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RESEARCH PAPER

Breaking the Chains: Exploring the Barriers of Carrying out a Marital Relationship in Women Seeking Khula

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the psychosocial barriers that women confront while seeking khula (Islamic divorce initiated by the wife) in marital relationships. Qualitative research approach with an ethnographic design was used. Purposive sampling for data collection through interviews was used until at the point of saturation. Interviews were conducted with informed consent, targeting women who had filed for khula and undergone separation. NVivo 12 Plus software was used for data management and analysis. The results suggested that women experience emotional difficulties such as fear, anxiety, guilt, shame, and emotional trauma, along with psychological issues like low self-esteem and manipulation. Societal, legal, and parenting issues also contribute to their pursuit of khula. The research highlights the need for support systems and interventions to assist women in navigating the khula process and promoting gender equality in marriage.

| **KEYWORDS** | Khula, Marital Relationship, Psychosocial Barriers |

Introduction

Marriage, a complex institution, encompasses legal, social, emotional, and cultural facets, driven by closeness, cooperation, and intimacy founded on respect, trust, and communication, essential for marital satisfaction. The dynamic nature of marriage is evident in the Islamic tradition's "Nikkah" agreement, allowing for divorce through "Khula," which grants women the right to initiate it (Muzaffar, Yaseen, & Ahmad, 2018; Shackelford & Buss, 2000).

Worldwide, diverse marriage laws and customs lead to varying divorce practices, ranging from "male-only divorce" in some regions to more equitable divorce rights in others. In Islamic culture, the "Nikkah" ceremony signifies the importance of marriage, offering options like "Talaq" for husbands and "Khula" for wives, reflecting evolving attitudes, particularly in Pakistan. Here, psychosocial factors like overworking, financial challenges, and interpersonal issues influence women's decisions to seek Khula, revealing the impact of resource access on marital dynamics (Nosheen&Muawia, 2022).

Conflict theory, inspired by Karl Marx, underscores the role of socioeconomic inequality and conflicts in shaping power dynamics within marriages, emphasizing the importance of addressing entitlement issues in relationships, highlighting their impact on spouses and children.

Literature Review

Divorce rates are on the rise globally due to various factors. In Pakistan, unemployment and poverty contribute to rising divorce rates, emphasizing the importance of family support in coping with divorce (Oldham, 2021). Factors like sexual dissatisfaction, personality changes, communication problems, financial troubles, abuse, and infidelity

affect divorce, especially among young couples. Domestic violence, external factors, and unequal household responsibilities also play a role.

Addressing domestic abuse is crucial, especially in cases where women initiate "khula." In regions like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, divorce decisions are influenced by factors like media addiction, family involvement, adultery, marital violence, partner personality, financial concerns, and infertility. Social and economic factors, including domestic abuse, substance abuse, arranged marriages, husbands' education and income, and educational attainment, contribute to Pakistan's rising divorce rate. These factors are often linked to in-law interference, compatibility issues, extramarital affairs, early marriages, lack of education, financial problems, forced marriages, and inequity (Ziaee et al., 2014; Ibrar, 2017; Mohlatlole, 2018; Naab et al., 2019; Rizwan, 2021; Akter, 2012; Coşkun, 2020; Mahmood, 2016; Sultana, 2021).

In Islamic law, women seeking "khula" often face complex psychosocial obstacles that make leaving an unhappy marriage difficult. Pakistan recorded over 6,000 divorces granted in the first seven months of 2022, with another 7,000 divorce petitions pending, averaging 100 to 150 divorce cases submitted daily. Divorce is a common choice for both genders, with victims on both sides. This study explores the psychological and societal barriers women encounter in maintaining healthy marriages and aims to conduct more extensive research on the triggers of "khula" in females, including rehabilitation programs, seminars, and talks to help women overcome marital relationship challenges (Rubab & Alam, 2022).

Material and Methods

The research design employed in this study was ethnographic, utilizing a qualitative approach. The sample size consisted of eight participants (N=8), chosen through purposive sampling techniques from Lahore, Pakistan, all of whom had filed for khula and obtained separation. Inclusion criteria comprised women who were 18 years of age or older and had filed for khula resulting in separation through the court. Exclusion criteria encompassed women who were divorced by their husbands and those with pending khula cases. Data collection involved the use of demographic sheets and a semi-structured interview protocol to gather information. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurrent themes in qualitative data and the collected demographic data is detailed below.

Table1
Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Name and age	Religion	Socio Economic status	Family structure	Children	Language	Geographic Location	Employment Status
S.A (32yrs.)	Islam	Middle	Nuclear	None	Punjabi	Lahore	Unemployed
T.B (30yrs.)	Islam	Upper	Nuclear	Three	Punjabi	Lahore	Unemployed
B.M (28yrs.)	Islam	Middle	Joint	One	Urdu	Lahore	Employed
Z.W (27yrs.)	Islam	Middle	Nuclear	No	Urdu	Lahore	Unemployed
M.B (23yrs.)	Islam	Upper	Nuclear	No	Urdu	Lahore	Unemployed
A.A (35yrs.)	Islam	Middle	Joint	Two	Saraiki	Lahore	Employed
T.W (25yrs.)	Islam	Middle	Nuclear	Two	Punjabi	Lahore	Employed
K.F (27yrs.)	Islam	Middle	Nuclear	No	Urdu	Lahore	Unemployed

Questions that were asked of the participants are given below.

1. Can you tell me a little about your background and your current marital status?

2. How would you define a happy life from your perspective?

3. Which factors do you think are there that hinder a happy marital relationship?

4. How do in-laws contribute to the dynamics of a married relationship?

5. Explain the role of the paternal home in married life?

6. What were some of the challenges or barriers you faced when seeking Khula?

7. Explain legal barriers or obstacles that you faced when seeking Khula?

8. Would you like to say something more about your experience seeking khula or the barriers you faced?

Results and Discussion

In order to contextualize participant experiences, thematic analysis was used to identify recurrent themes in qualitative data. Through manual data transcription, translation, and administration, this methodical procedure, which was influenced by Braun and Clarke (2006), produced 6 main themes, 22 subthemes, and related codes. A summary of all themes and codes is provided below.

Table2
Schematic Description of Major Themes, Themes and Codes of Psychosocial Barriers in Carrying Out a Marital Relationship

Sr.	Major Themes	Themes	Codes
1.	Emotional Challenges	• Fear and Anxiety • Guilt and Shame • Emotional Trauma	Apprehension of being in physical harm or in danger, Afraid, Fear of being judged, social isolation, Nervousness of relationship strain, Marriage disappointment, Marital discord, Insomnia or trouble sleeping, Fearful anticipation, Humiliation, Blame, Self-condemnation, Marriage regret, Embarrassment, Consuming Self-Disgrace.
2.	Psychological Factors	• Low Self-esteem and Self-worth • Emotional Manipulation and Gaslighting • Fear of Unknown Future	Self-doubt, Insecurity, Manipulative tactics, Inferior, Self- perception challenges, Constant self-criticism, Persuasion, Anxious, Self-negativity, Ambiguous, feeling unworthy or inadequate, Fear of making mistakes, Future anxiety, doubting about sanity.
3.	Societal Factors	• Stigma and Social Pressure • Cultural Norms and Expectations • Lack of Supportive Networks	Fear of judgment and negative perceptions, societal pressure to maintain the marriage, Disapproval, social exclusion, Traditional gender roles, and expectations, Cultural pressure, Cultural expectations of obedience and submission,

			Expectations of women to prioritize family over personal needs, cultural adaption, lack of empathy, Societal perceptions of women who seek khula, Isolation, and loneliness in the decision-making process.
4.	Legal and Practical Considerations	• Limited Access to Legal Resources • Financial Defense • Custody and Childcare Concerns	Financial constraints, lack of legal knowledge, weak support systems, lack of financial security, economic dependency, financial stability, legal advocacy, childcare arrangements, Economic Protection, Financial safeguarding, Parental Responsibilities, Childcare Priorities, study the court process for seeking khula.
5.	Parenting Challenges	• Emotional Impact on Children • Balancing Personal Needs and Shared Custody Arrangements • Maintaining Parent-Child Relationships • Single Parenting	Child Well-being, Emotional Resilience, Co-Parenting, Emotional regulation, Self-Care Struggles, Attachment Bond, Conflict resolution, Parent-child attachment, Communication Strategies, Support Systems, Financial Challenges, Children's Trauma, Self-Preservation and Custody, and Single Parenting Struggles.
6.	Empowerment and Agency	• Breaking Gender Norms • Strength and Resilience • Self-Discovery and Personal Growth • Self-Advocacy and Assertion for Women's Rights • Self-Liberation	Gender expectations, Gender discrimination, overcoming adversity, Self-awareness and reflection, liberation from oppression, Gender Revolution, Inner Power, Rights Activism, and Empowered Decision-Making.

Emotional Challenges

Emotional difficulties result from barriers to emotional fulfillment and control, such as financial stress, social isolation, and fear of criticism. In addition to experiencing emotions of fear, worry, guilt, humiliation, and emotional distress, women seeking khula frequently struggle with emotional challenges like social isolation, marital emotional trauma, and fear of defamation (Khan et al., 2021).

"I was always afraid of his anger and there percussions of expressing my emotions or wishes. I could no longer live in the fear of being entangled in a controlling and unloving relationship."

Psychological Factors

A woman's psychological wellbeing is severely impacted by the emotional toll of pursuing khula, which includes low self-esteem, emotional manipulation, and fear of an unclear future. It can cause mental health conditions such depression and anxiety and frequently results in divorce from unsatisfactory or abusive marriages (Zahid et al., 2020).

"Because I feared being rejected and criticized, I was unable to speak up or set boundaries. I was continuously led to question my own reality and sanity by him."

Societal Factors

Islamic divorce (khula), which causes marital dissatisfaction, can be spurred on by cultural standards, a lack of support, and societal pressure (Akhter, 2019).

"From an early age, I was taught that a woman's ultimate goal should be marriage and that, once she had met her spouse, it was her duty to protect the relationship at all costs."

Legal and Practical Considerations

Khula-seeking women must spend time and effort navigating difficult legal procedures with limited access to legal support. They assess the social stigma and broader societal repercussions against practical considerations like finances (financial defense) and child custody while making decisions (Al-Modallal, 2017).

"For me, gaining Khula was like traversing a maze without a guide since there was no accessible legal counsel to help me understand my rights and make a strong argument."

Parenting Challenges

Women in unhappy marriages frequently think about obtaining khula due to parenting issues, such as arguments over child upbringing, difficulty with co-parenting, and the emotional impact on children. These issues eventually affect the choice to file for divorce and manage single parenting since they raise parental stress, lower marital satisfaction, and increase the risk of divorce (Alami, 2021).

"I couldn't ignore how my children were affected by the ongoing conflict. They started to become tense and reclusive. My first priority is my children. In order to establish a calm and nurturing environment where kids could feel comfortable, I had to prioritize their emotional well-being and seek khula."

Empowerment and Agency

When pursuing khula, empowerment helps women to combat restrictive conventions, standing up for their rights, and prioritize their wellbeing. Ali and Khalid (2020) emphasize that empowered women may use khula to develop personal growth and a more contented, independent existence by navigating financial and social challenges, prioritizing their health, and breaking free from toxic relationships.

"I came to the realization that continuing in a stale and unfulfilling marriage was impeding my personal development. I had to get out and look for fresh opportunities."

Discussion

Women's rights in Pakistan remain severely disturbing, causing substantial changes in marital dynamics despite the fact that women constitute half the population and considerably contribute to societal advancement (Zafeer, 2022; Stern, 2018; Hussain et al., 2019; Ali et al., 2013). Emotional Challenges, Psychological Factors, Societal Factors, Legal and Practical Considerations, Empowerment and Agency, and Parenting Challenges are just a few of the psychosocial barriers that women seeking khula must overcome, according to the study that reveals 22 themes over six broad categories. It highlights the emotional and psychological toll that divorce stigma, emotional manipulation, and societal pressures have had on these women. Limited access to legal resources and financial dependence are

worsening their vulnerability. The khula process is made more difficult by practical difficulties like child custody conflicts in addition to emotional, psychological, and cultural barriers. In order to solve these complex problems, comprehensive support networks are crucial for empowering these women and creating a more encouraging environment.

Conclusion

This study focused on the barriers that women encounter as it addresses the absence of empirical knowledge regarding the reasons why they seek khula in Pakistan. Women deliberately choose Khula, influenced by emotional difficulties, psychological issues, social pressures, legal and practical issues, parenting concerns, and empowerment. These elements contribute a role in Pakistan's increasing khula rates. Women frequently experience emotional turbulence, social constraints, and legal complexity, which complicate their decision-making. They need to be empowered, resilient, and have access to resources and assistance in order to prioritize their well-being in the face of these difficulties.

Recommendations

A small sample size and inadequate diversity may make it difficult to generalize conclusions on khula-seeking women. Sensitivity could compromise the validity of the results due to social desirability bias. The effects and influence of psychosocial factors over the long term for a deeper understanding, longitudinal data and comparison groups are required.

By employing a mixed-methods approach and including quantitative and qualitative data, future research will more effectively understand khula. Clearer cause-and-effect relationships would be established by include a control group that did not seek khula. A more

The results of the study can help mental health practitioners understand the particular psychological difficulties that women who seek khula have, enabling the development of specialized therapy modalities. Counselors and therapists can help people and couples explore options, comprehend their rights, and deal with emotional problems related to khula by helping them better grasp the decision-making process. Clients can successfully negotiate these complications with the aid of a dynamic counseling strategy that takes into account psychological, social, cultural, and legal factors.

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