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Social Adjustment of Divorced Women: A Study of District Gujrat, Punjab, Pakistan

Irum Tahira	Visiting Lecturer, Department of Sociology, University of the Gujrat, Punjab, Pakistan
Tipu Sultan	Doctoral Scholar, Sociology, University of Bielefeld, Germany.
Muqadas Javeed	Lecturer, Department of Statistics, University of Gujrat, Gujrat, Punjab, Pakistan.
Afzaal Afzal	Doctoral Student, Department of Social Work, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.

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Corresponding Author:

Afzaal Afzal

Email: afzaal.afzal2010@gmail.com

Abstract: In recent decades, there is a significant increase in divorce rates throughout the world and particularly in poor and developing countries like Pakistan. In Pakistani society due to patriarchy, socio-cultural and religious reasons divorce is considered a taboo, which creates many long-lasting distresses for women in their social adjustment after the divorce. Therefore, the Social adjustment of divorced women is a social problem that raises many social and cultural questions in Pakistani society. The study is an attempt to find out the causes of divorce and to explore the social adjustment of divorced women in Pakistani society. Moreover, the influence of divorce on the personal lives of women and families is also comprehended. For this exploratory research snowball, a sampling technique is used to approach the respondents. In-depth interviews are conducted to collect the data. The thematic analysis is used to explore the phenomena. This research provides valuable insights into the reasons for divorce and the challenges faced by divorced women in their social adjustment in Pakistan. The research highlights the importance of societal support, acceptance and the socio-economic factors leading to divorce. Addressing the mentioned factors can promote healthier relationships and well-being among families.

Introduction

The twentieth century has witnessed unprecedented changes in family structures, family processes and interpersonal relationships among family members globally, which has a significant influence on individuals (Corradini et al., 2023). Family does not provide only peaceful living circumstances but also the foremost source of social and personal comfort for the individual. The basis for any family is marriage, a legal and religious promise that brings liabilities for both partners. Marriage and divorce are direct social issues as well as private concerns of individuals

and families (Strizzi et al. 2022). However, due to various socio-cultural and economic reasons, these relationships move towards the separation of partners oftentimes. In recent decades a substantial rise in divorce is observed throughout the world and particularly in poor and developing countries like Pakistan (Coskun et al., 2020).

The failure and success of marital relationships among spouses have deep consequences beyond their personal lives. Individuals at the crossroads of separation influence not only themselves but also their

families, children, relatives and communities (Chen et al., 2022). Divorce has become a serious issue for both partners, especially for women in patriarchal societies like Pakistan. Divorced women in Pakistani society experience numerous challenges and stress in their readjustment in society and even in their personal life. After divorce, women feel an inferiority complex, rejection, guilt, bitterness, and embarrassment for themselves and their families among others (Nashwan et al., 2023).

A high divorce rate is observed globally and this trend is more alarming in poor and developing nations (Saeed et al., 2022). Due to the rigid normative system, divorce is considered taboo, which creates chronic troubles, especially for the woman's adjustment after divorce (Qamar et al., 2021). There are multidimensional reasons behind this increased number such as poor economic conditions, lower education and socialization, lack of understanding, patience and immature behaviour among many others (Shabbir et al., 2022). Moreover, the reasons behind divorce differ based on the socio-cultural and ritual background of societies but there are some common reasons such as lack of patience, tolerance, understanding and spousal respect among others (Waseem et al., 2020). In poor countries arranged marriages, underage or child marriages, psycho-physical instability and mismatch of spouses, sociocultural conflicts and interference of other family members are the common practices, which are the leading factors toward marriage dissolution (Muzamil et al., 2022). Traditionally, couples used to stay together longer in marital relationships for their children's wellbeing even if they have to face adjustment issues. Nevertheless, at present many couples end their marriages and prefer living as single parents for simple or personal reasons. They want to end their relationship; no matter how hard being single, they deal with the consequences and challenges (Maunde et al., 2019).

In spite, divorce is an increasingly common phenomenon in the present world, but in

developing countries like Pakistan it has serious impacts and become one of the major life stressors for the husband and the wife. It has significant negative consequences for the physical and cognitive health of all family members, especially women (Zafeer et al., 2022). Divorce brings changes in a woman's life including deterioration in psychological and physical health, residential arrangement, depression associated with social networking, family discomfort, economic disadvantages, loneliness, and movement in society among many others (Her et al., 2023). Divorce affects not only the couples who are ending their marital relationship but also have heinous impacts on children, families of man, woman and all allied relatives, along with socioeconomic conditions (Yildirim et al., 2020).

The consequences of divorce for women have deleterious and long-lasting effects such as socio-cultural taboo, worse levels of psychological issues, lower personal attainments, poor social adaptability, and economic and adjustment issues among others (Zahl-Olsen et al., 2023). Failure of marriage would cause trouble and difficulties even for the most independent and strong woman because it directly relates to feelings, emotional involvement, and failure of expectations and desires that are taken at the beginning of a relationship. By passing, the trauma of separation takes several months or healing is achieved over several years (Chunni et al., 2019). Moreover, divorced women experienced a myriad of issues and difficulties in society after the divorce compared to men. Normally, they face a sense of isolation and social stigma, because of people's questions about their dissolution of marriage. In most cases, women blame their divorce and their views regarding separation are considered baseless and inferior (Rubab et al., 2022). It is a difficult process for a divorced woman to remarry to start a new life and most of the time she sacrifices many things in this regard. Uncomfortable conversation bends a divorced woman for a lot of compromises, tend to be

withdrawn, avoid social interactions and be subjected to harassment among others (Fresnoza et al., 2022).

Although a significant increase in divorce incidents makes it common, still women suffer a lot and it is harder for them to remarry or start a comfortable life (Norouzi et al., 2022). The woman's early period of separation marked a reorganization of her, dealing with aggressive feelings with others and with one, blaming others for their situation, and guilty feelings for her parents and family. Moreover, the involvement in domestic responsibilities and filling the challenges of everyday jobs in the case of children among others. Women's feelings suffer more intensively and face challenges of the adjustment caused by divorce (Nashwan et al., 2023).

Another challenge for a divorced woman's adjustment is characterized by changes in family and demographic aspects. Most of the time-divorced women try to adjust within their parental home or with their brothers who have their own families and their obligations (Huynh et al., 2022). Divorced women became a source of constant worry for family members and directly influenced the structures and processes of these families (Qamar et al., 2021).

The interpersonal relationships among family members especially husband and wife have changed significantly, which leads to an enormous number of divorces. As stated previously divorce represents one of the major stressors for a woman's life and has drastic consequences on their life and future adjustments (Akpan et al., 2022). Therefore, it is of utmost importance to undertake such studies to best understand the dynamics of divorce and

how women react to it, cope with it, and conduct their life. A thorough understanding of divorce will help in proposing policies, programs and measures to counter the negative effects of divorce and make it possible for readjustments.

Objective of the Study

1. To investigate the causes of divorce among women in Pakistan
2. To explore the social adjustment of divorced women in Pakistan
3. To comprehend the influence of divorce on women and their families

Methodology

In order to achieve the objectives of this qualitative study, a semi-structured interview guide was designed as the primary tool for collecting data. The guide consisted of four sections, with the first section focusing on the demographic and background information of the respondents. The second section aimed to identify the factors that lead to divorce, while the third section examined the consequences of divorce. The fourth section of the guide dealt with the social adjustment of women after divorce. Personal interviews were conducted with divorced women to gather their experiences and perspectives on social adjustment in Gujrat.

The study population consisted of divorced women residing in the district of Gujrat, Punjab, Pakistan. A sample size of 25 divorced women was selected through the snowball sampling technique, and primary data was collected from all three tehsils (Gujrat, Kharian, and Sara-e-Alamgir) of district Gujrat to ensure representativeness.

Table 1

Geographical distribution of participants

S#	Tehsil	Urban	Rural	Total
1	Gujrat	7	4	11
2	Kharian	4	5	9
3	Sara e Alamgir	3	2	5
Total		14	11	25

The interviews were conducted with the informed consent of the respondents, and meetings were held in their homes or places of work in various localities of the Gujrat district. Each interview lasted an average of 30–35 minutes. The data collection process spanned from June 2022 to December 2022. After data collection the interviews were transcribed, and themes were developed through careful analysis of the recorded conversations.

Results & Discussions

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Based on the primary data collected, it was found

that the majority of respondents were between the ages of 35 and 44 years. 8.2% of respondents were aged 18–24, while 20.0% were 45 or above years old. Most of the respondents had Matriculations or below qualification, 24.0% completed their graduation and 16.0% of the respondent had master's or above qualification. When the respondents were asked regarding their children 36.0% reported that they have only one child at the time of divorce, 48.0% have 2 and 3, 12.0% respondents have 4 and 4.0% respondents have 5 or above children.

Table 2

Distribution of demographic characteristics of participants

Demographic characteristics	Description of Characteristic	N	%
Age	18–24	2	8.0
	25–34	7	28.0
	35–44	11	44.0
	45 or above	5	20.0
	Total	25	100
Qualification	Upto Matriculation	11	44.0
	Intermediate	4	16.0
	Graduation	6	24.0
	Masters or above	4	16.0
	Total	25	100
No of Children	1	9	36.0
	2	6	24.0
	3	6	24.0
	4	3	12.0
	5 or Above	1	4.0
	Total	25	100
Family System	Nuclear	4	16.0
	Joint	14	56.0
	Extended	5	20.0
	Single Parent	2	8.0
	Total	25	100
Occupation	Housewife	15	60.0
	Job / Paid work	7	28.0
	Personal Business	3	12.0
	Total	25	100
Respondents' Income (In Rupees)	0– 20000	15	60.0

	20001- 40000	4	16.0
	40001- 60000	3	12.0
	60000 or Above	3	12.0
	Total	25	100
Duration of Marriage (In Years)	Up to 1	3	12.0
	1-2	5	20.0
	2-3	8	32.0
	3-4	7	28.0
	4-5 or above	2	8.0
	Total	25	100

A large portion of respondents 56.0% belong to a joint family system, 16.0% from nuclear 20% to extended and 8.0% participants belong to a single-parent family system. Out of the total sample, 60.0% of respondents were homemakers, while the remaining 40% were working women. Five of them were employed as school teachers, with one holding the position of principal. Additionally, one respondent worked as a tailor, one as a nurse, and two were employed in domestic work. Most respondents were dependent on their siblings and parents, with only 60% of them being independent and earning for themselves. Their average monthly income ranged from up to 20000 Rs, with the exception of 12.0% of respondents who earned 60000 or above Rs per month as a principal. The minimum amount of time respondents spent with their husbands was up to 1 year, while the maximum was 9 years.

Reasons of Divorce

Financial Pressure: Typically, lower-middle-class spouses neglect to satisfy the needs and demands of their wives, which turns into the fundamental reason for the disputes that ultimately led their relationship to end up with divorce. One respondent shared, "My husband was jobless and unable to bear family expenditure which caused quarrel day by day. Under economic pressure one day he divorced me."

Infertility As A Reason For Divorce: Three respondents stated that they were divorced due to their inability to have children. In-laws were

unwilling to compromise on this issue, which led to divorce. Society did not accept the deficiency of women and there was societal pressure to have children. There was a high probability (99%) that husbands would divorce their wives for this reason.

Financial Barriers Seeking Medical Treatment for Infertility: One respondent mentioned that her husband had no money for her medical treatment from a doctor, which may have contributed to their inability to conceive a child. This highlights the financial barriers to accessing healthcare and infertility treatments, particularly in low-income settings.

Another respondent shared that she could not conceive a child even after 3-4 years of her marriage. In the beginning, her mother-in-law took her to the doctor for treatment. However, with the passage of time, her mother-in-law started to taunt and tease her all the time. Ultimately, the mother-in-law pressured her husband to go for a second marriage. One day her husband divorced her and that was the hardest day of her life. Another respondent said, "I had no children. My husband had no money for my treatment from a medical doctor so we took medicine from many health practitioners (quacks). We tried to have children for 8 years. Finally, my husband decided to find another woman to have kids and divorced me".

Acceptance of Love Marriage: Parents could not accept the love marriages of their children. Therefore, they do not support them after their

marriages. They believe that love marriage is against our cultural norms and values. Therefore, it becomes difficult for a woman to live a happy life in her husband's house without her parent's and in-laws' support. One respondent did love marriage, but they failed to understand each other after marriage, and she got divorced.

Drug Addiction: In Pakistan, drug addiction is getting very common among men. Therefore, most wives are fighting with their husbands over household expenses. Fights often get violent and in many cases, husbands gave divorce their wives.

Handicapped Women: Disability was explored as one of the leading causes of divorce among women. Many disabled women face challenges in building and maintaining healthy relationships within marriage. They often have to make significant compromises in order to sustain their relationships. Disabled women are sometimes viewed as a second choice by society, and may end up marrying a disabled man or becoming a second wife. For instance, Zunaira, a disabled respondent, shared her experience: *"I married an older man who was a widower with five children. However, his children did not accept me as their mother, and my husband eventually divorced me in order to maintain peace in the household."*

Dowry Dispute: In rural areas, dowry disputes were a common cause of divorce. According to one of the respondents, Shazia, her in-laws frequently blamed her for not providing enough dowry from her parent's side. Meanwhile, her husband was working overseas, and her in-laws gave him misleading information about her behaviour, ultimately pressuring him to divorce her. Shazia eventually received divorce papers signed by her husband

Male labor Migration Abroad: In Pakistani society, the trend of foreign employment is very common. Moreover, in the Gujrat region, this trend is comparatively high. Many men seek

employment opportunities in foreign countries to support their families. They often get married in Pakistan to fulfil familial expectations before departing for work overseas, leaving their wives behind. According to one respondent, her husband went to Dubai just two months after their marriage. Initially, he stayed in touch with her through phone calls but eventually stopped communicating altogether. Despite her efforts to reach him she could not, ultimately she was served with divorce papers.

Difficulties To Adjust With In-Laws Family: In Pakistani society, the involvement of in-laws' families cannot be ignored. Especially the female in-laws are equally involved in all the decision-making. Therefore, adjusting to married life with in-laws was another common reason for divorce. For example, Maria stated that her sister-in-law and mother-in-law constantly blamed her for any issues that arose in their household. Over time, her mother-in-law's disagreements with her also increased, which caused disharmony in the home and led to disputes with her husband. As a result, Maria lost respect in her husband's eyes and eventually got divorced.

Social Adjustment of Divorced Women in Pakistan

Divorce has historically carried a stigma in Pakistani society, leading to the abandonment of relationships with divorced women by many individuals. However, for these women, establishing and maintaining strong relationships is essential for their social well-being. Friends play a significant role in providing invaluable moral support, enabling them to lead satisfying lives. In the study, a significant number of participants reported maintaining close friendships even post-divorce, which served as a source of emotional sustenance during challenging times. Shazia, for instance, shared a positive experience in which a friend continued to love and support her even more after her divorce. Nevertheless, despite such

instances, divorced women also encounter a lot of societal criticism and blame.

Experiences of Divorced Women: Fahmida, one of the participants in the study, expressed her experience of losing the support of her close friends after her divorce. She felt abandoned as no one extended a helping hand, perceiving that people only wanted to be part of happy moments while leaving her alone during difficult times. Accepting this situation proved to be difficult for her and despite her many attempts to connect with friends, her friends did not respond. Many other respondents encountered similar difficulties in forming new connections, as divorced women are often regarded unfavourably, leading people to avoid spending time with them. Zunaira, another participant, shared her perspective of refraining from finding new relationships and choosing to live independently. She believed that initiating new connections would only result in further emotional pain. Similarly, Rabia, a participant in the study, revealed the challenges she encountered in establishing new relationships after her divorce. She additionally observed that the stigma surrounding divorce affected her family a lot, particularly the family faced a lot of difficulties to find a suitable proposal for her younger sister. Moreover, Rabia expressed that individuals often avoid connecting with divorced women and their families. That results in social isolation and a struggle to gain acceptance of divorce women in society within the community. Various participants in the study disclosed their financial dependency on siblings and parents following their divorces. One woman narrated a particularly distressing experience, expressing that her family and siblings did not extend support during her challenging period. She shared, "After my divorce, I found myself without any means of support. Fortunately, a female relative courteously offered me shelter. She lives alone in her house while her husband is residing abroad and I now work at her home to sustain myself."

Acceptance by the Family: In most cases in the Pakistani community, divorced women find themselves with no option but to return to their parent's house. Therefore, the reactions from parents were varying and sometimes were shocking. Some parents readily accepted their daughters after divorce, whereas, some unjustly placed blame on their daughters for their failed marriage.

After analyzing the field data, the findings indicate that, in most instances, mothers showed higher levels of acceptance toward their daughters following a divorce. An example is illustrated by respondent Ansa, who shared her personal experience of her mother initially feeling deeply depressed upon knowing about her divorce. However, over time, her mother provided support and expressed sympathy towards her. Likewise, another respondent Shazia shared her own experience, stating that when she informed her parents about her divorce, they initially reacted with shock. Throughout her marriage, her parents had made efforts to advocate for her fair treatment from her in-laws and husband. Following the divorce, her parents continued to shower her with love and care, just as they had before.

On the other hand, women who lacked parental support and were dependent on their brothers did not receive acceptance and were unable to regain their previous status. A respondent named Sadaf revealed that her brother frequently taunts her, blaming her as the primary cause of the divorce. Similarly, Robina, one of the respondents, was raised by her uncle, as she did not have parents. She mentioned that her parents had passed away in a road accident before her marriage, and she resided in her uncle's house. Her uncle had organized her marriage ceremony. However, when news of her divorce reached them, her uncle blamed her for the separation. Robina expressed that "her aunt had used extremely harsh and unacceptable language towards her, which she found difficult to believe"

The significance of divorced women's opinions within the household reflects the level of acceptance they receive from their families. One of the respondents shared that she has five daughters who are now her family. She loves them dearly, and they reciprocate the affection. Although they manage all the household chores themselves, they always sought her input on every matter. Another respondent, who lived with her younger brother, expressed, "My brother always values my advice when he needs to make personal decisions. However, his wife never consults me, not even for routine cooking choices. I often console myself by acknowledging that it is her home, and she has the right to make decisions too."

However, some of the respondents said that their family gives them proper support to attend the ceremonies. One of the respondents Wajeeha *"My younger sister always insists on me attending a function; she always said if you attend that function then I will go otherwise not"*.

Influence of divorce on the personal life of women and Their families

In Pakistan, women are more vulnerable to depression due to uncertainties about the future being less socioeconomically stable than men are.

Social Support by the Family and Friend: Support from family and friends are instrumental in aiding women's adjustment after divorce. Based on the gathered field data, several respondents emphasized the essential role of family and friends in helping them reintegrate into society following their divorce. Samina, specifically emphasized the importance of family support, stating that without her parents' backing, it would have been highly difficult for her to cope with the situation. The support received from family and friends contributes to improved psychosocial functioning, reducing stress levels, and fostering a positive emotional state.

Divorced women got disturbed largely that they were not able to perform household matters

properly. Huma told, "Everyone tried to take my opinion in their personal matters but mostly I am unable to say something. My family tried to keep me happy so that I should not be worried." Moreover, many respondents told that they felt so much depression by not finding the attention of their family. One of the respondents said, "Because of my Husband and in-laws' behaviour I am still upset and unable to sleep well."

Another respondent Sadaf said, "Support from friends is very necessary for every woman. In many situations a person cannot share everything with his family, at that time friends' role is very important. I feel better when I share my personal problems with my friends and get advice."

The passionate support of loved ones is crucial for the well-being and survival of a divorced woman. Maria, one of the respondents, shared that she lacked a circle of friends and did not receive wholehearted assistance from her family. The spouses of her brothers strongly disliked her presence in the household, subjecting her to cold behavior and hurtful taunts. As a result, she leads a miserable life due to her divorced status. Conversely, one of the respondents said that her friend had emotionally supported her mostly. In earlier days after the divorce her friends spent most of their time with her, however now she has recovered. Another respondent Shazia said, *"My friends supported me emotionally. They always advised me to forget my sorrow and live a happy life with my children and parents. They encourage me that it will be alright when my children will grow up; they will become my true support."*

One of the respondents said that her ex-spouse took the kids, and she misses them a lot. Her parents are pressuring her for a second marriage, but she is not ready to start a new life. Another respondent mentioned that her family has provided her with full support to make any decision. However, she does not want to get married again. If a woman's first experience has

not been good, she is hesitant to try something new.

Withdrawal from Society: Most respondents felt hesitation while visiting a friend's gathering. It was hard for them to bear society's taunts and criticism. Thus, they are cut off from society. A respondent Ramiza shared that she felt much embarrassed at the beginning of her divorce, even though she could not attend any function of her family and relatives. She was hesitant to meet married friends and relatives. Moreover, the divorced woman fell down when anyone talked about her divorced status. Rehana said that she felt very bad when people talked about her divorce. She said that divorce is a very toxic word for her until she is alive. One of the respondents, Hania, said that when someone asked her in the presence of her children about the reason for her divorce, she felt very embarrassed. Tehmina, another respondent shared, in the earlier days of her divorce when someone asked questions about divorce she could not control herself and started shouting at others. Because of that, people started to avoid her. With the passage of time, she became stronger and now she answers peacefully. Most respondents' relatives were hesitant to invite them to the ceremonies. Many of the respondents themselves were not interested in any social and family gatherings. The reasons are that people start talking about their divorce story that they do not want to discuss. Moreover, Bushara mentioned that her family does not want her to participate in ceremonies, and even her parents have become estranged from their relatives. She revealed that her father's sister harbored animosity towards her and blamed her for the divorce. Several respondents shared stories of significant changes in their personal lives. Shazia expressed that she felt unprotected, empty, and dissatisfied after her divorce. She stated, "My life has undergone a complete transformation since the divorce. I spend most of my time engaged in household chores, cleaning, and caregiving. I have become rigid and hardened as a person."

Most of the respondents mentioned that memories of their own marriages flooded back when they encountered other married couples. However, one respondent shared a particularly distressing experience of being subjected to physical abuse by her husband. Tehmina expressed her lack of trust in male individuals, as every couple she saw reminded her of her own traumatic past. She harbored suspicions and believed that every husband was attempting to deceive his wife. Another respondent, Nida, described a significant transformation in her personal life following her divorce. Initially, she experienced deep depression, but over the years, she gradually adapted. Additionally, one respondent lamented, "I constantly face criticism in society. Divorce has completely shattered my life."

Feelings of Insecurity Regarding Future:

Considering the patriarchal culture of Pakistani society, divorced women face numerous challenges. The majority of respondents expressed concerns about their future and a sense of insecurity. It is particularly difficult for women to live alone in society, as they often rely on support from their families. Sabra, one of the respondents, stated, "My mother is my sole source of support. I am constantly worried about how I would survive if anything were to happen to her." Another respondent expressed her insecurities, saying, "I mostly fear being alone in life and how I will respond when my son asks about his father." Instead of supporting her, her family pressures her to remarry. Therefore, many respondents acknowledged the uncertainty of their future. In conclusion, every woman advised others to try to preserve their homes, as it is exceedingly challenging to lead a respected life in this society without a husband.

Conclusion

The research has explored several reasons for divorce among middle and lower-middle-class families in Pakistan. Financial pressure emerged as a significant factor, with the inability to meet

financial obligations leading to disputes and eventual divorce. Infertility was another common cause, with societal pressure and in-laws' interference often intensifying the issue. Financial barriers in accessing medical treatment for infertility added to the challenges faced by couples. The non-acceptance of love marriages by parents and the cultural norms surrounding them contributed to relationship breakdowns. Drug addiction among men, difficulties adjusting to in-laws, dowry disputes, male labor migration abroad, and disability were also identified as major reasons for divorce. The research further explored the social adjustment of divorced women in Pakistani society. Divorce carries a stigma, resulting in abandonment and criticism by many individuals. However, the support of friends and family played a significant role in the adjustment process. Women who received support from loved ones reported improved psychosocial functioning and a positive emotional state. On the other hand, those lacking support faced challenges in forming new connections and experienced social isolation. Acceptance by the family was found to be pivotal for divorced women's well-being. While some parents readily accepted their daughters after divorce, others unfairly blamed them for the failed marriage. Mothers were generally more accepting than other family members. The significance of divorced women's opinions within the household matters reflected the level of acceptance they received. The research also highlighted the influence of divorce on the personal lives of women and their families. Women often experienced depression and uncertainties about the future, particularly due to their socio-economic instability compared to men. Support from family and friends played a vital role in aiding women's adjustment after divorce. However, many respondents faced withdrawal from society due to taunts, embarrassment, and criticism. Feelings of insecurity regarding the future were also prevalent among divorced women in Pakistani society. There must be some policy for financial

support of divorced women so that divorced women can live with respect in society. The awareness campaigns should start to deal with the divorced taboo in society. Divorced women's respect is also important like other women because they are also human beings. Divorced women need to get knowledge about their rights so that they may secure themselves to survive and adjust to society.

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