



CHANGING EXPECTATIONS IN MARRIAGE: A STUDY OF YOUNG COUPLES' PERCEPTIONS OF DIVORCE IN URBAN PAKISTAN

M.Umer Attique
drumerattique@gmail.com

Department of Clinical Psychology, The Superior
University, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.

Dr Abid Ali
Abidali.fsd@superior.edu.pk

Department of Clinical Psychology, The Superior
University, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.

Fatima Tul Zohra
Fatima.munir463@superior.edu.pk

Department of Clinical Psychology, The Superior
University, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.

Amna Ishaque
amnaishaque1999@gmail.com

MSc (Hons.), Department of Human Nutrition and
Dietetics, University of Agriculture, Faisalabad, Punjab,
Pakistan.

Abstract

Changing expectations in marriage among young urban couples in Pakistan create tensions between idealized marital roles, evolving individual aspirations, and the social stigma attached to divorce. This study aims to explore how young couples define their expectations of marriage, how they perceive divorce as an option, and what social, cultural, and religious factors shape these perceptions. Using a qualitative design, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with married men and women living in major urban centers of Pakistan. The study is significant because it highlights how shifting gender roles, economic pressures, extended family dynamics, and media discourses intersect with religious understandings of marriage and divorce. Findings suggest that young couples increasingly value emotional companionship, mutual respect, and personal growth, while still feeling bound by family honour and communal judgement. Divorce is viewed as a last resort—religiously permissible yet socially stigmatized—more acceptable in cases of abuse or persistent incompatibility. The study concludes that young couples negotiate between tradition and modernity, seeking more equitable and emotionally supportive marriages while navigating strong cultural and religious expectations.

Keywords: *Divorce, Gender Roles, Marriage Expectations, Religion, Social Norms, Urban Pakistan, Young Couples*

Corresponding Author: M.Umer Attique (Department of Clinical Psychology, The Superior University, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan).

Emai: drumerattique@gmail.com

1. Introduction

In Pakistan, marriage has long been an institution of religious values, extended families and collectivism, as religion has traditionally viewed marriage as a lifelong relationship. Not only is it a contractual agreement between two people but it can also be described as a social institution and a social institution that gathers families and kinship groups and even whole biradaris. Parents and older people tend to play a central role in the choice and negotiation of partners, conflict management and divorce has always been stigmatized as a last resort that jeopardizes family honour and social bonding (Saeed et al, 2022).. However, in recent 20-30 years, this ostensible version of a taken-for-granted marriage in Pakistan has been destabilized by the fast social, economic, and cultural transition in Pakistan especially in the urban hubs.

The current national discourses and media commentaries indicate that the number of divorce and marital conflict in Pakistan is increasing gradually but noticeable; the national surveys indicate that a significant percentage of the Pakistani citizens feel that the divorce rates have continued to rise over the past ten years. According to a survey conducted by Gallup Pakistan, nearly fifty per cent of the surveyed people (48 %) see the situation of divorce increasing, many having attributed this to the decreased tolerations and patience among couples (Ramzan et al, 2018). Similar statistics suggested in law and court records of major towns, particularly those in Punjab and Sindh show that instances of khula and talaq have been on the increasing trend over the past few years. Qualitative studies have started registering the micro-processes of this trend, including intimate partner violence, the intervention of in-laws, unfulfilled emotional promise, and psychological and social irreconcilable aspects of marital dissolution among families and offspring. (Akpan & Ezeume, 2022).

The institution of family itself is also changing, at the same time. Households and gender roles are changing because of urbanization, rising levels of education especially among women and involvement in paid work (Trask, 2020) Research on urban Pakistan observes that there is a gradual change of extended families to more nuclear families and a growing focus on companionate marriage, emotional intimacy and negotiation among spouses as opposed to absolute subordination to the elderly. An example of such as negotiations is by Awan, Shoaib, and Malik (2023), who show that professional urban couples regularly negotiate that dual-career work, domestic labour, and parenting are not always situated according to the rigidly patriarchal role expectations, despite their being still situated within more general patriarch norms. These movements reformulate the

expectations of marriage the youth had and the way they perceived the possibility of divorce.

At the same time, there are signs of evolution of nuptiality and the timing of marriage. According to qualitative studies on the subject of late marriages in Pakistan, it has been argued that financial strains, the increased educational desires, and the search of an ideal partner have led to marriage delays and a more complicated process of talks between people and groups. The young adults now emphasize more on personal compatibility, emotional support, shared values and mutual respect as well as other more traditional issues like caste, family background and religious observation (Chavan, 2024). These changing standards increase expectations of marriage fulfilment, yet it can also precondition disappointment when realities experienced in life fail to meet the standards. International and local scholarship both believe that when set of high and usually idealised expectations about romantic love, emotional evenness, and lifestyle ambitions are not met, there is a heightened danger of marital dissatisfaction and, eventually, divorce (Wallerstein, 2019).

This is further complicated by the media and digital technologies. The Pakistani youth in the urban context are highly imbued in the social media arena which propagate globalised imaginaries of love, wedding ideals, and ideal relationships (Mahmood, 2019). Such practices as the recent literature on social media influencer weddings, such as how overly designed and glamorized images of extravagant ceremonies and couples often appear idealize the image of a successful marriage in the minds of young individuals (Ames, & Burcon, 2016). Such visual and narrative tropes can at the same time incite the sensation of desirability of contemporary, egalitarian unions and establish unachievable standards against which average couples may fall short in view of the limitations of economic insecurity and extended family demands. What is obtained is a complicated, and sometimes opposite, association of traditional and modern expectations that the young couples have to overcome (Bittman, 2020).

In this evolving socio-cultural world, divorce is normatively disapproved and religiously delicate but there seems to be a social interpretation changing. Qualitative and media-based interpretations suggest that the stigma of divorce is diminished slowly, particularly in urban environments and amongst scholar classes, where the stigma of self-respect, of mental peace and of bad relationships are more liberally shared. Certain literature demonstrates the divorce as its growing interpretation by younger generations as an acceptable, though hurting, way out of abusive or most unhappy marriages as opposed to a complete failure in morality. Nevertheless, these transitions are not homogenised and disputed, as they differ, depending on the class, gender, place, religio-cultural orientation.

Although much recent Pakistani research has been done in the area of late marriages, marital conflict, and the causes and effects of divorce, much of the existing

literature is devoted to either childless individuals (i.e., to divorced mothers) or to macro-level issues, like to legal systems and the socio-economic status. Little emphasis has been placed on the way young couples who are already married or those considering to get a marriage view divorce in this dynamically shifting background more so in the urban Pakistan where these changes have been highly felt. There is little known about their interpretation of divorce in the context of their own anticipations of married life, their integration of religious doctrine against the context of the new discourses of individual rights and psychological health or how they make differences based on gender, and social class or duration of relationship.

The concentration of universities, the service sector, media industries and neighbourhoods are features of urban Pakistan that offer a critical location to generate answers about these questions. To the daily life of young urban couples, both long-held collectivist values (overprotective parents, family duties, and izzat or family honour) and new ideas of individuality, self-expression, and individual happiness interact simultaneously (Admani, 2023).. It is in this contradiction, between continuity and change, obligation and choice, that the aspect of divorce is being renegotiated. Such perceptions are very important both in understanding sociological theory of the change of families in the Muslim and South Asian context as well as in practice by practitioners, counsellors and policy actors who face issues of marital stability, mental health and gender just family policy.

In particular, the study looks at how the expectation of marriage between the young urban population is constructed by the intertwining forces of religion, family, media, and economic aspects and how the expectation informs their ideas about when, why, and whom divorce is possible and justified. This study attempts to go beyond the deficit discourse, which only mourns the increasing divorce rate and, instead, bring into focus the lived experiences, fears and hopes through which the conceptualization of marital stability and marital dissolution occurs among young couples in modern urban Pakistan.

2. Research Questions

1. How do young couples in urban Pakistan define their expectations of marriage?
2. How do young couples in urban Pakistan perceive divorce as an option within marriage?
3. What social and cultural factors shape young couples' perceptions of divorce in urban Pakistan?
4. How do religious beliefs influence young couples' views on divorce in urban Pakistan?

2.1. Significance of the study

The research is also important as it explores within the context of changing social conditions, how young urban couples in Pakistan are redefining their concept of marriage

and divorce. Suggesting their vistas beforehand, it contradicts the common belief that high divorce rate is an easy marker of a declining morality. The results can guide counsellors, policymakers, and religious and community leaders to develop culturally sensitive marital counselling, awareness, and family policies by responding to changing expectations and supporting mental well-being, as well as developing more realistic and fairer conceptualisations of marital stability.

2.2. Research Methodology

The research design adopted in this study is qualitative because it aims at exploring the understanding of marriage among young couples in the urban setting in Pakistan and how they feel about divorce. Due to the emphasis on meanings, experiences, and interpretations instead of numerical patterns, a qualitative approach, the most appropriate one in order to capture the depth, complexity, and sensitivity of the issue.

2.3. Research Design

The research based on an interpretive phenomenological approach as it seeks to comprehend the meaning of the marital expectations and the concept of divorce as perceived by the participants in their daily lives. Such a design allows the researcher to discover the life lived by the participants, their feelings, and stories in their words, without compelling them to adhere to previously developed categories.

2.4. Research Setting

Urban centres like Lahore, Islamabad/Rawalpindi, Karachi, or Faisalabad in Pakistan were used in conducting the research. These are major cities with increased exposure to higher education, media, job opportunities, and changing family structures, which make the right location in examining the transformations of expectations about marriage and additional alterations to the way divorce is viewed.

2.5. Population and Sampling

The target group includes the young couples (both married and engaged or about to be married), who around 20-35 years old, and living in the urban Pakistan. Participants who selected on the basis of purposive sampling can give rich and highly relevant information. There was an attempt to make distinction in:

- Gender (promoting the thoughts of both partners)
- Socio-economic status (lower-middle, middle, and upper-middle classes)
- Duration of the relationship (newly married, few years of marriage, engaged)

The sample size will be planned at approximately 15 couples (24 people) and will continue to be sampled until the data is saturated (no new themes arise as a result of the interviews).

2.6. Data Collection

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used to gather the data. Two formats may be employed:

- The interviews were conducted as individual interviews (husbands, wives/partners), where they were open to talk without any pressure.
- Couple joint interviews (where suitable) to see the way they arrive at meanings together.

The areas to be addressed by an interview guide consisting of open-ended questions include:

- Marital expectations (roles and responsibilities, emotional support)
- Concepts of marriage success and breakdown.
- Divorce perceptions (divorce causes, reasons, social implications)
- Impact of religion, family, media and economic conditions.

Interviews were done either in Urdu or in the desired language of the participants that audio audio-recorded with the consent of the participants. All the interviews are supposed to take 45-60 minutes. Short field notes were also made to record the non-verbal information and context.

3. Analysis

The research question, which is, How do young couples in urban Pakistan define their expectations of marriage, is based on meaning and not measurement. It tries to look at how marriage should be and feel like to the youths who are already married or soon to be married, and not according to the older generations, religious leaders, or the state.

The question in its essence is composed of two important concepts, which are: the concept of the young couples and the concept of marriage expectations. The young couples here are interpreted to be partners of approximately 20s and early 30s and are living in an urban area Lahore, Karachi, Islamabad or Faisalabad. This has placed the study in an environment characterized by education, media exposure, job stresses and evolving family units. It presupposes that these couples have a different social world than their generation of parents and thus can have different visions of marriage.

Expectations of marriage are what they expect, what they want or believe is normal in the marital relationship including expectations regarding gender roles (who earns, who cooks, who decides), emotional life (love, care, respect, communication), religious and moral obligations, relations with in-laws, children and parenting and concepts of success and failure in marriage. There is no presupposition of the question about the relatively traditional and modern character of these expectations; rather, the participants are encouraged to describe marriage in their own terms to reveal the contradictions and ambivalences.

How do define are the words indicating interest in process and language. It thus tries to understand not only their expectations themselves, but how they express them: the terms in which they are expressed, the metaphors they use, the narratives they tell, and the

explanations they give (e.g. in terms of religion, culture, love, social media or personal experience). This makes this question especially appropriate to qualify study because the question can be used to capture the nuance, emotion and context.

The question specifically incorporates the urban Pakistani setting. In urban living, there is exposure to a variety of ideas and global media, shift in working habits and sometimes lesser control by extended families but it comes at a price, housing and a new kind of stress. This question assumes that these conditions are influencing the reformulation of expectations of marriage. As an example, couples can look forward to being more emotionally companionate and on an equal footing with the family honour and established standards.

The question is an open-ended and exploratory question. It is not meant to demonstrate a hypothesis but a topography of meanings. The replies can indicate some strains, such as love and obligation, equality and inequality, individual and societal happiness, personal and social pressures, which can bring out the core of why marriage works, suffer or rides towards divorce in modern urban Pakistan.

How do young Pakistani couples who live in urban areas view divorce as an alternative to marriage? inquires after the definitions, demarcations, and circumstances in which divorce could be recognizable, tolerable, or otherwise inappropriate to the youths today. It goes beyond the question of whether they advocate or are against divorce; how they perceive it in the light of their realities, their values and their expectations.

One, the term perceive divorce is a term that dwells upon attitudes, emotions, and meanings. To other couples, divorce can be envisioned as the last resort when all the reconciliation strategies have been exhausted; to some couples, divorce can be regarded as a means of attaining mental peace, safety, or self-respect in case the relationship turns abusive or irreconcilably incompatible. The question opens the door of asking the question of whether divorce is perceived as a taboo or moral failure or individual right or religiously controlled or a must-have means to escape harm.

The phrase of being an option to marriage is very crucial. It implies that the research is not concerned with some abstract views of divorce in the society, but rather how the couples envision the same within their own marital life. Is divorce in the background of their minds as a way out or is it inconceivable? Do they make lines - say, I will never think of divorce except when there is violence or infidelity? This shifts the discussion of general attitudes to individual thresholds and red lines in their relations. These perceptions occur within a certain socio-cultural setting as the author targets young couples in urban Pakistan. The urban youth may be frequently exposed to:

- Religion education, which does not promote divorce but permits it when specific circumstances are met.

- The family and community standards which could stigmatise the divorced people, more so women.
- Social networks and media that legitimise the discourse of quitting toxic relationships or focusing on oneself.

The implicit acknowledgement of this question is the understanding that young couples are balancing between old collectivist values (family honour, community reputation, lifelong endurance) and new individualist values (self-care, emotional fulfilment, personal boundaries). This tension will probably be manifested in their attitudes toward divorce.

It is also an open-ended and exploratory question. It is not that it presupposes that young couples are entirely accepting or entirely rejecting the divorce, but that provides room to complex, ambivalent standpoints. An example is that one of the participants may state, I am personally opposed to divorce however I agree to divorce in the presence of abuse, or Religiously; it is permitted, but socially; I think it destroys the life of a woman. These subtle reactions display the complex moral and emotional thinking of their opinions.

Answering this question qualitatively can reveal the connection between marital expectations (that are changing) and how perceptions of divorce are associated with it. In case marriage is becoming more and more viewed as a partnership that is supposed to offer companionship, respect, and emotional support, the circumstances in which divorce can be called thinkable are also changing. Therefore, it is one of the key questions in the study of how young couples strike a balance between commitment and the concept of an exit and how this balance determines marital stability in modern urban Pakistan.

The question to be answered is; What are the social and cultural influences on young couples in urban Pakistan that perceive divorce? brings the emphasis out of the individual attitudes and onto the broader structures and environments that shape the understanding of divorce. It acknowledges divorce as not perceived individually but highly entrenched in family structures, societal values, religion, gender ideals and media portrayals.

The most important term is the social and cultural factors, which leads to the discussion of several levels

Marriage: Marriage in Pakistan is family based. Parents, in-laws, and extended relatives usually mediate in the conflict of marriages and highly dissuade any divorce since it includes the family honour, interrelationships among the biradaris and marriage opportunities of siblings. The understanding of divorce by young couples is then put in the prism of expected family responses, the need to adapt, and the fear of social stigma.

Gender norms and patriarchy: Divorce is not sex neutral. Women tend to be more stigmatized, economically vulnerable, and have difficulties with custody. Men can be afraid of financial support or social disparagement as unsuccessful husbands. Such

disproportional effects determine how each spouse considers divorce as a possibility: a woman might consider it as a way to safety, as well as the way to lose her respectability; a man might regard the divorce as a threat to his position as the breadwinner or an authoritative figure.

Religious views and interpretations: Islam allows divorce but does not encourage divorce but defines it as a last resort. This is highlighted differently by various families and religious scholars; some of them strongly discourage it with expressions of Allah not liking divorce, but moderately, they emphasize on justice, dignity, and avoidance of harm. The teaching of young couples at home, in mosques, social groups regarding sabr (patience), reconciliation, and zulm (injustice) affects the perception of the couple.

Social stigma and reputation of the community: Community gossip, labelling, and fear of being referred to as talaq-shuda or khula-shuda are some of the very strong control tools. The social cost of divorce could be quite daunting to many young couples as the personal cost.

Media and digital culture: Television dramas, movies, social networking sites depict divorce differently, being either romantic, demonising divorced females, or normalising second chances. These images also provide the young couples with new words (mental peace, toxic relationship, self-respect) that rebrand the way they think and discuss divorce.

Urbanisation and class: Urban life exposes to many different kinds of life, legal consciousness, and provision of services (lawyers and counsellors), but also economic pressures. Middle and well-educated couples might have a larger discursive space to think of divorce as a possibility of choice, although they still might be afraid of being stigmatized.

The research question, which is How do religious beliefs affect the perceptions of the urban Pakistani young couples about divorce? will test the way in which Islam and its daily interpretations influence the perceptions, minds and choices made by the young adults towards marital dissolution. Instead of trying to use religion as a dichotomous rule permitting or not permitting the divorce, the question views religion as a dynamic structure by which couples make sense of their issues, responsibilities, and rights.

To begin with, the question contextualises the religious faith as an interpretative construct. In Pakistan, most young couples are raised with a message that a marriage is a holy relationship and any divorce though sanctioned by the Islamic law is highly disapproved. Most of them refer to the ideas like Allah does not like divorce or the focus on the sabr (patience) and reconciling. Meanwhile, they also know that the Islam permits talaq and khula to shield people against either zulm (injustice), the violence, or even the extreme incompatibility. The question thus aims at explaining how couples bargain on these two dimensions; discouraging divorce and conditional allowance as a last resort.

- Second, the sample is analyzed according to the way in which couples express their religious views in the qualitative interviews. As an example, one of the participants can state:
- Islam does not prohibit divorce but only in case the conditions become too intolerable.
- We are supposed to do everything we can to save the marriage; it is a worshipping thing.
- When present are zulm, then our religion does not bind us to stay.

Implication such utterances show religion to be both a kind of moral demarcation - discouraging too early thought of divorce - and a kind of moral protection - permitting withdrawal in situations of actual persecution. The terminology which is used to analyze the case is very attentive to the terms used, such as: sabr, taqwa, zulm, haq, al-halal/haram and follows the development of how faith is being operationalized in decision-making concerning marital selection.

Third, the investigation recognizes the differences in religious beliefs. Various families, mosques and media preachers place different focus on them: some place more stress on endurance and obedience; others on justice, mercy and rights to each other. In turn, the views of young couples are conditioned by:

- The manner in which religion is practiced at home.
- Whom they follow as the scholars or online preachers.
- The amount of their religious practice and education.

The paper guides the focus on religious beliefs that have gendered implications. For instance, men may view themselves as religiously bound to provide and to entertain family cohesion, women may use religious rhetoric in the assertion of dignity, in the demand of protection against abuse, or a khuluyu right.

4. Conclusion

The article, Changing Expectations in Marriage: A Study of Young Couples Perceptions of Divorce in Urban Pakistan, combines a complex of mutually dependent areas of concern: the changing meaning of marriage, the rising prominence of divorce, and how young adults in a fast-changing urban world are negotiating the reality of divorce on the ground. The contextual explanation states that, despite the traditionally-defined marriage institution as a sacred and family-oriented life-long ordeal in Pakistan, the modern urban culture (through education, media penetration, women working and roles of making a family) slowly shape the way young couples are imagining marriage and divorce.

The four research questions are a systematic way of tackling this bigger issue. The former, How do young couples in urban Pakistan define their expectations of marriage? explores the articulation of aspirations of companionship, emotional intimacy, gender

roles, shared responsibilities, mutual respect in urban Pakistan and the move beyond stereotypical traditional and modern binaries. The second, entitled How do young couples in urban Pakistan see divorce as a possibility in marriage? changes the emphasis on continuity expectations and looks at the perceived possibility of rupture, whether divorce is perceived as a taboo or a last resort, whether divorce is perceived as a religiously acceptable way out of injustice or an acceptable way out of mental peace and self-respect. The third, What social and cultural factors shape the perceptions of urban Pakistan young couples of divorce, broadens the scope to include the understanding that perceptions are also created by more than just personal attitudes but also by other discourses in the world around them stigma, family honour, gendered outcomes of divorce, and television, dramas, and social media. The last question, How do religious beliefs affect young couple perceptions on divorce in urban Pakistan? predicts the mobilization of Islam as a key interpretive paradigm, exploring how the notion of stay, suffer, reconcile or leave are conceptualized when couples are questioned about divorce.

The interpretive phenomenological paradigm used methodologically is especially effective in capturing the delicacy and depth of the issue under investigation. In-depth, semi structured interviews with youthful married and engulfed couples in metropolitan areas enable them to bring out their voices, language and stories without being tied to pre-determined categories. Thematic analysis thus allows the central patterns and tensions, i.e., the opposition between love and duty, personal happiness and family demands, and ideals and actualities related to religion to be organically brought to the fore. An insistence on purposive sampling, socio economic diversity, as well as, trustworthiness strategies (e.g member checking and thick description) adds additional credibility and depth to the findings.

Together as a whole, this work is set to contribute immensely. On the theoretical level, It expand sociological and gender research on family change in the context of Muslim and South Asian families by illuminating on the conceptualization of marriage and divorce by young people in a time of transition. Through the relocation of alarmist accounts of a rising divorce rate, the research places divorce in the context of shifting demands of what marriage is supposed to offer emotional satisfaction, respect and psychological well-being, as well as speaks to the long-standing institutions of patriarchy, kinship and community.

As a practical consideration, the results should be used by counsellors, psychologists, social workers, and other marital educators to support young couples. A better insight into how a good marriage is defined by the couples, what are the unacceptable terms, and how to frame the morality of divorce would help the professionals develop culturally based counselling, premarital counselling and conflict-resolution programmes. These insights could also help policy makers and religious or community

leaders to respond to the problem of families in a manner that fulfills religious principles and responsive to the realities experienced by modern urban youth especially on matters of dignity of women, mental health and safety against abuse.

The intention to work with urban and rather educated segments in the research is the main strength and, at the same time, the main limitation of the study. It provides a more descriptive and context-rich image of the shifting expectations and perceptions in the most acute areas of social transformation; though not to signify all of Pakistan or rural citizens. The development of future studies might be based on this work by developing comparative rural-urban studies, longitudinal designs of the couples and mixed methodological studies that combine the qualitative information with the larger quantitative trends.

The paper acknowledges marriage and divorce as not fixed and purely personal matters but as social institutions and moral experiences in constant transformations as young people are torn between tradition and change. Through listening to the accounts of the young couples as they express their marital experiences, marital divorce, religion, family, and selfhood, the study used to create a more compassionate, practical, and fair discourse on the topic of marital life in modern urban Pakistan.

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