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## Divorce issues among Malaysian Single Mothers in Kinta, Perak, Malaysia

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### Abstract

This article intends to discuss the experiences of separation issues and their coping during divorce among single mothers in Perak, Malaysia. The topic of the discussion should not be underestimated as the number of divorced couples keep increasing. Moreover, the divorce has had stigma surrounding the issue in Malaysian culture. Thus, this study opted qualitative approach by semi structured interview of nine single mothers who were living in the district of Kinta, Perak, Malaysia. Snowballing technique used to recruit the informants. The verbatim of the interviews were analyzed by using thematic analysis. Five themes emerged to illustrate the experiences of divorce issues among single mothers; emotional instability, financial insecurity, repression of divorce from children, dealing with the legal system and support received from family and significant others. The findings recommend the relevant authorities such as the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development providing support to enhance programs in helping single mothers especially during the process of divorce as well as after the divorce happened.

**Keywords:** Divorce, Separation, Coping, Single Mother, Malaysia.

### Introduction

Historically in the 1950s the Malay population had the highest divorce rates in the world (Jones, 2021). The trend of divorce among married couples is not much different to the current situation. It is reported that in 2016 there are about 156 cases of divorce every day, relatively about 6.5 cases of divorce per hour (Kosmo, 2016). The divorce rate among Muslim couples in the country occurs within 15 minutes (Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (JAKIM), 2009). This situation resulted in a rise in the number of single mothers in Malaysia. The numbers of divorces increased more during the movement control order during the pandemic of COVID\_19. The statistics showed that the divorce cases filed involving about 66,440 Muslim couples and 10,346 non-Muslims from Mac 2020 to August 2021 (Povera & Yunus, 2021).

There are many factors of divorce such as personality, sexual issues, communication breakdown, and substance abuse (Shabudin et al., 2016). In addition, the most common factor of divorce is the duration of marriage less than five years (Abe Sophian et al., 2014). In addition, according to Abd. Rahim et al (2006) the social environment of the couples is also seen as a factor in the divorce. There are also cases of divorce that occur due to trivial matters such as a wife cooking too slow or doing laundry in the night. It is believed that due to the short period of marriage such as less than five years, married couples unable to cope with their new responsibilities as husband and wife, and new environment to integrate into their spouse's family.

As divorce has had a stigma in Malaysian society, a woman who became a single mother because of divorce may have several separation issues as a divorcee. Separation issues could be financially i.e. poverty, rising cost of living with uncertain financially, the division of matrimonial assets), emotionally (i.e. depression, disciplinary problems among children, and child custody) and many more (Ishak et al., 2009). For example, a study by Sakina (2013) explained in his study that divorce will have a big impact not only on the couples, but it will also affect their children. According to him, the effect tends to be negative especially on their psychological and parenting styles.

The children who are the victim of divorce may be exposed to personality problems due to the loss of role models and leaders in the family, as well in their academic. It is expected that a single mother with school-age children would be more exhausted to deal with the situation to make them understand the separation and divorce. Moreover, mental health also among the issues of concern during the separation of divorce due to lacked or no social support. According to Abdul Kadir and Bifulco (2013) education system is seen as an intervention to improve single mothers' economic and social well-being, as well as their mental health. Lawler (2000) explained there are six stages of divorce ones may experience namely; emotional divorce, economical divorce, psychological divorce, community divorce, legal divorce and divorce with mother or father.

Salhah et.al (2011) stated that coping is an action of an individual to overcome a stressful situation that can help them to see the situation positively. According to Folkman (2010) coping is a dynamic process evolving within individuals who are experiencing frustrating experiences. According to Macguire (2012), there are two types of solving coping strategies chosen by a depressed person, namely emotion-focus coping and problem-focus coping. However, coping strategies also has certain effects (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). If the selected coping succeeds, the individual may experience positive feeling, for example believing in their ability and self-confidence to cope with pressure. However, if the chosen coping fails to overcome with the stressful situation, ones may experience with negative feelings such as disappointment and sense of self-anger (Duclos et al., 2013).

The circumstances mentioned above have raised questions on the separation issues and coping of single mothers in Malaysia. Hence, this study intended to explore the experiences of separation issues and their coping during divorce among single mothers in Perak, Malaysia. The results are expected to enhance the understanding of the society about the phenomenon of single mothers as well as to give the ideas to other single mothers that might facing the same situations.

### **Methodology**

The study opted for a qualitative approach by in-depth interviews in the district of Kinta, Perak, Malaysia. Snowballing technique was used for sampling with the following criteria:

- i. Being a single mother due to divorced
- ii. Living in Kinta

The informants were asked with open-ended questions such as informant's background, experiences during and after the divorce occurred, and coping strategies used to cope with divorce (Figure 1).

The informants were explained about voluntary participation, and they can withdraw at any time during. The informants are also aware of anonymity. The interviews were carried out at the appropriate place that secure privacy and upon agreement between the researcher and informants. The interviews were done either at informants' housing area or at a café nearby. The interviews lasted about one hour per session and were done two sessions for each informant. The data were collected until saturated.

The recorded interviews were transcribed. The transcripts were verified by the informants either through WhatsApp, email or social media that reached to the informants. The data was analyzed by thematic analysis according to (Braun and Clark, 2006).

### Interview Protocol

#### Demographic Background

Age

Education background

Age of marriage before divorce

How long have been divorcee?

#### Experiences of separating issues and coping strategies

How do feel during the divorce?

What was your main feeling during the divorce?

How do you deal with the legal procedure at the court?

What was the most difficult situation during the divorce?

How was the reaction of your children and family members about your divorce?

Can you describe your experiences to get social support from whom you think was there to help you during the divorce?

What did you do for the adjustment with your status as a divorcee?

How long it takes for you to get up from your stressful feeling and situation?

What did you do to continue your life positively as usual with your children?

Did you participate in any development programs especially for single mother? If yes, explain.

Can you share with me, how you control your stress after the divorce

*Figure 1 Interview Protocol*

### Analysis

Nine informants were interviewed to discuss their experiences of separation issues and coping during and after the divorce.

Table 1

*Informants' Background*

Informant	Age	Number of children
Informant 1 (Y)	55	5
Informant 2 (A)	52	5
Informant 3 (Z)	49	3
Informant 4 (MI)	49	3
Informant 5 (T)	53	3
Informant 6 (D)	54	7
Informant 7 (J)	52	5
Informant 8 (I)	46	5
Informant 9 (R)	60	5

The majority informants age between 49 to 60 years. Most of them having about three to five children. Only one informant had seven children. Most of the informants went through divorce while their children were in their school-age years.

***Experiences of Separation Issues***

Table 2 shows the result of the analysis. Five themes emerged to illustrate the experiences of separation issues among single mothers; emotional instability, financial insecurity, repression of divorce from children, dealing with laws and support received from family and significant others.

***Emotional Instability***

The study found that the majority of the informants had expressed similar feelings from the aspect of their emotional instability. Most of them were shocked and unexpected that they will go through the divorce. For example, Informant 1, 2, 3, 7 and 8 stated that they were astonished and had mixed feelings when their husbands decided to end their marriage. The dissolution of a marriage can be highly impactful especially in the event of unexpected divorce, leading to feelings of astonishment of these informants. According to Informant 1, she was disappointed and shocked when her husband decided for divorce. It is because it was love marriage after several years of relationship. She felt her husband dumped her and walked out on her. She expressed her feelings were sad, grieving, and vindictive for a long period.

Table 2

*Sub-themes and themes of experiences of separation issues*

<b>Sub-themes</b>	<b>Themes</b>
Uncertain emotions It's hard to accept the reality	Emotional instability
It is hard to survive Disregarding child financial support	Financial insecurity
Children could not accept the fact of divorce occurring Children refused to involve Children were too small to understand	Repression the feeling of divorce from children
Responsible Independent Cooperation between the two parties Support received from family Support received from friends and neighbors	Dealing with the legal system  Support received from family and significant others

In addition, Informant 3 expressed her feelings as overwhelmed with sorrow, grieved and numb when her husband decided for divorce. She found it difficult to accept the situation. It was because it was an arrange-marriage by their families. She took quite some time to develop affection towards her husband. However, after conceiving with their third child she started to fall in love with her husband and out of sudden her husband decided to divorce her with one talaq.

*"... Acceptance? I'm kind of disappointed and shock. Why is it happened like this? We got married, deeply in love, then he wants to divorce? For me, once we get married then we should stay in our marriage. Such as pity to the kids. After the divorce, I could be lie to you if I said I didn't feel sad. I was devastated. What I did wrong? I let him do whatever he wants. He can be friend with anyone, male and female. He can go home at any time either 1 or 2 o'clock in the early morning as long as he is loyal to me. I worked hard. I opened a restaurant, being a school-van driver and do my level best. He was an apple of my eyes. I don't want to think about my divorce. It makes me sad and heartbroken. Why is it happened like this, why does God do this to me?"*

(Informant 1)

*"I found it's hard to accept the situation because I feel deeply distressed and empty. It was never crossed my mind that my husband (ex-husband) would do this to me. I did not expect that from him. Feels like.. I don't know.. the feelings were too much. I can't describe it. I just can't accept the situation that happened to me. It feels so sad, crazy, disappointed.. angry. All in one. Can you imagine I married him just after I finished my high school. It was pretty common back then to marry at that age. We married because of family arrangement. I started to fall in love with him when*

*I got pregnant with our third child. But then God tested us with his behavior. He started a relationship with another woman until to the extend she started to call me again and again. Emm.. ”*

(Informant 3)

#### *Financial insecurity*

The study found that the informants had gone through financial insecurity that makes them difficult to survive. Informant 3 stated that it was difficult for me because it becomes a single income family after the divorce.

*“It’s hard because he... it was like he used to provide us.. Now there is no transport. It is hard to go here and there. It is hard to go everywhere. We need to use public transports. He left us with nothing. Totally nothing. When there is no transport, it difficult for me to go to work to support my family. Even to send kids to school become a problem. ”*

(Informant 7)

*“To be honest I really can’t accept the situation on me. I was lost. I don’t know who I can rely on. I don’t know how to keep living because I lost my direction. I have no money for my kids and myself.”*

(Informant 3)

Meanwhile, informant 8 stated as below

*“... Emm.. like we don’t have anyone who can support us, no one wants to know about our children, so I don’t have a direction at the beginning of divorce. I was lost. I survive myself. Alone.”*

(Informant 8)

Most of the informants experiencing financial insecurity due to the facts that most of their husbands did not help in regards of providing their children expenses. All the household needs, meals, and schooling expenses of their children were borne by the informants.

*“I have financial difficulties. How I cannot be. I need to think all expenses. He just washing his hands of us. Not a single penny he give us. He not even come to visit his children. He did nothing. So.. I had to do all sorts of things to support myself and my kids. School expenses, food, whatever. Life was so rocky back then. It was hard to get aid from the Welfare Department. They asked this and that.. [need to get approval from] the State Assemblyman. The amount was small and it can be very slow. ”*

(Informant 3)

Informant 8 also elaborate experiencing financial difficulty as her ex-husband did not provide the needs of their children.

*“Financial is number one. Financial is number one because I am alone to take care of the kids.. To take care of my five children. School, food, clothes, house, bills. Everything I need to deal it myself. My ex-husband did not help a single thing until.”*

(Informant 8)



### *Repression of divorce from children*

Analysis shows that informants describe their children could not accept when the divorce happened between informants and their husbands. The informants stated that the children remain a long-standing grudge against their fathers due to their decision to terminate the marriage. Some informants also notified that the children became rebellious after the divorce.

*“My youngest kid; Mohamad. He used to ask, “Where is my father? Where is my father? Mom, I really miss him”. Then he cried. Until now he could not accept [the divorce]. Mohamad seems rebel. He refused to go to school, he became lazy to go to school. He is my only son. I got enough from his father. I don’t want my kid to give me any trouble. Later, he used to go home at late night. He said he hang out with friends. I was so worried. I, along with his sister, search for him the entire residential area. We were worried because he didn’t back home until 1 or 2 am. I am worried if he started to be friend with bad kids, or he might involve with fight.”*

(Informant 3)

It is also noted that the children could not accept the divorce because they could not believe that their fathers left their mothers. Informant 1 describe as below:

*“My eldest son; he can’t accept [the divorce]. He cried. He said “Why did Papa do this to you, Mum? You have no other man except him. He saw that you keep working. Every time he has no money, he will ask from you. Every time.”*

(Informant 1)

Some informants also narrated that their children refused to involve with the divorce of their parents. Informant 2 stated; *“My kids did not interfere. They said do what I think is the best for me.”*

Further, Informant 4 stated that her children were aware of their father’s behavior towards her. Therefore they told her to make up her decision so that she will no longer suffering. Similarly with Informant 5; although her children were shocked but they entrusted her with the full responsibility of making the decision to divorce.

*“The kids were like; OK. It is up to you either you want to divorce or what, but as long as they can easily study and stay in at their home. But of course they were shocked at the beginning.”*

(Informant 5)

On the other hands, some informants also describe that the divorce happened when their children were small. Due to their maturity, they could not understand what actually the divorce means for their parents relationship. Informant 6 describe as: *“The children were small that time. They no nothing. They could not understand anything. It was only me that heartbroken. It was only me felt sad.”*

*Dealing with the legal system*

According to the analysis, the informants describe their experiences dealing with the legal system to legalize their divorce. The informants showed their responsibility to themselves as well to their children.

Informant 4 stated that she was never miss the court hearing of her case although she was busy managing all the household chores, schooling of her children and work. Similarly with Informant 3. She described as below:

*“That time I handle the court case with the help of my kids. They were small. But they were with me to go here and there. I brought them with me because I am scared to leave them with anyone else. I went to the Religious Department [to legalize the divorce] and follows all the instructions given by the officers.”*

(Informant 3)

In addition, it is also noted that the informants were independent and self-reliance in regards of dealing with the legal process of divorce. For example, Informant 2 decided to make a report on her case as her husband just left her without any words.

She narrated as: “I make a report [of divorce] myself. That time it was after three years he left me without any single words. After three years, I went to court, fill up the forms and pay by my own and everything by my own.”

(Informant 2)

Meanwhile, there were also some informants illustrate their divorce process as cooperation between the two parties; husband and wife. Informant 1 describe the situation when she received the divorce letter as follows: “The divorce letter reached to the shop\*. It stated in the letter ‘Nora Binti Zainal (not the real name) when you read this letter, you are divorced with three talaq.’ So what I can say. Even he did not come home anymore, no financial for his kids. Then when I went to the court for hearing case, the officer asked me, ‘Ms. Nora, what is the reason of your divorce? I said ‘I don’t know’ I know nothing.’ Then the officer asked my ex-husband. He said ‘Because there no understanding between us. ”

(Informant 1)

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\* In some place a shop nearby to the residential area will be a place to receive letters or anything by post.

“It was easy. Everyone understand. There were no understanding between us. When there is no understanding, the court makes the case faster. Especially when both parties willingly to cooperate. It was easy. The important thing is, we understand and he also understands.”

(Informant 7)

Meanwhile, for Informant 8, the ex-husband willingly cooperate with the court as he understood that he did wrong by pronounce the divorce to her outside the court.

The Informant 8 stated as follows

*“Alhamdulillah [Thank to Allah], my time was easy. Easy to manage. No need to go to the court a few times. Just once. Then we are legally divorced... - Indeed he needs to cooperate because pronounce the divorce outside the court. So he needs to follows all the procedure.”*

(Informant 8)

#### *Support received from family and significant others*

Based on the analysis, it is also noted that some of the informants received support from family members such as Informant 4, Informant 5 and Informant 6.

*“That I think my brother. He is my own brother. The one that fully support me. He gave confident to me. He said ‘There is nothing for you to wait’. For financial, my siblings chips in to help me for three months. Nut how long they can help me. Every one of us has responsibility to our family. “*

(Informant 4)

Some of the informants also received support from their significant others such as friends and neighbors.

*“That time there was a friend. She was there to listen everything from me. Just she. No one else. The kids only listens about my divorce when we meet up. Then they knew my situation.”*

#### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The results of the study found that the single mothers experiencing various issues of divorce. It is worth to note the utmost issue is financial instability. This issue is related to the negligence of the ex-husband to give aid in term of financial. In some cases, the ex-husband just walk out from the marriage without taking any responsibilities on the children. Consequently, single-mothers left alone to bear all the issues (their or children’s matters) after the divorce. It must be very challenging for single mothers when they were left alone heartbroken and to handle the children matters at the same time without any help from the ex-spouses.

On the other hands, single mothers also learnt to be independent and self-reliance to overcome the situation. In some way, it shows a good role-model to their children that their mothers never give up at any circumstances. The findings of the study recommend the relevant authorities such as the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development providing support to enhance programs in helping single mothers especially during the process of divorce as well as after the divorce happened.

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