generally viewed their divorces as well-considered decisions, despite the emotional toll, while male participants often expressed regret, indicating more impulsive decisions.

These findings underscore the need for greater awareness of the complexities and responsibilities of marriage, with an emphasis on choosing a compatible partner. Participants called for more engaging, inclusive, and timely marital education programmes from the Family Court. The study also highlighted gaps in the implementation of the Family Act and reconciliation services. Addressing divorce in the Maldives requires a holistic approach, including legal reforms, targeted interventions for substance abuse and domestic violence, promoting premarital education programmes, establishing affordable childcare facilities to support working parents, ensuring economic stability, and work-life balance conducive to cohesive, healthy families. By fostering understanding and supportive environments, policymakers can work towards reducing divorce rates and promoting healthier marriages in the Maldives.

Declaration

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