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Fakir Al Gharaibeh

Muneera Majed Al Ali

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## **The Voices of the Divorced: Reasons for Early Divorce among Emiratis in Abu Dhabi**

By Fakir Al Gharaibeh<sup>1</sup> and Muneera Majed Al Ali<sup>2</sup>

### **Abstract**

There has been a growing interest, especially among Emirati organizations concerned with family development, in the rising rates of early divorce in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The purpose of this research is to identify the reasons for early divorce among Emiratis. The authors selected 2,162 Emirati early divorcees who were registered with the Family Development Foundation (FDF) in Abu Dhabi and who received services from the (FDF) between 2012 and 2018. Among those, 200 divorcees agreed to participate in this study. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS. Results found that the most common reasons for early divorce were the lack of marital relations, partners' bad behavior, and domestic violence. Other reasons frequently quoted by the participants included the partner's personality type, health issues, and the partner's physical appearance. Findings will offer useful guidelines to the policymakers, service providers, social workers, and experts to improve the national-level family support interventions to prevent early divorce.

*Keywords:* Early divorce, UAE, Separation, Family conflict, Women, Social policy

### **Introduction**

The United Arab Emirates is a federation of seven emirates: Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ras Al Khaimah, Ajman, Umm Al Quwain, and Fujairah. The country covers an area of 83,600 km<sup>2</sup>, and has a population of 9,890,000 comprised of both local citizens and expatriates from about 200 different nationalities of whom almost two-thirds are male according to 2020 figures (The United Arab Emirates in Brief, 2021).

The Emirati society considers the family unit as an essential part of its social structure: a component that is significantly important to nation-building and progress along with its economic, cultural, religious, and health systems. A typical Emirati family is an extended tightly knit unit. In addition, marriage is the only socially and religiously acceptable form of relationship between a man and a woman.

The Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Authority's (2020) report in UAE cited 4,213 divorce cases of all nationalities (Emirati and non-Emirati nationals), including 1,333 that occurred during the first five years of marriage (early divorce) and (751 cases out of 1,333 of divorce) that occurred in Abu Dhabi. The number of marriages registered in the UAE in the same year reached 17,653 of which 6,539 cases were registered in Abu Dhabi.

An increase in the number of divorce cases in the UAE can be attributed to several social factors. In recent decades, the Emirati family structure has undergone considerable changes due to widespread affluence and substantial economic and technological development.

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<sup>1</sup> Fakir Al Gharaibeh is a Professor of Social Work and Social Policy and Director of the Research Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates. His research is focused on mental health, social innovation, divorce, refugees and war, child abuse, criminal justice, and Arab youth. Al Gharaibeh is a consultant in family policies with many agencies; he has published many articles both in Jordan and internationally. He received his Ph.D. in Social Work and Social Policy from the Dept. of Social Work and Social Policy and the Centre for Human Rights Education, Curtin University of Technology, Australia. [falgharaibeh@sharjah.ac.ae](mailto:falgharaibeh@sharjah.ac.ae)

<sup>2</sup> Muneera Majed Muneera Majed Al Ali is a Director of Studies and Research Department at the Family Development Foundation in Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates. She holds a master's degree in social and Human Sciences from Paris-Sorbonne University 2016. With more than 15 years of experience in preparing Scientific Research, Opinion Polls, Research Management and Programs Evaluation.

For example, there has been a noticeable shift from an extended family structure to a nuclear one. This is mainly because women and men have started to assume different roles in society, and social relations have been seriously impacted by social media. Moreover, many Emirati families rely on domestic help, and more men marry non-nationals.

Additionally, emotional disengagement and feelings of loneliness and dissatisfaction lead to separation. Marital problems undoubtedly reflect a lack of harmony and happiness in the family. Partners feel dissatisfied with their marriages if their physical, emotional, and social needs go unmet. In other words, the costs of continuing the relationship seem higher than the rewards, as explained by proponents of the social exchange theory.

This study investigates a very important recent phenomenon that may have a serious impact on the community of Abu Dhabi. The increasing rate of early divorce in the UAE has caused considerable concern especially as it affects the divorcees' attitudes towards their own lives and future happiness and influences young people's perceptions of marriage and family life. This study presents some models and recommendations for professional social intervention that help inform future national strategies to counter the issue of early divorce. For this study, early divorce is defined as the legal and religious dissolution of marriage during the first five years among Emirati nationals.

### **The Right of Divorce**

This part will discuss Islamic feminism in relation to divorce, and the stages of divorce.

In reference to empowerment, particularly in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Al Gharaibeh (2015) stated that, despite some of the dominant tribal and traditional beliefs that downplayed women's role in society, globalization and modernization have reduced barriers to equality for both genders. Globalization has strengthened and entrenched the role of women in a variety of fields, including health and education, and assisted them in embracing modernity in accordance with Islamic regulations, which focus on attaining gender equality and balance.

Although Islamic feminism is not a new concept, the word is a point of contention. Many Muslims, particularly conservatives, consider feminism to be a Western creation that is essentially incompatible with Islam (Hussein, 2019). The Islamic feminist viewpoint, which places emphasis on women's empowerment and full equality in public and private life for all Muslims, regardless of gender, has focused on the role of Muslim women scholars on various social and political issues. According to Al-Sharmani (2014) Islamic feminism is a contemporary interpretive knowledge initiative that critically engages with Islamic religious sciences and is motivated by the issue of gender justice. These endeavors, which have been dubbed "Islamic Feminism," are carried out by Muslim women scholars from many nations who are dedicated to their religious faith and seeking to produce alternative, gender-sensitive religious knowledge. With regards to marital relationships, Islamic feminism, as a subset of feminism that focuses on women's roles in Islam, seeks equality among all Muslims regardless of gender especially when it comes to marital issues. For instance, the right to divorce is not constrained to men but available to women, as well. Although divorce causes a lot of stress, it may sometimes be advantageous for women, especially those who have been mistreated, because it allows them to get out of abusive relationships. Even though in Islam, women have the right to divorce (*khal'a*), women in Gulf societies find it harder to obtain a divorce than men do because of some cultural and social traditions.

According to Al Gharaibeh and Bromfield (2012), for a man to divorce, he could simply pronounce the *talaq* (divorce words) in person, in writing, and even via text message. Under Shari'a (Islamic) law, for a woman to divorce, she must seek a divorce based on specific grounds such as neglect or by practicing *khal'a*, which allows a woman to obtain a divorce for any reason if she gives up her right to alimony and pays back the dowry (*mahr*) she received when she got married. Moreover, child custody is most often granted to the father (Al Gharaibeh and Bromfield, 2012).

To obtain a divorce, the couple must follow specific steps as per the family laws of the UAE if both husband and wife are Muslims. Then, the Sharia law will most likely be applied. The same is likely if the husband is a Muslim and the woman a non-Muslim.

The first step is to register the case by either party at the Family Guidance Section at the respective judicial department. The couple will first need to attend counseling sessions with a court-appointed conciliator. During these sessions, the couple is free to raise their concerns about the marriage in the absence of their legal representatives. Amicable divorces can be reached at this stage provided the couple agrees to draft a settlement based on the parties' mutual understanding and sign it before the conciliator (The United Arab Emirates' Government Portal, 2021).

If one or both partners are determined to divorce, then the conciliator will provide the claimant with a referral letter, permitting them to proceed before the court to conclude their divorce case. The letter can be submitted to the court within three months from the date of issue. Once in court, the particulars of the divorce case fall at the court's discretion and each party has to provide evidence to support their claims against one another as well as in their defense (The United Arab Emirates' Government Portal, 2021).

Bohannon (1970) suggested that couples go through six stages to complete their divorce: emotional divorce, legal divorce, economic divorce, co-parental divorce, community divorce, and finally psychological divorce. These "stages" of divorce can be very taxing experiences for the couples, where they might lose friends and witness their families split. The high emotional, psychological, and potential economic cost could serve as deterrents for divorce and influence couples to seek conciliation before finalizing the divorce. The feminist perspective has generally looked to divorce's potential as a gender equality right. Overall, marital freedom is a key component of a social order committed to ensuring equal citizenship and human dignity for all women, rather than simply a legal remedy for broken marriages (Yefet, 2020). This pressure to reconcile may adversely affect women who are abused and already feel trapped in the relationship. Although divorce requires the negotiation of multiple stages and is disruptive to the family unit, divorce may sometimes be the best course of action for marriages.

For this study, early divorce is defined as the legal and religious dissolution of marriage during the first five years. The study aims to answer the following question: What are the main causes for early divorce in the emirate of Abu Dhabi?

### **Literature on Early Divorce: Global and Gulf Scenarios**

An extensive body of literature has focused on the reasons and consequences of divorce. Despite the fact that divorce can have nearly disastrous emotional, social, economic, and health consequences for the entire family (Al Gharaibeh, 2015; Al Gharaibeh & Bromfield, 2012; Al Gharaibeh & Olimat, 2012; Franiuk et al., 2002; Lansdale & Hetherington, 1990; Zazlow, 1988), research on early divorce has received very limited scientific attention. In the UAE, some evidence from the emirate of Sharjah suggests that a significant number of divorce cases (76%) occur during the first seven years of marriage (Sharjah Family Development Centres, 2008). This and other anecdotal evidence justify the need for rigorous research into the phenomenon of early divorce in the UAE.

Most research conducted on the causes of divorce has come from the Western view. However, research carried out elsewhere has pointed to similar reasons, albeit apparent differences of significance according to the society under investigation. Among the causes indicated are women's independence; early marriage; economic factors; poor intellectual, educational, and social skills; liberal divorce laws; sexual factors; role conflicts; alcoholism and substance abuse; risk-taking behaviour; differences between the partners leading to acrimony; and religious factors (Lowenstein, 2005).

Fortier (2012) conducted three comparative studies on women's divorce (*khal'a*) practices in three countries: Mauritania, Morocco, and Egypt. He contended that several Muslim countries have implemented substantial legislative reforms in recent years, particularly in the areas of marriage (*nikâh or zawaj*) and divorce (*talaq*).

Fortier (2012) confirmed that the right to divorce initiated by women (*khal'a*) is found in the canonical writings of Islamic law (*Sharî'a*), which form the legal foundation of these cultures, although being poorly understood or practiced in Muslim societies. He argued, however, that the condition of Moorish women differed from that of Moroccan or Egyptian women, who rediscovered this right as a result of new personal status legislation. In Morocco, for example, the family code reform of 2004 allowed a woman to add a condition to her marriage contract allowing her the right to divorce if her husband marries another woman (Fortier, 2012). Furthermore, while legislative advances in Egypt and Morocco often concern only urban zones and certain social milieus and are not always applied due to the tradition and the persistence of gender relations, perhaps "Moorish women, supported by their own families, recognize the social importance of their right to divorce. A comparison of the Mauritanian situation with that of other African and Middle Eastern countries, particularly the Egyptian perspective on women initiating the divorce, demonstrates the distinctiveness of women's standing in Moorish society compared to that of other Muslim societies, such as Egypt. (Fortier 2012, p. 155, 156).

Another noteworthy study is by Mendoza et al. (2019) regarding women's empowerment in post-divorce situations. Their study looked at the phenomenological experiences of 20 Egyptian women who had recently divorced. Using a traditional approach to content analysis, five key themes were identified such as expectations before marriage, a secret life, marital dynamics, mental health, and resilience. According to Mendoza et al. (2019), the findings were unexpectedly astounding, as many women reported feeling more resilient and empowered as a result of their post-divorce experience (p. 1).

Al-Nasr (2011) and Al Gharaibeh (2015) confirmed that the status of women in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is fast-changing, resulting in increased divorce rates. The intentions for modernization in this energy-rich region have resulted in unexpected socioeconomic and gender disparities. Women's educational gains have resulted in a gender imbalance in the region, with highly educated women outnumbering their male counterparts, tipping the gender roles scales. While both men and women accept paternalistic standards, increases in women's status may run counter to traditional practices and expectations. Thus, their changing status likely influences their beliefs about divorce. For example, Klobučar and Simonič (2017) investigated the causes of divorce from the perspective of females in Slovenia. They interviewed 29- and 57-year-old women who were divorced for less than 10 years. The participants listed their own reasons for divorce, all of which corresponded with previous studies. The findings of this study confirm the complex factors highlighted in other studies that contribute to the breakdown of marriage. Davis and Aron (1989) established similar reasons for divorce when they explored the perceived causes of divorce and postdivorce adjustment among recently divorced midlife women. Of the 17 perceived causes of divorce cited by the participants, four bases for divorce (husband abused me, husband's extramarital affair, husband desired independence, and communication problems) were mentioned significantly more often.

Akter and Begum (2012) explored the grounds cited for divorce by women undergoing the divorce process in Bangladesh. Eleven women were selected by purposive sampling technique from the Bangladesh National Women Lawyers' Association at Agargaon, Dhaka, who applied for legal support for their marital problems. It was found that extramarital affairs, substance abuse, physical abuse, dowry-related problems, abandonment, interference from in-laws, polygamy, personality problems, criminal activity, and unemployment of husbands were the primary reasons given by the participants.

In a study that also explored the psychological well-being of the participants, Chang (2004) collected self-reported reasons for divorce as cited by divorced Korean immigrant women. Face-to-face interviews with the 73 divorced participants revealed a “substantially different pattern of self-reported reasons for divorce from that of non-Korean, mostly white, divorced women”. The main reasons for divorce as reported by the majority of the participants were their ex-husbands' abusive/negative behaviors and financial problems.

Bodenmann, et al. (2006) invited 711 divorced individuals from Germany, Italy, and Switzerland to give retrospective reports on their perception of attractors and barriers to divorce. This study combined the evaluation of macro-level variables (the three different countries) and micro-level variables (psychological variables) to gain in-depth insight into the attractors and barriers to divorce. Alienation was found to be the most relevant ground for divorce in all three countries, while the presence of children (for all three countries) and financial strain (for German and Swiss women) were cited as primary barriers. Constantinou and Anagnostopoulos (2019) in Cyprus reached similar conclusions. They found that women were more willing than men to divorce a harmful spouse and that domestic abuse was the most common ground for divorce.

A study conducted in Java, Indonesia attempted to ascertain whether the partners' age at first marriage was a reliable predicate of the probability of divorce. The researchers selected 10,046 ever-married from the Indonesia Demographic and Health Survey 2012 records to test their hypothesis. It was found that about 28% of Javanese women who married when 16 or younger, and 14.7% of women who married after the age of 16 experienced divorces. The rate of divorce was higher among women with lower educational levels, rural women, East Javanese women who married early, West Javanese women who delayed marriage, and women with no children (Widyastari et al., 2020).

Al Gharaibeh (2014) aimed to identify the causes of divorce in the UAE from the point of view of female divorcees and concluded that there were five main reasons for terminating a marriage: “falling out of love”, disharmony, inability to converse with the partner, irritability, and partner's personal traits. In contrast, Al-Abbar (2004) cited four reasons for divorce in the UAE: marital relations, financial problems, personal and social factors and health issues. Other recurring reasons for divorce in the UAE included delinquency, substance addiction, male polygamy, family interference in the marriage, inability to conceive, age difference between the spouses, differences in the level of education, pre-marital unfamiliarity, and husband's objection to his partner taking employment (Almalki, 2001). A study conducted by Rashid (1998) listed similar causes in addition to the husband's alcoholism, the wife's lack of devotion, and family desertion.

A similar pattern to that of the UAE is evident in Saudi Arabia where more divorce cases have been reported among those with lower levels of education, younger than thirty years of age, and recently married. Several studies that investigated the roots of divorce there pointed to the following reasons: early marriage, arranged marriages, personality clashes, family interference, differences in the educational levels of the spouses, the number of offspring, and the traditional social views of educated women (Abduljaleel & Alseba'e, 2006; Alfaisal, 1991; Alkhateeb, 1993).

Investigating the causes of divorce in Kuwait, Althaqib (1996) found that the most common causes were related to spouse interaction, place of residence, families of the spouses, sexual intercourse, finances, psychological disorder, health issues, trust, and polygamy. The emotional and social causes and impacts of divorce on Omani spouses were investigated by Abdeen (2007) in a study that involved 100 female divorcees. It was found that of the 22 reasons given by the participants for divorce the most cited were family interference (36%), lack of communication and intellectual compatibility between the spouses (32%), and irresponsibility (28%).

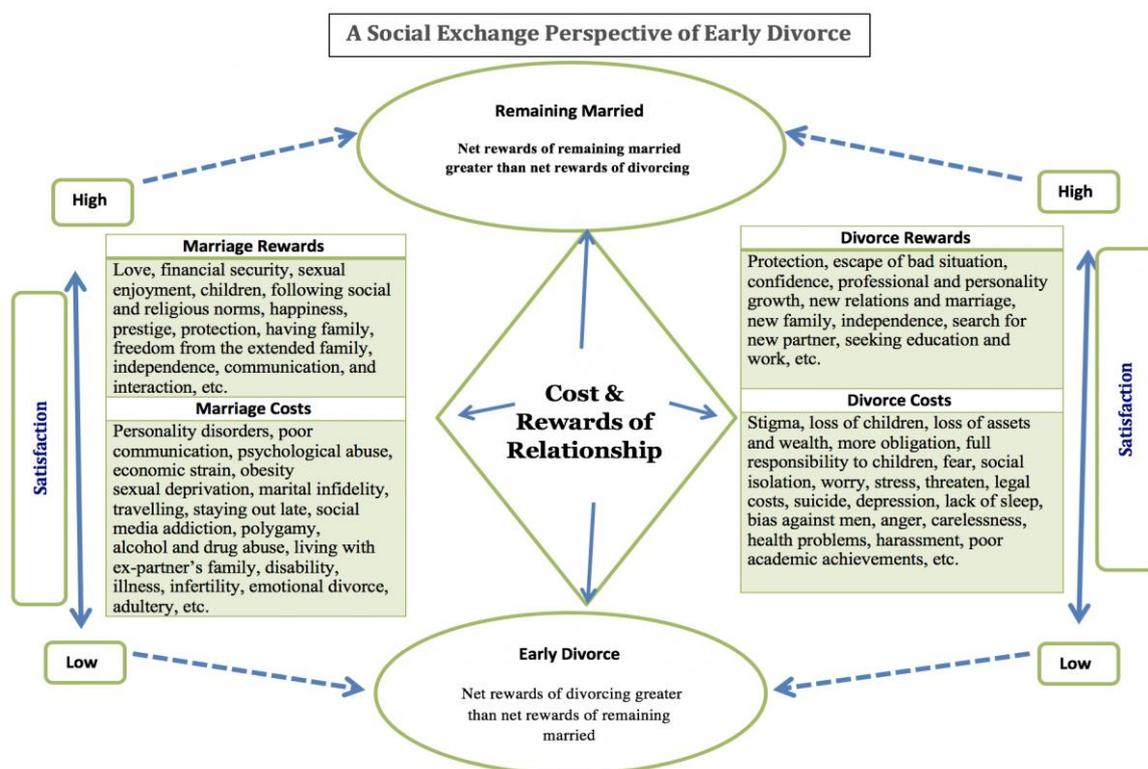
In summary, a review of studies that explored the causes of divorce over the past twenty years reveals that, unlike the present study, early divorce received significantly limited attention. It was also found that the most common causes for divorce vary slightly in different cultures, although their significance and impact might differ in different societies and communities.

### Theoretical Framework: Social Exchange Perspective of Early Divorce

This study adopts a social exchange perspective to identify the various factors that lead to the early breakdown of the marriage. The social exchange theory explains divorce as a result of a series of events, during which partners evaluate their marriage in terms of rewards and costs. Each partner seeks to maximize the rewards—levels of satisfaction and minimize the costs—levels of dissatisfaction. If they feel that the rewards of the relationship are equitable and the costs are shared equally, the relationship is strengthened. Failing that, partners would feel that their needs and expectations have not been met, leading to the breakdown of the marriage (Blau, 1964). In other words, self-interest and interdependence are the basic forms of social interaction including marital relations (Edward, 2001). Accordingly, it has often been assumed that late divorcing couples must overcome tougher obstacles, as the cost of divorce might seem quite high, than early divorcing couples (Hagestad & Smyer, 1982; Levinger, 1979; Lloyd & Zick, 1986; Rusbult, 1983, English, 1997).

This study particularly focuses on value-laden factors, viewed as costs and rewards, such as the partner's personality traits, domestic abuse, health issues, and physical appearance (Figure 2). This approach is consistent with Eddouada's (2016) caution that recognizing and honoring the varied understandings of gender justice held by different population groups is necessary to create interventions that successfully support women's rights (p. 72).

**Figure 1: A Social Exchange Perspective of Early Divorce**



## **Method**

### *Study Design*

The study used the quantitative research methodology using social surveys to identify the causes of early divorce in Abu Dhabi, UAE. In particular, this study aims to identify:

- The characteristics of divorcees in Abu Dhabi
- The main causes for divorce in that emirate that are related to
  - the spouse's personality traits
  - spouse's behavior
  - domestic abuse and marital discord
  - patterns of marital relations
  - health issues and physical appearance

### *Sampling and Data Collection*

The target research population comprised 2,162 individuals who received assistance from the Family Development Foundation during the period 2012–2018. In response to e-mail and text messages, 200 individuals agreed to participate in this study and were then contacted by five social workers specially trained in research. Data collection took place over eight months in 2019 and 2020.

The participants' views were collected in three ways:

- Participants were asked to respond to an online questionnaire
- Family Development Foundation social workers helped some participants to fill in the questionnaire during meetings.
- Phone interviews were conducted by FDF social workers

Based on previous studies, the researchers devised the early divorce scale, which comprised 86 items in its first draft. The scale was then reviewed by five experts from among sociology and social work faculty from the University of Sharjah and Family Development Foundation staff. The questionnaire items used a 5- point Likert scale (from 1 = "Strongly disagree" to 5 = "Strongly agree"). Based on the referees' feedback, 54 items were included in the final version of the scale as follows:

- Spouse's personality traits: 9 items
- Spouse's behavior: 16 items
- Domestic abuse and marital discord: 13 items
- Health issues and physical appearance: 9 items
- Patterns of marital relations: 7 items

To assess the validity of the scale, the correlation coefficient of each item was calculated. This showed that the items correlated with their subscales more than they did with other subscales. Items that showed a correlation of less than 0.40 with their subscales were discarded. Consequently, the early divorce scale demonstrates high enough levels of validity and reliability for this research.

### *Data Analysis*

The researcher used SPSS to answer the main research question (What are the reasons for early divorce from the point of view of divorced people in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi). The averages, standard deviations, ratio and rank of performance were calculated for each of the items that make up the subscales of the early divorce scale, the subscales and the overall scale.

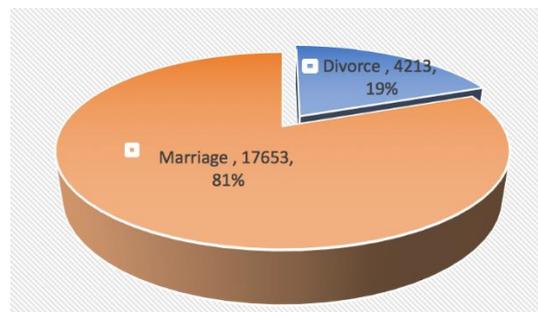
### Ethical Considerations

Details were given about the purpose of the research, that their personal information would remain confidential and would be used only in this current research study. The meaning of the terms 'voluntary participation' and 'informed consent' was explained to the participants. Prospective participants were advised that they could withdraw their consent and their data at any time. All procedures were approved by the Ethics Committee of the FDF.

### Findings

This study identified the common reasons for early divorce among couples in the emirate of Abu Dhabi, UAE. This section shows the Number and percentage of all Divorce and Marriage cases (Emirati and non-Emirati nationals) in 2020, Participants (Divorcee) Characteristics, and Main Reasons for Early Divorce.

**Figure 2: Number and percentage of all Divorce and Marriage cases (Emirati and non-Emirati nationals) in 2020\***

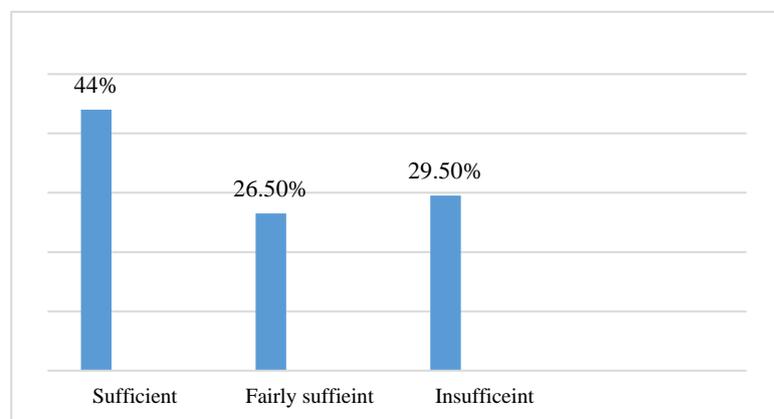


\*Source: Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre - Shari'a Courts - Ministry of justice; Statistics Centre - Abu Dhabi; Dubai Statistics Centre; RAK Centre for Statistics and Studies.

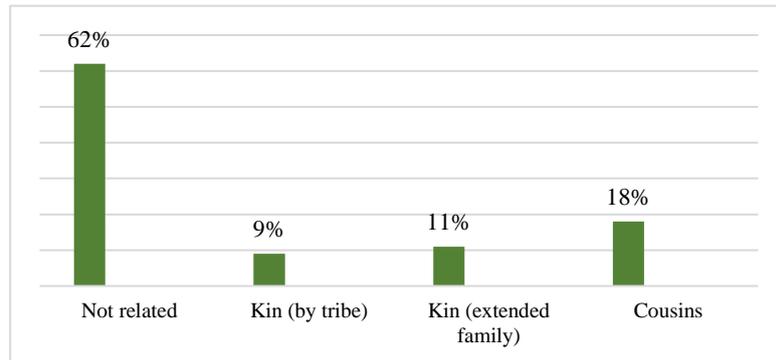
### Participants (Divorcee) Characteristics

A large number of the participants (44%) indicated that their families were financially secure, which is to be expected in a wealthy country like the UAE (fig. 3). In addition, almost two thirds of the participants (62% to be exact), were not related. This might mean that it is more difficult for unrelated couples to lead a harmonious married life due to differences in family customs and traditions (fig. 4).

**Figure 3: Level of the Family's Monthly Income**

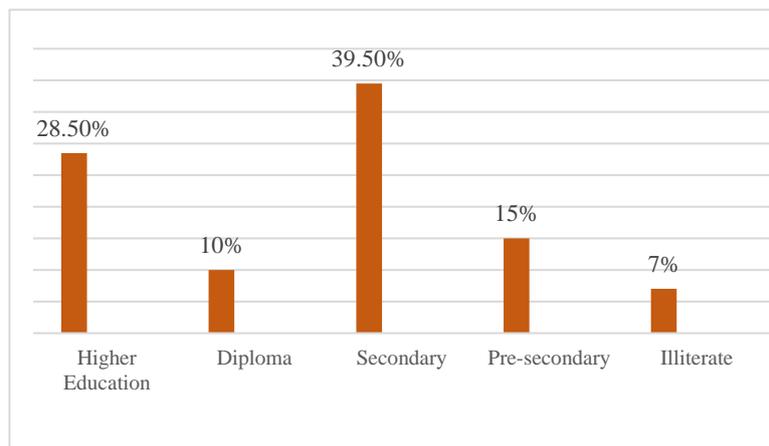


**Figure 4: Family Relations between the Divorced Couples**

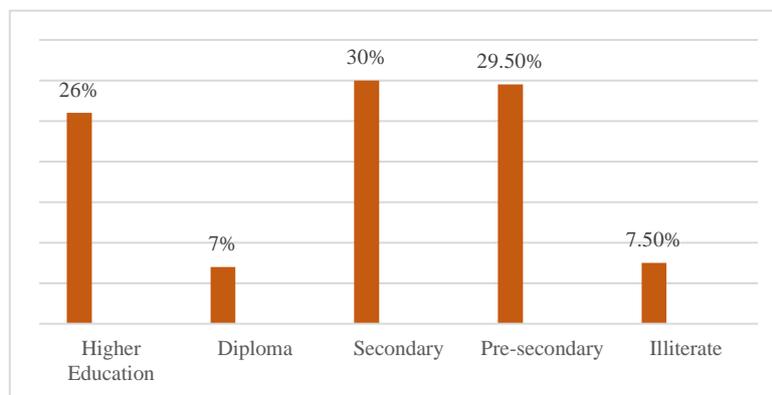


The data also shows that the lowest rates of early divorce were evident amongst those with the lowest levels of education: illiterate women (7.5%) and men (7%), while the highest rates occurred among those with secondary and presecondary education (figs. 5 & 6).

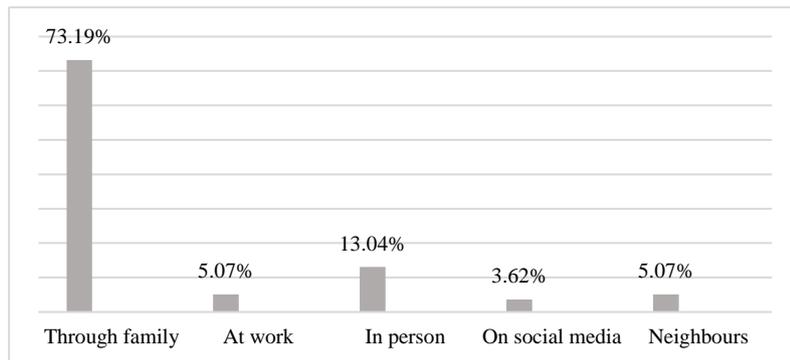
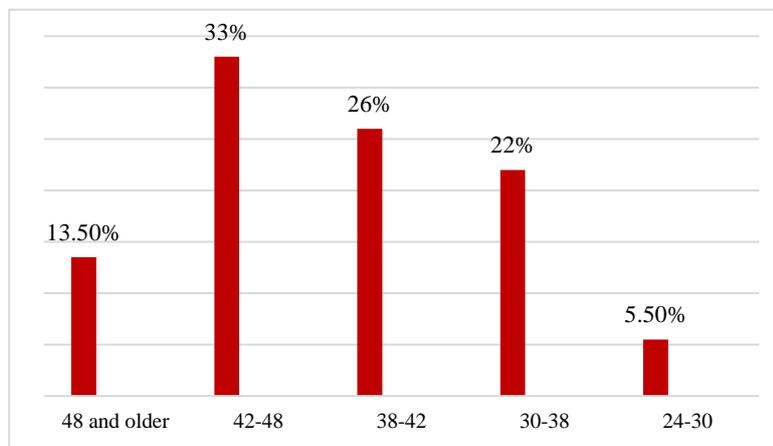
**Figure 5: Wife's Level of Education when Divorce was Finalized**



**Figure 6: Husband's Level of Education when Divorce was Finalized**



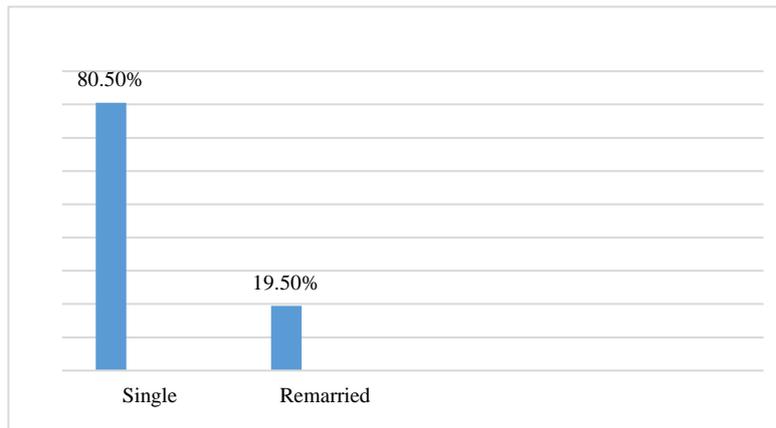
The data also shows that certain factors seem to contribute to incidents of early divorce. For example, the majority of the participants (73%) were involved in arranged marriages (fig. 7). Moreover, the highest incidents of early divorce (33%) occurred among those who married late by Emirati standards, while the lowest rates occurred among 24-30 years old (fig. 8).

**Figure 7: How the Divorced Couples Met****Figure 8: Age of Participants Met**

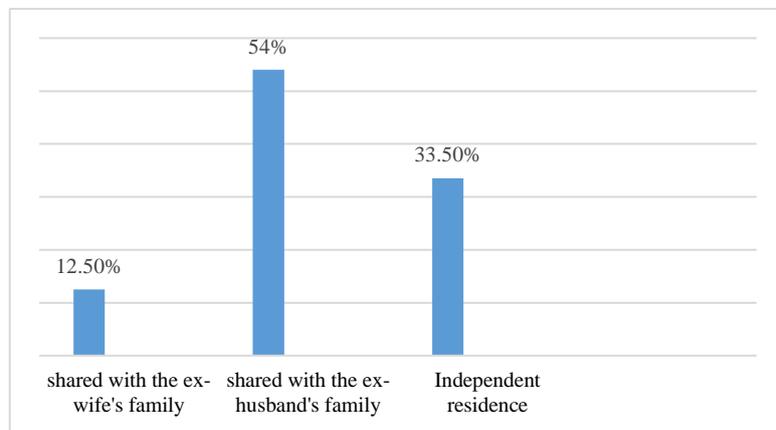
It was also found that only 19.5% of the divorcees remarried (fig. 9). This can be attributed to the difficulty the couples might have experienced during their first relationships and going through the divorce process. This can also be related to the number of children the couples have and their age. It was evident that the majority of the divorcees' children were at the pre-school age. To add, 22% of the couples had only one child and 18.5% had no children (fig 12).

Many factors that seem to also contribute to early divorce are related to social issues. For example, in the UAE, it is customary for newlyweds to live with the husband's family while preparing their own residence. This usually allows the in-laws to interfere in the couple's affairs leading to early divorce. 54% of the participants cited family interference as the reason for their divorce (fig. 10). In addition, divorce is still considered a serious social stigma in the UAE and especially for women. This might explain why only 1% of the wives' families sought the divorce of their daughters compared to 20.5% of the husbands' families. However, surprisingly more women (46.5%) than men (22%) sought divorce (fig. 11).

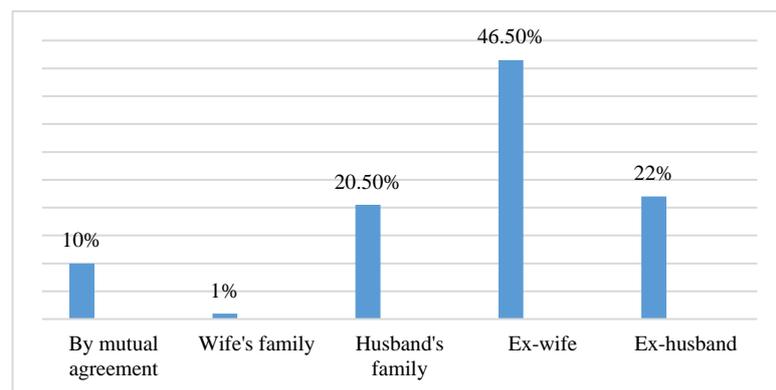
**Figure 9: Social Status after Divorce**



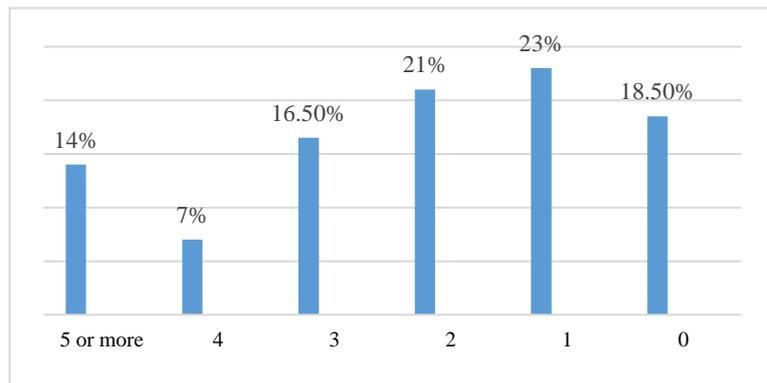
**Figure 10: Family Residence before Divorce**



**Figure 11: Who Requested the Divorce**



**Figure12: Number of Children of Divorced Couple**



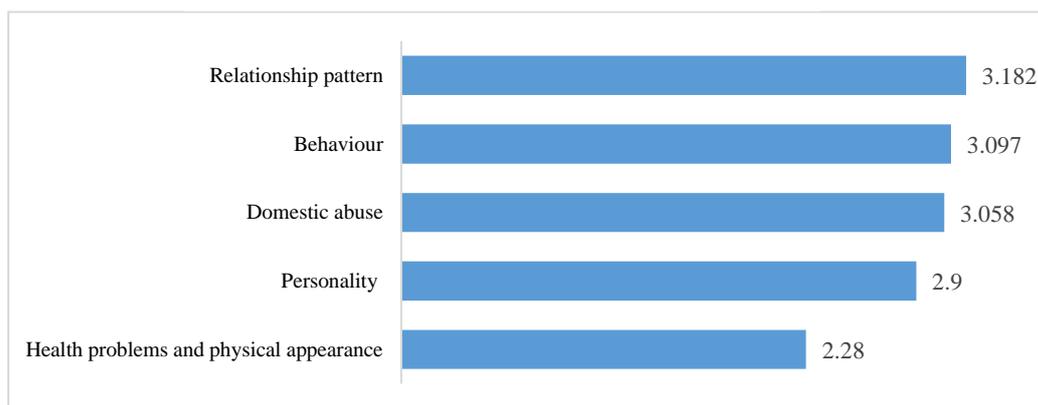
The participants were asked to complete the Early Divorce Measurement tool, which revealed that the most significant grounds for divorce were factors related to the relationship pattern followed by those linked to the behaviour of the ex-spouse, and the least commonly cited causes were related to health and physical appearance (Table 1).

**Main Reasons of Early Divorce Abu Dhabi**

**Table 1: Main Reasons for Early Divorce**

Cause	Average	Standard Deviation	Percentage of Value	Rank
Personality	2.90	0.73	0.58	4
Behaviour	3.097	0.74	0.61	2
Domestic abuse	3.058	0.75	0.61	3
Health problems and physical appearance	2.28	0.89	0.45	5
Relationship pattern	3.182	0.93	0.63	1

**Figure13: Main Reasons of Early Divorce**



**First reason: Spouse's Personality Traits that may Lead to Divorce**

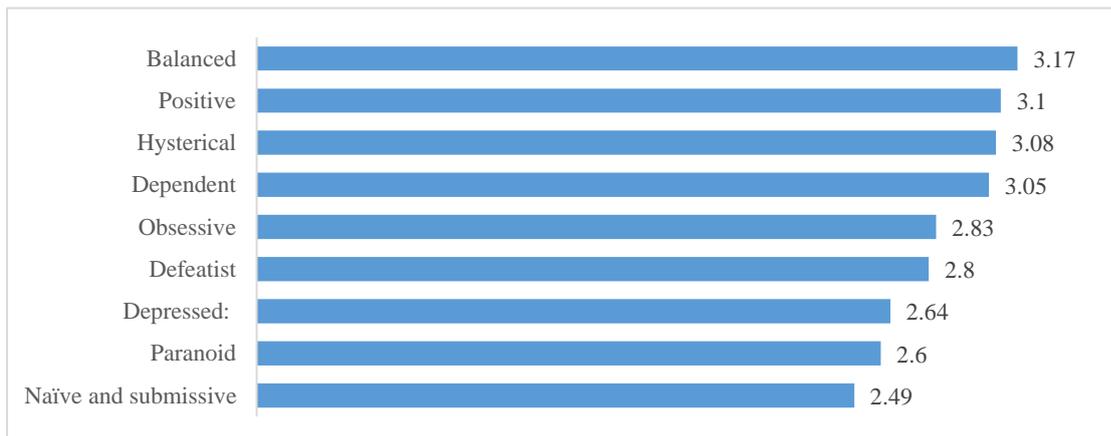
One of the major grounds for divorce explored in this study was the personality traits of the spouse (Table 2). The average scores on items included under this area ranged from 2.60 and 3.17 with an overall average of 3.83, which indicates that the personality traits of the spouse represent a significant cause for the breakdown of the marriage. The participants' responses revealed that the least appealing personality trait that might prompt someone to seek divorce

was naivety and submissiveness ( $\bar{x}=2.49$ ) while having a balanced personality ( $\bar{x}=3.17$ ) and having a positive personality ( $\bar{x}=3.10$ ) ranked as the two most appealing traits.

**Table 2: Spouse's Personality Traits that may Lead to Divorce**

No.	Personality Traits	Mean	SD	P Value	Rank
1	Paranoid	2.60	1.200	0.52	8
2	Hysterical	3.08	1.276	0.616	3
3	Dependent	3.05	1.354	0.61	4
4	Defeatist	2.80	1.239	0.56	6
5	Obsessive	2.83	1.276	0.566	5
6	Depressed	2.64	1.166	0.528	7
7	Naïve and submissive	2.49	1.113	0.498	9
8	Positive	3.10	1.070	0.62	2
9	Balanced	3.17	1.239	0.634	1
	TOTAL	2.90	0.73	0.58	

**Figure 14: Spouse's Personality Traits that may Lead to Divorce**



The second area that the Reasons for Early Divorce Scale measures is the spouse's behavior (Table 3). It was found that making unilateral decisions was the main factor for marital problems ( $\bar{x}=3.70$ ) followed by the spouse's inability to accept criticism or different opinions ( $\bar{x}=3.55$ ). The item that ranked last was alcohol and/or substance use ( $\bar{x}=2.45$ ).

### **Second reason: Behavioral Patterns that Lead to Divorce**

**Table 3: Behavioral Patterns that Lead to Divorce**

No.	Patterns of Behavior	Mean	SD	<i>p</i> Value	Rank
1	Neglecting providing the family with basic needs	2.85	1.313	0.57	12
2	Poor participation in domestic chores	3.12	1.299	0.624	6.5
3	Alcohol and/or substance use	2.45	1.422	0.49	16
4	Low involvement in childcare	3.07	1.417	0.614	8
5	Inability to accept criticism or different opinions	3.55	1.309	0.71	2
6	Excessive jealousy	3.18	1.410	0.636	4
7	Dwelling on past arguments	3.14	1.300	0.28	5
8	Weak religious commitment	3.12	1.362	0.624	6.5
9	Becoming excessively bad-tempered during marital discussions	3.52	1.278	0.704	3
10	Taking decisions unilaterally	3.70	1.166	0.74	1
11	Not keeping family secrets	3.04	1.362	0.608	9
12	Comparing the spouse with friends and family	2.92	1.412	0.584	11
13	Frequent overseas travel	2.64	1.307	0.528	14
14	Frequent late nights out	3.03	1.338	0.606	10
15	Digital addiction	2.73	1.491	0.546	13
16	Preventing the wife from working	2.58	1.350	0.516	15
	TOTAL	3.097	0.74	0.61	

The third dimension of the scale is concerned with domestic abuse and marital discord (Table 4). Certain patterns of behavior in acrimonious marital relations were cited more often by the participants such as emotional neglect (rank = 1,  $\bar{x}$ =3.70), and frequent angry outbursts (rank = 2,  $\bar{x}$ =3.36), and poor communication (rank = 3,  $\bar{x}$ =2.37). Meanwhile, the participants' responses showed that the least significant cause of marital disharmony was the increased involvement of housekeepers and nannies in childcare ( $\bar{x}$ =2.37).

### **Third reason: Domestic Abuse and Family Discord**

**Table 4: Domestic Abuse and Family Discord**

No.	Domestic Abuse and Marital Discord	Mean	SD	<i>p</i> Value	Rank
1	Lack of participation in family events	2.95	1.245	0.59	7
2	Lack of respect of spouse's family	2.81	1.336	0.562	10
3	Frequent physical, sexual, and/or verbal abuse	3.04	1.445	0.608	6
4	Recurrent problems with the in-laws	2.84	1.488	0.568	9
5	Nannies and housemaids are more involved in child care than the partner	2.37	1.212	0.474	13
6	Sarcasm	2.76	1.292	0.552	12
7	Frequent angry outbursts	3.36	1.305	0.672	2
8	Intentional emotional neglect	3.62	1.202	0.724	1
9	Expressing regret for marrying current partner	2.86	1.380	0.572	8
10	Distrust	2.77	1.296	0.554	11
11	Rarely expressing their feelings towards the partner	3.27	1.251	0.654	4
12	Polygamy	3.06	1.459	0.612	5
13	Poor communication	3.34	1.277	0.668	3
	TOTAL	3.058	0.75	0.61	

Another area investigated in this study was grounds for divorced linked to health and physical appearance (Table 5). It was revealed that the main cause of the deterioration of the family relation was the spouse's poor personal hygiene and care for personal appearance ( $\bar{x}=2.73$ ) followed by the husband's inability to adapt to his wife's pregnancy and childbirth ( $\bar{x}=2.23$ ). The third most common reason was the spouse's poor health ( $\bar{x}=2.15$ ), while the least commonly cited cause was infertility with an average score of 01.75.

#### **Fourth reason: Issues Related to the Health and Physical Appearance of the Spouse**

**Table 5: Issues Related to the Health and Physical Appearance of the Spouse**

No	Health and Physical Appearance	Mean	SD	<i>p</i> Value	Rank
1	Poor personal hygiene and care for personal appearance	2.73	1.443	0.546	1
2	Obesity	2.08	1.067	0.416	4
3	Unwillingness to have children	2.01	1.078	0.402	6
4	Infertility	1.75	.837	0.35	9
5	Inability to adapt to wife's childbearing	2.23	1.249	0.446	2
6	Sexual dysfunction	1.95	.910	0.39	7
7	Dissatisfaction with the spouse's personal appearance	2.06	1.071	0.412	5
8	Chronic health issues	2.15	1.155	0.43	3
9	Sustaining a disability during marriage	1.92	.888	0.384	8
	TOTAL	2.28	8.89	0.45	

To gain a comprehensive insight into the causes of early divorce in the UAE, we also investigated the reasons related to the patterns of marital relationships that the divorcees followed (Table 6). The majority of participants cited lack of communication between the spouses as the most significant grounds for divorce ( $\bar{x}=3.40$ ) followed by low levels of emotional intimacy ( $\bar{x}=3.23$ ) and expressing great distaste towards the partner ( $\bar{x}=3.21$ ). The least commonly cited factor was that the husband does not treat his multiple wives fairly ( $\bar{x}=2.68$ ).

### Fifth reason: Relationship Patterns

**Table 6: Relationship Patterns**

No.	Issues Related to the Patterns of Marital Relationship that the Divorcees Display	Mean	SD	<i>p</i> Value	Rank
1	Unfairness towards multiple wives	2.68	1.401	0.536	7
2	Marital desertion	2.75	1.281	0.55	6
3	Monotony of married life	3.16	1.283	0.632	4
4	Lack of communication	3.40	1.218	0.68	1
5	Expressing distaste of the spouse	3.21	1.206	0.642	3
6	Low levels of emotional intimacy	3.23	1.226	0.646	2
7	Adultery	3.14	1.443	0.628	5
	TOTAL	3.182	0.93	0.63	

### Discussion and Policy implications

This study aimed to identify the specific causes that lead to early divorce. It especially investigated whether such factors as the spouse's personality, domestic abuse and family discord, spouse's behavior, and spouse's physical appearance and health were viewed as value-laden by the couples, and, as such may lead to divorce if the costs exceed the rewards.

The results of this study are in line with previous studies that suggest that the factors that may lead partners to seek divorce may be categorized into emotional causes (Apstolou, 2019; Bodenmann et al., 2006; Davis & Aron, 1989; Klobučar & Simonič, 2017; Rashid 1998), economic factors (Rashid, 1998; Bodenmann, et al., 2006; Chang, 2004; Akter & Begum, 2012; Lowenstein, 2005; and Davis & Aron, 1989), and issues related to the spouse's behavior such as alcoholism, drug addiction, adultery, and domestic violence (Akter & Begum, 2012; Davis & Aron, 1989; Klobučar & Simonič, 2017; Lewin, 2005; Rashid, 1998). Other grounds for divorce included factors related to incompatibility between spouses, health and sexual issues, and infertility (Akter & Begum, 2012; Widyastari et al, 2020; Apstolou, 2019; Chang, 2004; Lewin, 2005; Lowenstein, 2005). Several studies also cited the wife's desire for independence and freedom such as those of Davis & Aron (1989) and Lewin, (2005).

The decision to seek divorce often has been explained in terms of social exchange, including an analysis of the costs associated with remaining married, the barriers and external pressures to remain married, and the availability of attractive alternatives for meeting one's needs outside of marriage (English, 1997). According to the social exchange theory, conflicts can provide a public social expression to the couple's disapproval and latent hostility on the one hand, and a means to conflict resolution as it helps divide and disperse responsibilities leading to social stability and coherence. In addition, social change is dialectic as any form of social structuring inherently has the potential for problems and conflicts. However, what Blau (1964) stresses is that there are several factors of institutional inertia related to gaining benefits and stable power, regulating conventions, rules, and traditional institutions that prevent change and adaptation unless a change is brought about through social conflict and opposition.

The findings of this study suggest that family conflicts and disagreements can lead couples to express their enmity and dissatisfaction through such behaviors as lack of communication, domestic abuse, or neglect, all of which may be sufficient grounds for early divorce. Blau (1964) claims that social exchange is determined by the alternatives available to the different parties involved to gain independence and self-actualization or to gain control. The consistent dynamic nature of these alternatives leads to what can be described as a dialectic of power: an ongoing power conflict that is displayed along the self-interest-meaning continuum where material interests and needs merge with such notions as self-actualization, spouse's social status, and role expectations. It should also be noted that Blau (1964), fairly early on in his work, linked power to meaning through the social norms that emerge in relationships, which serve as indicators for the spouse's interpretation of justice and injustice, entitlement to the withdrawal of acceptance or legitimacy, deprivation, hatred, hostility, resentment, solidarity, and opposition.

Accordingly, and based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that couples face two options: either to submit and tolerate the costs such as conflicts, role-reversals, and deficiencies that characterize their marriage, or opt for the rewards of independence and freedom which leads to divorce. In our view, this also explains early divorce. In fact, even when the marriage does not break down, the presence of the marital problems mentioned in this study leads the submissive partner to place a higher value on the rewards of the relationship compared to its costs. In the early stages of marriage, both partners tend to embrace the positives and overlook the negative aspects of the relationship. However, with the passage of time, familiarity and routine expose the flaws in the relationship. One possible explanation for early divorce is that new couples may not be aware of the arduous and painful process of divorce and its negative impact not only on themselves but also on their children and social network.

The Islamic regulations in dealing with divorce and *Khal'a* improved the status of women and make it easier for women to participate as citizens on equal terms with men. Moreover, these regulations don't compel women to stay wives by giving them the opportunities to be part of divorce decisions which protects women from oppression. The women should accept the idea of divorce and *Kulla* and not keep it as an issue that prevents them from practicing their normal expressions in all aspects of life.

Partners need to work jointly to fulfill each other's basic social, emotional and economic needs. The failure to reciprocate the efforts of one partner to fulfill the other's needs is an indicator of dysfunctional family structure, social upbringing, or the value system of one or both partners. Divorce has social, family, and economic long-term implications, which may not be immediately observed. Certain policies could reduce the rate of divorce (Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 2006). A number of these policies are work-related. For example:

- A more flexible work environment would allow partners to spend more time with their families and attend to their needs.
- Paid leaves in cases of family emergencies would reduce stress and enable employees to show care and attention to their spouses.
- Affordable, good-quality childcare would reduce the family's financial burdens and reduce the couples' stress.

In addition, many social policies and initiatives led by local social organizations, sports clubs, academic institutions, and religious entities can reduce the rate of early divorce. For example, marriage counseling and family programmes should be widely available to help married couples strengthen their relationships and overcome some of the issues they are struggling with in their marriages. Other programmes and workshops may highlight the

negative impact their divorce may have on them and their children. This may force couples to pause and reconsider the costs and rewards of their relationships before they file for divorce.

To add, some programmes can focus on preparing new couples for marriage. These programmes can offer those intending to get married training to improve their communication skills, and emotional intelligence.

Intervention can also be highly effective especially when it is based on a comprehensive approach that deals with the root causes of divorce. Accordingly, the study recommends the following:

- Like the obligatory medical checks, personality tests and assessments of how potential partners were chosen should be included as part of the obligatory pre-marriage requirements.
- Married couples and those intending to get married should receive emotional and interpersonal communication training.
- There should be more focused and effective efforts to raise public awareness of the importance of family communication and inter-dependence, and the negative effects of the over-reliance on house help and nannies.
- Newlyweds need to receive guidance on the importance of their physical appearance and personal hygiene for enjoying more satisfying intimate marital relations.
- Awareness campaigns about the negative impacts of divorce on the whole family should be conducted through social and traditional media platforms.
- Couples should be referred or advised to seek family counselling to help them better deal with family conflicts and problems.
- The negative impact of divorce on the family and children should be dealt with in TV programmes and dramas.
- A national digital platform offering awareness materials and information on marital compatibility and harmony, and available professional family support services should be established.
- Social workers dealing with cases of early divorce should be provided with a detailed guidebook to enable them to offer better post-divorce support to their clients.

It is expected that the results of this research will enable social workers to develop specific parenting programmes that support parents in managing the effects of family breakdown on themselves and their children, at the same time improving access to sources of information and advice related to the needs of separating parents, including information on the legal and financial rights and responsibilities of married and cohabiting couples, child custody arrangements, housing advice, and welfare benefits.

### **Limitations of the Study**

It is important to highlight two limitations of this research. Although this research is quantitative, it depended upon the divorced' views as reflected in the survey. The provided information was limited by the boundaries of the research instrument. Additional insights may be discovered using in-depth interviews to capture the depth and richness of the voices of the divorced and their children.

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