

Family Transformation, Gender Relations, and Marital Dissolution: A Qualitative Sociological Study of Divorce in the Dhaka Region of Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Divorce has become an increasingly important indicator of social change, reflecting transformations in family life, gender relations, and marital expectations. Although divorce has attracted growing scholarly attention, research in Bangladesh has largely focused on demographic patterns, legal issues, and socio-economic determinants, with comparatively limited qualitative evidence on how people experience and interpret marital dissolution. This study examines how family transformation and changing gender relations shape divorce in the Dhaka Region of Bangladesh from a qualitative sociological perspective. A qualitative case study design drew on twelve cases involving divorced men, divorced women, family lawyers, and professional counsellors. Reflexive thematic analysis identified recurring patterns across lived experiences and professional perspectives. The findings indicate that divorce develops through the interaction of changing marital expectations, communication breakdown, gendered power relations, economic pressures, and continuing family involvement. Gendered outcomes were not uniform; they were conditioned by access to income, education, family support, and other social resources. Marital dissolution also extended beyond legal separation to encompass identity reconstruction, psychological adjustment, social stigma, and institutional support needs. By integrating four stakeholder perspectives, the study offers a contextually grounded account of divorce as a multidimensional social process. It contributes qualitative evidence to scholarship on family change in Bangladesh and identifies priorities for coordinated legal, psychosocial, community, religious, and workplace support. Because the cases are urban and cross-sectional, the findings are analytically transferable rather than statistically representative.

Keywords: Divorce; Marital Dissolution; Family Transformation; Gender Relations; Bangladesh; Qualitative Research.

INTRODUCTION

Background

Divorce has become an increasingly significant sociological phenomenon worldwide, reflecting profound transformations in family structures, gender relations, and social institutions. Although marriage continues to be regarded as a fundamental social institution that provides emotional, economic, and social stability, contemporary societies have experienced substantial changes in marital expectations, individual autonomy, and family organization. Rising divorce rates in many countries indicate that marital dissolution is no longer viewed solely as a private family matter but as a broader social process influenced by demographic change, economic development, cultural transformation, and shifting gender norms (Amato, 2010; Cherlin, 2004). Consequently, divorce has emerged as an important area of sociological inquiry because it affects not only spouses but also children, extended families, communities, and public institutions.

The transformation of family structures has been closely associated with processes of modernization, urbanization, industrialization, and globalization. Traditional extended family systems have increasingly given

way to nuclear households, while greater educational attainment, women's participation in paid employment, delayed marriage, and changing expectations regarding intimacy have altered the nature of marital relationships (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1992). Contemporary marriages are increasingly characterized by expectations of emotional fulfillment, mutual respect, and individual self-development rather than solely by economic necessity or family obligation. These changes have expanded opportunities for personal choice but have also introduced new challenges related to work-life balance, financial pressures, communication, and the negotiation of gender roles, all of which may contribute to marital instability (Giddens, 1992; Goldscheider et al., 2015).

These global transformations are also evident across South Asia, although they occur within distinctive cultural, religious, and legal contexts. Historically, marriage in South Asian societies has been regarded as a lifelong social institution supported by extended kinship networks, patriarchal family structures, and strong community expectations. Divorce has traditionally carried considerable social stigma and has often been viewed as a last resort rather than an acceptable solution to marital conflict (Allendorf & Pandian, 2016). Nevertheless, rapid urbanization, increased educational opportunities, women's economic participation, migration, digital communication, and changing social values have gradually reshaped family relationships throughout the region. As a result, researchers have documented growing diversity in marital practices and increasing acceptance of divorce, particularly within urban populations, while acknowledging that traditional cultural norms continue to influence marital decision-making (Allendorf & Pandian, 2016).

Bangladesh reflects many of these broader regional transformations while maintaining its own distinctive socio-cultural characteristics. Marriage remains a highly valued institution, closely linked to religious beliefs, family honor, and community identity. At the same time, economic development, urban expansion, women's increased participation in education and employment, and greater awareness of legal rights have contributed to changing marital expectations and family dynamics (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2023; Goldscheider et al., 2015). Although divorce continues to carry social and cultural stigma, particularly for women, recent evidence indicates a gradual increase in registered divorce cases, especially within urban areas, suggesting that marital dissolution has become an increasingly visible aspect of contemporary Bangladeshi society (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2023).

The Dhaka Region provides an especially appropriate setting for examining these changes because it is the country's largest metropolitan area and the center of political, economic, educational, and cultural activity. Rapid urbanization, extensive internal migration, socio-economic diversity, and changing family structures have created a complex social environment in which marital relationships are negotiated under evolving economic and cultural conditions. As Bangladesh's most densely populated urban region, Dhaka records the highest number of registered divorce cases and encompasses individuals from diverse educational, occupational, religious, and socio-economic backgrounds (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Investigating divorce within this metropolitan context therefore offers valuable sociological insight into how family transformation and changing gender relations shape marital dissolution in contemporary Bangladesh.

Research Problem

Despite the growing body of scholarship on divorce, existing research has predominantly employed quantitative approaches that emphasize demographic trends, socio-economic determinants, and statistical associations. Large-scale surveys have substantially improved understanding of divorce patterns and correlates; however, they often provide limited insight into how individuals interpret, negotiate, and experience marital dissolution within their everyday social and cultural contexts (Amato, 2010; Cherlin, 2004). Consequently, important dimensions of divorce remain insufficiently explored from the perspectives of those directly affected.

This limitation is particularly evident in Bangladesh, where much of the available literature focuses on divorce rates, legal frameworks, women's vulnerability, and socio-economic outcomes (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Although these studies have contributed valuable empirical evidence, relatively few have examined the lived experiences of divorced individuals through qualitative inquiry. As a result, the complex ways in which people understand marital breakdown, negotiate changing family relationships, experience social stigma, and reconstruct their identities following divorce remain underrepresented in sociological research.

Moreover, gender dynamics within the process of marital dissolution require deeper investigation. Divorce is shaped by unequal power relations, patriarchal norms, changing expectations of marriage, and evolving gender roles that influence men and women in different ways (Connell, 2009; Walby, 1990). Existing studies often treat gender as a demographic variable rather than as a socially constructed relationship that shapes decision-making, post-divorce experiences, and access to social and institutional support. Addressing these gaps through a qualitative sociological approach can provide a richer understanding of family transformation, gender relations, and marital dissolution in the rapidly changing urban context of the Dhaka Region of Bangladesh.

Research Gap

Despite these advances, several important gaps remain in the existing literature. First, most studies on divorce have relied primarily on quantitative survey data, providing limited insight into how individuals interpret and experience marital dissolution within their everyday social and cultural contexts (Amato, 2010; Cherlin, 2004). Second, qualitative evidence from Bangladesh remains scarce, particularly regarding the lived experiences of divorced men and women in rapidly urbanizing settings. Third, existing research has generally examined divorce in relation to socio-economic or legal factors without sufficiently integrating family transformation and changing gender relations as interconnected sociological processes. Finally, comparatively little attention has been given to how divorced individuals negotiate social stigma, reconstruct their identities, and access institutional support following marital dissolution. Addressing these gaps, the present study adopts a qualitative sociological approach to explore divorce as a multidimensional social process in the Dhaka Region of Bangladesh.

Research Objective

This study aims to explore how family transformation and changing gender relations shape marital dissolution among divorced individuals in the Dhaka Region of Bangladesh. Specifically, it seeks to examine how socio-cultural expectations, gendered power relations, and evolving family structures influence the experiences of divorce, while also exploring the psychological, social, and economic consequences of marital dissolution. By adopting a qualitative sociological approach, the study aims to generate a contextually grounded understanding of divorce and contribute to contemporary debates on family change, gender relations, and marital instability in Bangladesh.

Contribution of the Study

This study makes four important contributions to the existing literature on divorce and family change. First, it contributes methodologically by adopting a qualitative approach that foregrounds the lived experiences of divorced individuals, thereby complementing the predominantly quantitative scholarship on marital dissolution. Second, it advances sociological understanding by examining divorce through the interconnected perspectives of family transformation, gender relations, and changing social norms, demonstrating how these processes shape marital experiences and post-divorce life. Third, the study enriches the limited body of qualitative research on divorce in Bangladesh by providing context-specific evidence from the Dhaka Region, where rapid urbanization, migration, and socio-economic change have substantially influenced family structures and marital relationships. Finally, the findings offer practical insights for policymakers, legal practitioners, counselors, and social service organizations by identifying social and institutional challenges experienced by divorced individuals. These insights may inform the development of more inclusive family policies, accessible support services, and gender-responsive interventions that promote social well-being and strengthen institutional responses to marital dissolution in contemporary Bangladesh.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Family Transformation

Family transformation has become one of the defining characteristics of contemporary societies, reflecting the influence of modernization, urbanization, industrialization, and globalization on marital and family life. Classical sociological perspectives viewed the family as a relatively stable institution that fulfilled essential functions related to socialization, economic cooperation, and social integration (Goode, 1963; Parsons & Bales,

1955). However, rapid socio-economic changes have reshaped these traditional functions, leading to more diverse family forms and evolving marital expectations.

Modernization has significantly altered family organization by encouraging the transition from extended family systems to nuclear households. Urban migration, higher educational attainment, women's increased participation in paid employment, and greater economic independence have reduced the influence of traditional kinship networks while strengthening individual autonomy in family decision-making (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1992). Although nuclear families offer greater privacy and flexibility, they may also experience reduced social support and increased vulnerability to economic and interpersonal pressures, which can affect marital stability.

Marriage has similarly undergone substantial transformation. Rather than functioning primarily as an economic or familial arrangement, contemporary marriages increasingly emphasize emotional companionship, mutual respect, and personal fulfillment (Cherlin, 2004; Giddens, 1992). Rising expectations regarding equality, communication, and individual well-being have redefined marital relationships, while unmet expectations may contribute to marital conflict and eventual dissolution. These transformations are also evident in Bangladesh, particularly in urban areas such as the Dhaka Region, where modernization and changing gender roles have reshaped family relationships while traditional cultural values continue to influence marital decision-making (Allendorf & Pandian, 2016; Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2023).

Gender Relations

Gender relations constitute a central dimension of marital relationships because they shape the distribution of power, responsibilities, and decision-making within the family. In many societies, including Bangladesh, marital relationships have traditionally been influenced by patriarchal social structures that assign men primary authority over economic resources and family decisions while positioning women in caregiving and domestic roles (Connell, 2009; Walby, 1990). Although these gender arrangements have historically contributed to family stability, they have also reinforced unequal power relations that may generate conflict when expectations regarding authority, autonomy, and household responsibilities are contested.

The expansion of women's education and participation in paid employment has significantly transformed these traditional gender relations. Greater economic independence has enhanced women's access to resources, increased their bargaining power within households, and expanded opportunities for personal and professional development (Kabeer, 2000). At the same time, these changes have challenged conventional gender roles, requiring couples to renegotiate domestic responsibilities, financial contributions, and decision-making processes. When partners hold conflicting expectations regarding these evolving roles, marital tension and instability may emerge, particularly in rapidly urbanizing societies.

Changing expectations of marriage have further reshaped gender relations by emphasizing equality, mutual respect, shared decision-making, and emotional companionship rather than strictly hierarchical family structures (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1992). Nevertheless, traditional patriarchal values continue to influence marital relationships in Bangladesh, especially regarding family honor, social norms, and gendered responsibilities. Consequently, divorce cannot be understood solely as the outcome of interpersonal conflict but must also be viewed within the broader context of changing gender relations and ongoing negotiations between traditional cultural expectations and contemporary social transformation.

Divorce as a Social Process

Divorce should be understood not merely as the legal termination of a marriage but as a complex social process shaped by changing family structures, cultural norms, and interpersonal relationships. Sociological perspectives emphasize that marital dissolution reflects broader transformations in society, including shifts in gender relations, individual aspirations, and family expectations (Amato, 2010; Cherlin, 2004). As societies modernize, divorce increasingly becomes a mechanism through which individuals respond to changing social, economic, and emotional circumstances rather than simply an indicator of family breakdown. Consequently, divorce

represents an important dimension of contemporary social change that reflects the evolving nature of marriage and family life.

Despite growing social acceptance in many parts of the world, divorce continues to carry considerable stigma in societies where marriage is closely associated with family honor, religious values, and community expectations. Divorced individuals, particularly women, may experience social exclusion, negative stereotyping, and diminished social support, which can influence their psychological well-being, economic security, and opportunities for social participation (Goffman, 1963). In Bangladesh, these experiences are often intensified by patriarchal norms and cultural expectations that continue to privilege marital continuity over individual well-being.

Divorce also involves the reconstruction of personal and social identity. The transition from married to divorced status requires individuals to renegotiate family roles, social relationships, and future aspirations while adapting to new economic and emotional realities. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, these changes occur through ongoing social interactions in which individuals reinterpret their identities and reconstruct meaning following marital dissolution (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Mead, 1934). Understanding divorce as a social process therefore highlights not only the factors leading to marital dissolution but also the ways individuals navigate social stigma, redefine their identities, and rebuild their lives within changing social contexts.

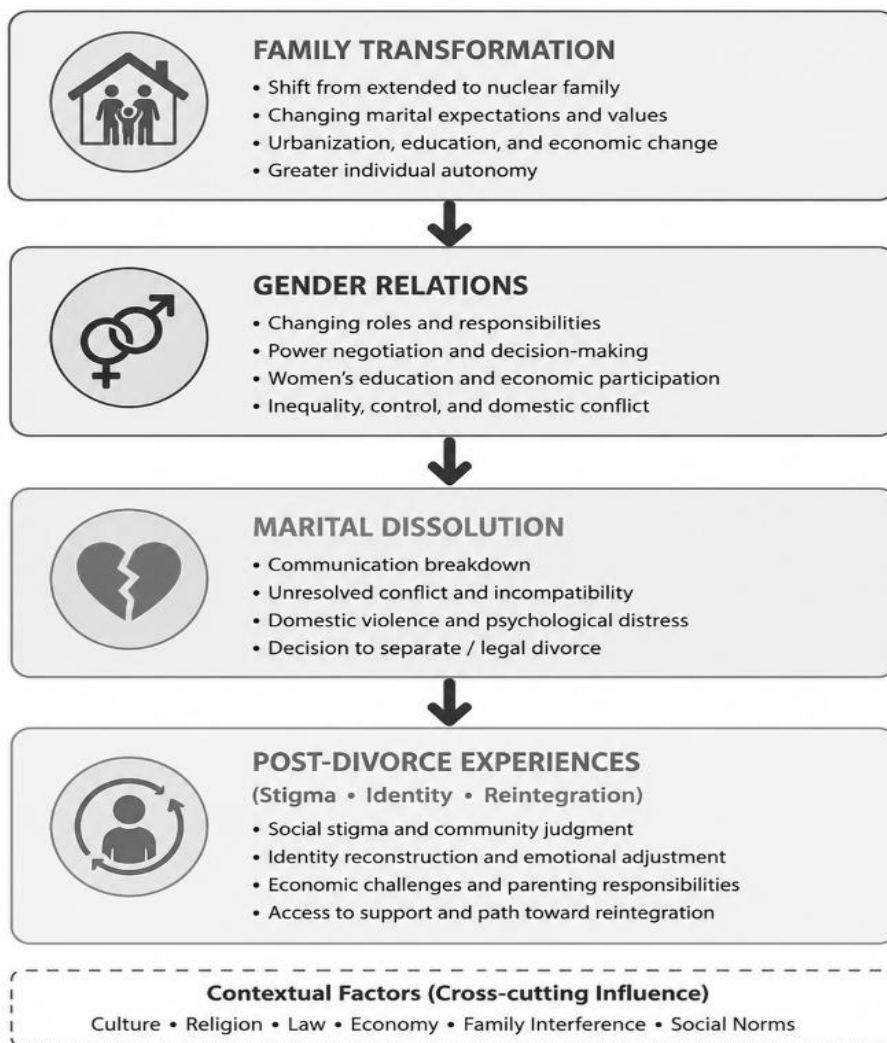
Theoretical Perspective

This study is informed by three complementary sociological perspectives that provide a multidimensional understanding of marital dissolution. **Social Constructionism** views marriage and divorce as socially constructed phenomena whose meanings are shaped by cultural norms, social interactions, and historical contexts rather than by fixed universal principles (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Burr, 2015). This perspective helps explain how individuals interpret marital relationships and negotiate the meanings of divorce within the socio-cultural context of Bangladesh.

The **Family Systems Perspective** conceptualizes the family as an interconnected system in which changes affecting one member influence the functioning of the entire family (Goldenberg et al., 2017). From this perspective, divorce represents a process of systemic reorganization that alters family roles, communication patterns, and relationships, requiring individuals to adapt to new family structures.

Conflict Theory emphasizes that marital relationships are embedded within unequal social and gender power structures. It argues that conflicts over authority, economic resources, and gendered expectations may contribute to marital instability and divorce, particularly in societies characterized by patriarchal social norms (Collins, 1975; Engels, 1972). Integrating these perspectives enables the study to examine divorce as both a socially constructed experience and a product of changing family dynamics and structural inequalities, thereby providing a comprehensive framework for interpreting family transformation and gender relations in the Dhaka Region of Bangladesh.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework



The conceptual framework illustrates divorce as a sequential social process in which changes in family structure influence gender relations, leading to marital dissolution and shaping post-divorce experiences, including social stigma, identity reconstruction, and reintegration. It serves as the analytical framework for examining how broader social and family changes interact with gender dynamics to influence divorce within the socio-cultural context of the Dhaka Region of Bangladesh.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative case study approach to examine how family transformation and changing gender relations influence marital dissolution in the Dhaka Region of Bangladesh. A qualitative design was considered appropriate because it enables the exploration of divorce as a socially constructed experience shaped by individual perceptions, family relationships, and broader cultural contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Rather than measuring the prevalence of divorce, the study sought to understand the processes through which marital relationships change, break down, and are reconstructed within contemporary Bangladeshi society.

The investigation was conducted in the Dhaka Region, the country's largest metropolitan area and a setting characterized by rapid urbanization, economic diversification, population mobility, and changing family structures. These social transformations have contributed to evolving marital expectations, shifting gender roles, and increasing complexity in family relationships, making the region an appropriate context for examining contemporary experiences of divorce.

The study drew upon two complementary sources of evidence. Secondary data were obtained through a critical review of scholarly literature, including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, government publications, policy documents, and previous empirical research on family change, gender relations, divorce, and institutional responses in Bangladesh and comparable socio-cultural settings. The literature review

established the theoretical foundation of the study and provided contextual support for interpreting the empirical findings.

Primary data consisted of twelve qualitative case studies selected to represent diverse perspectives on marital dissolution. The cases included three divorced men (DM1–DM3), three divorced women (DW1–DW3), three family lawyers (FL1–FL3), and three professional counsellors (C1–C3). Together, these cases provided insight into the personal, legal, psychological, and social dimensions of divorce. Examining multiple stakeholder perspectives allowed the study to explore how marital dissolution is experienced, interpreted, and managed by individuals directly affected by divorce as well as by professionals who regularly support families during and after the separation process.

Table 1. Overview of the Twelve Qualitative Case Studies

Case ID	Participant Category	Primary Focus
DM1	Divorced Man	Economic stress and marital conflict
DM2	Divorced Man	Communication breakdown and changing gender roles
DM3	Divorced Man	Family interference and post-divorce adjustment
DW1	Divorced Woman	Domestic violence and divorce
DW2	Divorced Woman	Economic independence and marital dissolution
DW3	Divorced Woman	Identity reconstruction after divorce
FL1	Family Lawyer	Financial disputes in divorce cases
FL2	Family Lawyer	Domestic violence and legal intervention
FL3	Family Lawyer	Child custody and family mediation
C1	Professional Counsellor	Communication breakdown and psychological recovery
C2	Professional Counsellor	Trauma recovery following domestic violence
C3	Professional Counsellor	Co-parenting and post-divorce reintegration

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Data analysis followed the principles of reflexive thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021). The analytical process began with repeated reading of the case narratives and documentary sources to achieve familiarity with the data. Initial codes were then generated to identify meaningful features relevant to family transformation, gender relations, causes of marital breakdown, post-divorce adjustment, institutional support, and identity reconstruction. Related codes were subsequently organized into broader themes, which were reviewed, refined, and interpreted in relation to the study's theoretical framework and existing scholarship. This iterative process enabled the identification of recurring patterns while preserving the contextual depth and complexity of individual experiences.

To strengthen the credibility of the findings, evidence from the case studies was interpreted alongside the reviewed literature through methodological triangulation. Comparing multiple sources of qualitative evidence helped establish consistency across emerging themes while also identifying areas of divergence that reflected the diversity of divorce experiences in the Bangladeshi context. Throughout the analysis, attention was given to maintaining transparency in coding decisions and ensuring that interpretations remained grounded in the available evidence.

Ethical considerations guided every stage of the research. All case materials were anonymized through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of identifying information to protect individual privacy. The study was conducted in accordance with accepted principles of qualitative social research, including respect for confidentiality, responsible data management, and accurate representation of participants' experiences. Every effort was made to present the findings in a manner that preserved the dignity of the individuals represented while contributing to a deeper sociological understanding of marital dissolution in contemporary Bangladesh.

Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

Because reflexive thematic analysis recognizes the researcher as an active participant in knowledge production, the research team considered how disciplinary training, cultural familiarity with Bangladeshi family life, and prior assumptions about gender and marital conflict could shape interviewing, coding, and interpretation. Reflexive notes were maintained during data analysis to record emerging interpretations, moments of uncertainty, and possible value judgments. Accounts from divorced participants were compared with the perspectives of lawyers and counsellors, and competing explanations were retained when the evidence did not support a single interpretation. This process did not eliminate subjectivity; instead, it made interpretive decisions more visible and reduced the risk of treating culturally familiar assumptions as self-evident findings.

Findings and Analysis

Family Transformation and Changing Marital Expectations

Across the interview narratives, changing family structures and evolving marital expectations emerged as important contributors to marital instability in contemporary Bangladesh. Across the qualitative evidence, divorce is portrayed not as the consequence of a single event but as the outcome of a gradual process in which interpersonal, economic, and socio-cultural factors interact over time. Interview evidence highlights the influence of urbanization, changing gender roles, communication difficulties, and family relationships in reshaping marital experiences within the Dhaka Region.

Table 2. Summary of Themes Identified Through Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Theme	Main Issues	Primary Evidence
Family Transformation and Changing Marital Expectations	Communication breakdown, family interference, changing expectations	DM, DW, FL, C
Gender Relations, Power Negotiation, and Marital Conflict	Gender roles, domestic violence, financial control, decision-making	DM, DW, FL, C
Divorce, Identity Reconstruction, and Post-Divorce Consequences	Stigma, psychological adjustment, children, economic effects	DM, DW, FL, C
Institutional Support and Reintegration After Divorce	Family courts, legal aid, counselling, NGOs, family support	FL, C, DM, DW

Source: Prepared by the authors.

One recurring pattern concerns the transformation of marital expectations. Participant accounts describe couples entering marriage with expectations of emotional companionship, mutual respect, and shared decision-making. As demonstrated in the narrative of a dual-income household, differences regarding household responsibilities and work-life balance progressively generated dissatisfaction when partners maintained contrasting expectations concerning gender roles and family obligations. Rather than functioning solely as an economic institution, marriage was presented as a relationship requiring continuous negotiation of emotional, domestic, and financial responsibilities. These examples reflect broader social changes associated with modernization and increasing educational and occupational opportunities for both men and women.

Urbanization also appears as an important contextual influence throughout the narratives. Professional commitments, financial pressures, and demanding work schedules reduced opportunities for meaningful communication between spouses. In several cases, everyday disagreements concerning childcare, household management, and financial planning accumulated over time instead of being resolved through constructive dialogue. One composite counselling case describes how “*communication became increasingly conflict-oriented*,” while repeated avoidance of discussion contributed to emotional distance and declining trust. Collectively, these narratives demonstrate how structural changes associated with urban living may influence interpersonal relationships within marriage.

Communication breakdown represents another central feature across the composite cases. Rather than identifying a single critical incident, the narratives consistently portray marital conflict as developing through repeated misunderstandings, avoidance of difficult conversations, and the gradual erosion of mutual confidence. The lawyer and counsellor cases similarly suggest that unresolved disagreements frequently intensified because couples delayed seeking professional support until conflict had become deeply entrenched. These narratives emphasize that ineffective communication may amplify existing financial, emotional, and relational pressures rather than functioning as an isolated cause of divorce.

Family relationships beyond the couple also occupy an important place within the discussion. Several composite cases demonstrate how continued involvement by parents and extended family members in financial decisions, parenting practices, and household management complicated marital relationships. In one lawyer case, repeated family intervention gradually reduced the couple's ability to resolve disagreements independently, while the counselling narratives describe similar challenges in establishing healthy boundaries after marriage. Collectively, the narratives suggest how marital relationships may remain embedded within wider kinship systems in Bangladesh, where collective family expectations continue to influence private decision-making even as family structures evolve.

Taken together, these cases suggest that family transformation involves both structural and interpersonal change. Expanding educational opportunities, women's labour-force participation, urban lifestyles, and evolving expectations regarding equality reshape how individuals understand marriage and family life. At the same time, traditional expectations concerning authority, caregiving, and family involvement remain influential, creating situations in which competing values require continuous negotiation. Within this analysis, marital dissolution is therefore portrayed as a gradual social process emerging from the interaction between changing family expectations, communication practices, and broader socio-cultural transformation rather than from any single isolated event.

Gender Relations, Power Negotiation, and Marital Conflict

Evidence from the four stakeholder groups indicates that changing gender relations constitute a central dimension of marital conflict in contemporary Bangladesh. Across the composite narratives, marital instability is portrayed as emerging from the ongoing negotiation of authority, economic responsibility, household roles, and personal autonomy rather than from isolated disagreements. Evidence across the four stakeholder groups demonstrates how the coexistence of traditional patriarchal expectations and contemporary aspirations for gender equality may generate tension within marital relationships, particularly in urban settings where educational attainment and women's labour-force participation continue to expand.

Women's increasing economic independence appears as a recurring feature across several cases. In one composite narrative, a professionally employed wife expected household responsibilities to be shared equally because both spouses contributed financially to the family. However, her husband continued to perceive domestic work as primarily the wife's responsibility, resulting in persistent disagreement over household duties and childcare. These differing expectations progressively weakened communication and mutual trust, demonstrating that financial contribution alone does not necessarily transform established gender norms.

Interview evidence suggests that changing expectations regarding men's family roles contributed to marital tensions in several cases. Rather than functioning solely as financial providers, husbands were increasingly expected to participate in childcare, emotional support, and shared household decision-making. Interview evidence indicates that difficulties in adapting to these evolving expectations contributed to frustration on both sides. Counsellor observations indicate that disagreements frequently arose because couples held contrasting understandings of partnership and family responsibility, while lawyer perspectives similarly suggest that financial stress often intensified pre-existing communication problems rather than acting as the sole cause of divorce.

Household decision-making emerged as another area in which power negotiation influenced marital stability. Cross-case comparisons indicate disagreements over financial planning, parenting practices, employment decisions, and interactions with extended family members. In several narratives, decisions that might

traditionally have been made by one spouse increasingly became subjects of negotiation, occasionally leading to conflict when expectations regarding authority differed. Family lawyers further observed that disputes presented before the courts frequently extended beyond legal matters to include longstanding disagreements concerning responsibility, financial management, and family obligations.

Domestic violence represents the most severe manifestation of unequal power relationships within the discussion. Several composite cases portray patterns of verbal intimidation, coercive control, financial restriction, and physical abuse that gradually undermined both personal safety and psychological well-being. One counsellor observed that survivors often delayed seeking professional assistance because they hoped abusive behavior would improve or feared negative social reactions following divorce. Similarly, one lawyer noted that victims frequently postponed legal action until prolonged exposure to violence had caused significant emotional harm, emphasizing the importance of combining legal protection with counselling and social support.

Financial control also appears throughout the narratives as an important mechanism through which unequal power relationships may be maintained. Some cases describe continued demands for dowry, restrictions on women's employment, or unequal control over household resources, all of which contributed to dependency and conflict. Other narratives demonstrate that when women achieved greater financial independence following divorce, they eventually regained confidence and autonomy despite continuing social and economic challenges.

Overall, the cases suggest that marital conflict is closely connected with the negotiation of gender roles and power within changing family structures. Rather than presenting gender as a fixed characteristic, the cross-case analysis suggests that marital relationships function as dynamic social spaces in which authority, responsibility, and equality are continually renegotiated. Within this analysis, divorce is therefore understood as a social process shaped by evolving gender relations, unequal power structures, and the ongoing interaction between traditional cultural expectations and contemporary family life.

Divorce, Identity Reconstruction, and Post-Divorce Consequences

Interview findings demonstrate that divorce is a significant life transition extending well beyond the legal dissolution of marriage. Across the composite narratives, marital dissolution is presented as a process that requires individuals to adjust psychologically, reconstruct personal identities, renegotiate family relationships, and respond to changing social and economic circumstances. Although experiences differed according to gender and personal circumstances, interview evidence consistently indicates that divorce initiated a period of adaptation during which individuals sought to establish new roles and restore stability in their lives.

Psychological adjustment emerged as one of the earliest and most significant challenges following marital dissolution. Across the composite cases, individuals described a range of emotional responses, including sadness, anxiety, loneliness, uncertainty, and emotional exhaustion. Many participants initially struggled to accept the end of their marriages. Counsellors observed that feelings of self-doubt, uncertainty, and fear about the future often complicated this early period of adjustment. One counselling narrative explained that both spouses experienced "sadness, disappointment, anxiety, and uncertainty regarding their future," illustrating the emotional complexity associated with marital dissolution. Family lawyers similarly observed that prolonged conflict frequently produced psychological strain before legal proceedings even commenced, reinforcing the importance of emotional support alongside legal intervention.

Identity reconstruction constitutes another important dimension of the narratives. Following divorce, individuals were depicted as redefining themselves outside the marital relationship while adapting to new family, occupational, and social roles. Women who had experienced domestic violence or financial dependency progressively rebuilt confidence through employment, education, and supportive family relationships. Likewise, several male narratives suggest that post-divorce adjustment involved reassessing personal responsibilities and developing new approaches to parenting and family life. Although women more frequently described experiences of social stigma and financial dependency, male participants more commonly emphasized the loss of daily family interaction and changes in their parental roles following divorce. Across the counselling cases, recovery extended beyond emotional healing. Participants gradually described rebuilding confidence, regaining autonomy, and developing a renewed sense of purpose as they adapted to post-divorce life.

Social stigma appears consistently across the composite cases, particularly in relation to divorced women. Participants consistently described community attitudes that often attributed responsibility for marital breakdown to women, regardless of the circumstances surrounding the divorce. Such perceptions reduced participation in community activities, affected self-confidence, and complicated social reintegration. Lawyer and counsellor observations further suggest that concerns about social judgment frequently delayed decisions to seek legal or psychological assistance. As one counsellor noted, survivors of domestic violence often hesitated to seek professional support because they feared negative community reactions following divorce. These findings suggest how cultural expectations surrounding marriage continue to influence post-divorce experiences.

Children's well-being represents another prominent theme within the discussion. Across several narratives, children experienced confusion, emotional insecurity, behavioral changes, or anxiety following parental separation. Both lawyers and counsellors emphasized that cooperative parenting, consistent communication, and family support played important roles in helping children adjust to new family arrangements. Rather than portraying children solely as passive recipients of divorce, the composite cases suggest that their long-term adjustment is closely associated with the quality of post-divorce parental relationships and ongoing emotional support.

Economic consequences also feature prominently throughout the narratives. Divorce frequently resulted in increased financial responsibilities, particularly for individuals assuming primary caregiving roles. Participant accounts describe challenges associated with securing stable employment, managing household expenses, and supporting children's education following marital dissolution. The qualitative findings further reveal that financial independence contributed positively to long-term recovery by strengthening confidence, expanding personal autonomy, and facilitating social reintegration.

Overall, the cases portray divorce as a multidimensional social process involving psychological adjustment, identity reconstruction, changing family relationships, and economic adaptation. Such experiences highlight that successful post-divorce adjustment depends on emotional resilience, supportive relationships, and access to institutional resources. Taken together, the experiences of divorced women, divorced men, family lawyers, and counsellors demonstrate that post-divorce adjustment is shaped by interconnected psychological, social, economic, and institutional factors.

Intersectional Variation in Divorce Experiences

Gender differences were evident across the cases, but gender alone did not explain the variation in divorce and post-divorce experiences. Access to paid employment and family resources shaped whether participants could obtain legal assistance, secure housing, support children, or rebuild an independent household. Education appeared to widen awareness of rights and expectations of mutual decision-making, although it did not protect participants from domestic conflict, coercive control, or stigma. Age and stage of family life also mattered, particularly where childcare responsibilities tied post-divorce adjustment to continuing contact with a former spouse.

Religious and community expectations formed part of the moral environment within which participants interpreted marital continuity and divorce. The case material, however, was not sufficiently diverse to compare religious affiliations systematically. Accordingly, the analysis treats religion as a contextual influence rather than attributing distinct patterns to particular faith communities. Cross-case comparisons suggest that class, education, age, religion, and gender operate together by shaping access to resources, exposure to social judgment, and the practical possibilities available after separation. These patterns are indicative rather than exhaustive and identify an important direction for a larger, purposively stratified study.

Institutional Support and Reintegration After Divorce

The qualitative evidence indicates that successful post-divorce reintegration depends not only on individual resilience but also on the availability of effective institutional and social support systems. Evidence across the cases demonstrates that family courts, legal professionals, counsellors, family members, and community organizations play complementary roles in supporting individuals during the transition from marital dissolution

to post-divorce adjustment. While legal procedures provide formal resolution to marital disputes, the narratives suggest that long-term reintegration requires sustained emotional, social, and economic support.

Family courts and legal aid emerge as important mechanisms for protecting individual rights and resolving disputes related to divorce, child custody, maintenance, and personal safety. Lawyer interviews demonstrate that mediation is frequently encouraged before litigation, particularly when children are involved. One lawyer observed that *“the court encouraged mediation before proceeding with litigation,”* emphasizing that negotiated settlements may reduce conflict and facilitate more constructive post-divorce relationships. Another legal perspective highlights that effective legal intervention should extend beyond judicial decisions to include guidance regarding available support services and long-term family responsibilities.

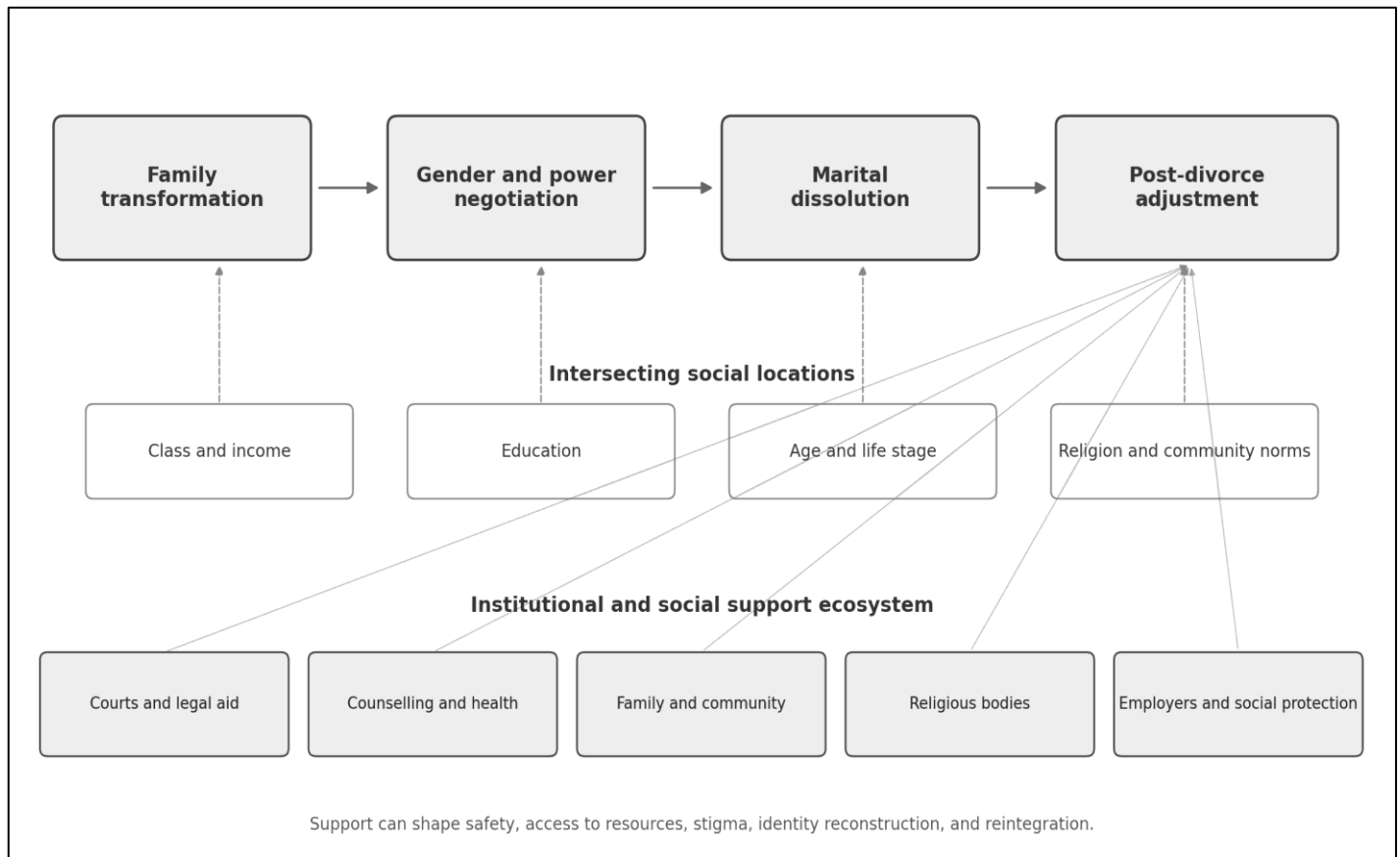
Counselling services also play a significant role in supporting psychological recovery and family reintegration. The composite counselling narratives suggest that professional support assists individuals in managing grief, anxiety, trauma, and parenting challenges following divorce. Rather than focusing exclusively on reconciliation, counsellors emphasized emotional recovery, improved communication, and healthy co-parenting. As one counsellor explained, *“successful reintegration depended on emotional acceptance, effective co-parenting, and continued family support rather than simply obtaining a legal divorce.”* Another counselling narrative stresses that early psychological intervention may reduce emotional distress and improve long-term adjustment for both parents and children.

Informal support from family members likewise appears as an important component of post-divorce adjustment. Several cases describe parents and close relatives providing housing, emotional encouragement, childcare, and financial assistance during the initial period following separation. Divorced women, in particular, were portrayed as relying on parental support while rebuilding economic independence, whereas divorced men also benefited from family networks that facilitated emotional adjustment and continued involvement in parenting. Although some extended family members contributed to marital conflict before divorce, supportive family relationships after separation frequently strengthened resilience and promoted successful reintegration.

Although NGO involvement received limited attention in the composite narratives, community-based organizations may contribute to legal awareness, psychosocial counselling, vocational training, and economic rehabilitation. Religious institutions and community leaders may also influence whether divorce is stigmatized, mediated, or accepted, but they were not directly represented among the participants and no effectiveness claim can be made from the present evidence. Their potential role should therefore be examined in future research, particularly in relation to confidential referral, non-discriminatory support, and safeguards for survivors of violence. Employment structures constitute a further institutional dimension: flexible work arrangements, leave for court or counselling appointments, protection from workplace discrimination, and childcare support could affect economic stability during and after divorce. Together, these institutions form a wider support environment that extends beyond courts and counselling services.

From a broader policy perspective, the analysis suggests that divorce should be addressed as a multidimensional social issue rather than solely as a legal matter. Coordinated collaboration among family courts, counselling professionals, legal aid providers, social welfare agencies, NGOs, and community organizations may strengthen reintegration and reduce the long-term social consequences of marital dissolution. Expanding access to affordable counselling, mediation services, legal assistance, and family-centered support programs could enhance individual well-being while promoting more inclusive and responsive family policies in contemporary Bangladesh. Collectively, these findings demonstrate that marital dissolution in the Dhaka Region is best understood as a multidimensional social process shaped by changing family structures, evolving gender relations, institutional responses, and broader processes of social transformation. This conclusion provides an important foundation for the discussion presented in the following chapter.

Figure 2. Divorce Process and Institutional Support Framework



Source: Developed by the authors from the cross-case analysis.

DISCUSSION

Family Transformation

The findings suggest that marital dissolution in the Dhaka Region cannot be understood simply as the outcome of interpersonal conflict between husbands and wives. Instead, divorce appears to emerge within a broader process of family transformation in which changing expectations of marriage intersect with urbanization, economic pressures, and continuing family involvement. Participants consistently described marriages that required ongoing negotiation over communication, household responsibilities, and emotional support, indicating that marital relationships are becoming increasingly complex within contemporary Bangladeshi society.

These observations closely reflect Giddens' (1992) concept of the pure relationship, which proposes that modern marriages are increasingly sustained by emotional satisfaction, mutual commitment, and personal fulfillment rather than by economic necessity or traditional social obligation. The experiences described by participants illustrate this transition. Many couples entered marriage expecting companionship, equality, and shared decision-making, yet conflict often developed when those expectations were not mutually understood or fulfilled.

The findings also resonate with Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (2002) theory of individualization. According to this perspective, modernization expands opportunities for personal choice while simultaneously increasing uncertainty within intimate relationships. Similar patterns emerged in this study, where higher education, women's employment, and demanding urban lifestyles broadened individual aspirations but also created new pressures surrounding work-life balance, financial responsibilities, and family commitments. Rather than reducing conflict, greater autonomy often required continuous negotiation between spouses.

Cherlin's (2004) argument regarding the deinstitutionalization of marriage further helps explain these findings. Although marriage remains highly respected in Bangladesh, participants no longer described it as a fixed

institution governed solely by traditional family expectations. Instead, marital stability increasingly depended upon communication, emotional compatibility, and cooperation. Nevertheless, extended family influence remained highly significant, demonstrating that traditional kinship structures continue to shape marital decision-making even as family relationships become more individualized. The findings therefore suggest that family transformation in Bangladesh reflects adaptation rather than the disappearance of traditional family values.

Gender Relations

Changing gender relations emerged as another important dimension through which participants understood marital conflict and divorce. Rather than portraying gender roles as fixed, the interviews revealed that husbands and wives continually negotiated authority, household responsibilities, financial contributions, and parenting roles. Divorce frequently occurred when these negotiations remained unresolved over an extended period.

This pattern supports Connell's (2009) understanding of gender as a dynamic social relationship rather than a biologically determined characteristic. The findings demonstrate that expectations surrounding masculinity and femininity are becoming increasingly flexible within urban Bangladesh. However, couples often entered marriage with different assumptions regarding equality, caregiving, and domestic responsibilities, creating tensions that gradually undermined marital stability.

The experiences of divorced women also reinforce Kabeer's (2000) discussion of empowerment. Greater access to education and paid employment increased women's capacity to participate in household decision-making and, in some cases, enabled them to leave abusive or unsustainable marriages. At the same time, participants described continuing experiences of social stigma, unequal domestic expectations, and financial vulnerability, indicating that greater agency does not automatically eliminate structural inequalities.

Similarly, the findings remain consistent with Walby's (1990) analysis of patriarchy. Domestic violence, financial control, and unequal decision-making demonstrate that patriarchal structures continue to influence marital relationships. However, the evidence also suggests that these structures are increasingly contested as women seek greater autonomy and men face changing expectations regarding emotional involvement, parenting, and shared domestic responsibilities. Divorce therefore reflects both the persistence of patriarchal norms and the ongoing renegotiation of gender relations within contemporary Bangladeshi families.

Intersectional Differences

The gendered differences identified in the cases became clearer when considered alongside participants' access to economic, educational, and familial resources. Women more often encountered stigma, caregiving burdens, and financial dependency, while men more often emphasized disrupted parental roles and loss of everyday family contact. Yet neither pattern was universal. Paid employment, education, secure housing, and supportive relatives could buffer some consequences, whereas limited resources intensified vulnerability regardless of gender. This indicates that gender operates through, rather than separately from, class position, education, age, and family circumstances.

Religion and community norms also shaped the meanings attached to marital continuity and separation, although the sample did not permit comparison across faith groups. The analysis therefore avoids treating divorced women or men as internally uniform categories. Instead, it suggests that post-divorce outcomes emerge from intersecting social locations that influence exposure to stigma, bargaining power, access to services, and opportunities for reintegration. A larger study designed around these intersections would be needed to determine how consistently these patterns extend across Bangladesh.

Divorce as Social Change

The findings indicate that divorce should be understood as a broader social process rather than merely the legal dissolution of marriage. Participants described divorce as involving emotional adjustment, identity reconstruction, changing family relationships, and the gradual development of new social roles. These experiences extended well beyond legal proceedings and continued throughout the post-divorce period.

This interpretation aligns closely with Social Constructionism, which views marriage and divorce as meanings constructed through social interaction rather than fixed social realities (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Participants interpreted divorce in different ways depending on their personal circumstances. For some, divorce represented emotional recovery and renewed independence; for others, it involved loss, uncertainty, or continuing responsibility toward children. These differing interpretations demonstrate that divorce acquires meaning through cultural expectations, family relationships, and individual experiences rather than through legal status alone.

The findings are equally consistent with Conflict Theory, which emphasizes how unequal access to power and resources shapes social relationships. Many participants linked marital breakdown to struggles over authority, economic resources, domestic responsibilities, and personal autonomy. Such conflicts reflected broader structural inequalities embedded within family life rather than isolated disagreements between spouses.

Overall, the study demonstrates that divorce in the Dhaka Region is an indicator of ongoing social transformation. Family structures are becoming more individualized, gender relations are being renegotiated, and expectations surrounding marriage continue to evolve. At the same time, the persistence of patriarchal authority, family influence, and social stigma shows that change is uneven. Divorce is therefore best understood as a socially situated process in which new expectations of intimacy and equality encounter enduring structures of power and obligation. The policy and practice implications arising from this interpretation are set out in the following section.

Policy and Practice Implications

The findings support a coordinated response to divorce that extends beyond the legal termination of marriage. Family courts and legal aid providers should establish clear referral pathways to affordable counselling, domestic-violence services, child-focused support, and social protection. Mediation may be useful where participation is voluntary and safe, but it should not be treated as a substitute for protection in cases involving coercion or violence. Counselling services should address grief, identity reconstruction, trauma, and co-parenting, with fee structures and delivery options that remain accessible to people with limited incomes.

Community organizations and religious leaders can influence stigma, help-seeking, and family responses. Training in confidentiality, gender sensitivity, legal rights, and survivor-centered referral would help these actors provide support without pressuring individuals to remain in unsafe marriages. Public awareness initiatives should challenge the unequal attribution of blame to divorced women while acknowledging men's needs for emotional support and continued, responsible parenting. Such initiatives should be adapted to differences in class, education, age, and religious or community context rather than assuming a single post-divorce experience.

Workplaces also have a practical role in recovery. Reasonable leave for court proceedings and counselling, flexible scheduling for caregivers, protection from marital-status discrimination, and links to employee assistance or social-welfare services could reduce economic disruption. At the policy level, cooperation among courts, legal aid bodies, counselling and health services, social-welfare agencies, NGOs, employers, and community or religious institutions is needed to create a continuous support pathway. Implementation should be monitored through service uptake, referral completion, user safety, affordability, and post-divorce well-being rather than through divorce-rate reduction alone.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how family transformation and changing gender relations influence marital dissolution in the Dhaka Region of Bangladesh through a qualitative sociological perspective. By drawing on the experiences of divorced men, divorced women, family lawyers, and professional counsellors, the study demonstrates that divorce is best understood as a complex social process rather than merely the legal end of a marriage. Marital breakdown emerged through the interaction of changing family expectations, communication difficulties, gendered power relations, economic pressures, and wider socio-cultural change. The findings also show that the consequences of divorce extend beyond separation itself, shaping identity, family relationships, psychological well-being, and social reintegration.

The study contributes to the growing body of qualitative research on divorce by providing context-specific evidence from Bangladesh, where empirical research has largely emphasized demographic trends and legal issues. Bringing together the perspectives of divorced individuals alongside those of legal and counselling professionals offers a more comprehensive understanding of how marital dissolution is experienced, interpreted, and managed within a rapidly changing urban society. In doing so, the study highlights the continuing interaction between traditional family values and contemporary expectations of equality, autonomy, and emotional partnership.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The twelve cases were selected for qualitative depth and stakeholder variation, not statistical representation. The urban Dhaka focus limits the range of rural, regional, socio-economic, educational, and religious experiences captured, while the small numbers within each participant category restrict systematic subgroup comparison. The cross-sectional design records interpretations at one point and cannot show how conflict, legal processes, identity, parenting, and reintegration change over time. Lawyers and counsellors broadened the analysis, but religious leaders, community organizations, employers, and policymakers were not interviewed. Finally, despite reflexive procedures, the researchers' disciplinary perspectives and cultural assumptions inevitably influenced questioning, coding, and interpretation.

Future research should use purposive stratification to include participants across income groups, educational levels, ages, religious affiliations, occupations, and family circumstances, with rural and urban cases selected for explicit comparison. Longitudinal research could follow individuals from separation through legal proceedings and post-divorce reintegration. A mixed-methods design combining in-depth interviews with a larger survey would allow qualitative explanations to be examined across a broader population without sacrificing contextual depth. Further studies should also recruit religious leaders, community organizations, employers, and social-welfare professionals to evaluate how institutional practices shape safety, stigma, economic continuity, parenting, and access to support.

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