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A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experience of Life after Divorce among Women in Bandar Abbas

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The primary objective of this study was to explore the lived experiences and post-divorce coping strategies of women in Bandar Abbas, aiming to uncover the hidden and multi-layered dimensions of their lives following marital dissolution.

Methods: This research employed a qualitative framework using a descriptive phenomenological approach. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted in 2025 with 15 divorced women in Bandar Abbas, selected through purposeful and snowball sampling techniques. The data were analyzed according to Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method to identify and categorize the core themes of the participants' lived experiences.

Results: The findings indicated that women's post-divorce experiences and consequences manifest in four core categories: precarious economic status, psychological and emotional trauma, social punishment, and sexual challenges. To address these issues, women utilized two main categories of coping strategies: personal development strategies and social adaptation strategies.

Conclusions: The study concludes that divorce is a complex transition that confronts women with an entanglement of psychological, social, and economic hardships. The experience is characterized by a heavy psychological burden stemming from identity loss and societal shame, exacerbated by patriarchal structures and cultural taboos that restrict access to support networks and economic opportunities. Ultimately, these lived experiences reflect broader structural inequalities that shape how women navigate the reconstruction of their lives and confront hidden hardships.

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Introduction

Marriage is a deeply significant decision with important consequences for future development (Amato, 2010; Shulman & Connelly, 2013). When interpersonal conflict and incompatibility escalate, couples often conclude that cohabitation is no longer viable, leading to separation or divorce. Divorce entails numerous adverse consequences, including psychological distress and emotional trauma for family members, an increased propensity for certain criminal behaviors, and the deprivation of parental care for children, ultimately exerting profound destabilizing effects on the social fabric. This is because, legally, divorce is merely an event, but from the perspective of sociologists and psychologists, it is an interconnected chain that will affect its victims forever. Most children from single-parent families experience higher levels of psychological stress, personality problems, educational difficulties, aggression, and failure to adapt with their peer group compared to other children (Mahy, 2014). In fact, divorce is a reality of modern life that has become a normal phenomenon spreading at an alarming rate. In recent years, Iran has faced a concerning increase in the divorce rate. Statistics show that in 2021, one out of every three marriages ended in divorce, and the divorce rate in Iran increased by approximately 28 percent from 2011 to 2020 (National Statistical Yearbook, 2021), indicating a likely further increase in divorce in coming years. Bandar Abbas city is no exception to this rule. In 2021, compared to the previous year, the number of registered marriages and divorces showed growth rates of 1.0% and 16.1 %, respectively (Hormozgan Province Statistical Yearbook, 2021). Therefore, attention to the issue of divorce in Bandar Abbas city is of great importance.

The divorce process and the concept of renewed singleness are gendered concepts. Divorce brings for women feelings of loneliness and isolation, psychological disorders such as anxiety and depression, financial problems arising from issues such as being the family's breadwinner, negative views from those around them, and limited contact with friends and acquaintances (Lloyd et al., 2014; Parker et al., 2022). Women who experience living alone face more difficulties and problems compared to their male counterparts and experience a more painful life (McCarthy & Edwards, 2011). Most women after divorce devote their efforts to shaping an independent life beyond the requirements and limitations of patriarchal culture, and they pay steep costs for resisting male structures, gendered spaces, and woman-hating norms. Therefore, given women's greater vulnerability, men's higher chances of remarriage after divorce, and the covert nature of

relationships and lack of access to information about the divorce phenomenon, it is not possible to explain it within the framework of a single study. Therefore, the present study, observing family transformations in Iranian society and increasing divorce trends, seeks, using a qualitative method, to illuminate hidden aspects of life, the lived experience of women after divorce, their perspectives and adaptation to divorce and its consequences, and the strategies of women after divorce, adopting a phenomenological approach. The focus is on analyzing the narratives of divorced women—specifically, how they construct the story of their divorce and their renewed single status. We believe that reading the experiences of other women and how they emerged from this process as winners can help other damaged women find new meaning and balance in their lives. Therefore, this study is organized around the following question: What is the lived experience of women after divorce?

The findings of Mohammadi et al. (2023) indicate that women's solitary living after divorce can be categorized under four overarching themes: the development of individuality, personal autonomy, social exclusion, and the absence of a supportive foundation for their children. Furthermore, solitary living is perceived by some women as an unpleasant experience, while for others it is construed as a liberating metaphor. On the other hand, the principal themes identified in Bastani et al. (2022) include: (1) the family as a significant resource for achieving adjustment, (2) individual resilience, and (3) social resilience. The findings underscore the necessity of adopting a comprehensive approach to the issues faced by divorced women after separation, as well as implementing effective measures to empower them in attaining adaptation to post-divorce conditions. Moreover, Yarigar-Ravesh (2022), in her study, concluded that the consequences of divorce for women encompass both individual and social harms: individual harms (a sense of loneliness) and social harms (financial difficulties, stigma, and a sense of insecurity). The findings of Vaezi (2018) indicate that empowering divorced women, providing training in adaptive coping strategies, strengthening the foundations of family support, and expanding social opportunities are among the measures that can enhance women's adjustment to post-divorce conditions. In this regard, Hemmati and Karimi (2018) found that the stigma of widowhood, social anxiety, homelessness, and the lack of social support contribute to a sense of insecurity among divorced women, and that being the head of a household further exacerbates their challenges and problems. Khalajabadi Farahani et al. (2017), in their study, demonstrated that a common essence underlying

women's experience was evident across family relationships, social interactions, and insecure occupational and social environments. Therefore, Ahmaddoost et al. (2017), in their study, examined macro-level contexts (economic difficulties, the weakening of religious and traditional values, and social changes), meso-level contexts (deficiencies in marital skills, failure to fulfill spousal roles, addiction, and early-age marriage), and micro-level contexts (infidelity and personality and psychological problems). Among the robust studies in this field is that of Zayerzadeh and Pirkhaefi (2014), which indicates that the consequences of divorce for women lead to solitary living, a decline in personal status, disruption of psychosocial equilibrium, and social deviance.

Khan and Hamid (2021) reported in their study that divorce has entailed numerous social, economic, cultural, and psychological challenges, and that divorced woman, following divorce, demonstrated greater resilience through the use of various coping strategies. Quah (2020) also indicated in their study that the uneven effects of globalization, the intersection of women's social identities, and the strategies they employ shape their divorce trajectories. Moreover, the study by Abolhasani et al. (2017) demonstrated that the consequences of divorce can be categorized into three conceptual domains: economic, socio-cultural, and personal dimensions. Konstam et al. (2016), in their study, identified five categories: (1) self-stigma versus public stigma; (2) failure, shame, and perceived blame; (3) religion and stigma; (d) non-disclosure and impression management; and (4) contextual considerations (if circumstances differed). Their findings indicate that stigma manifests in the behavior of young divorced women in diverse and, at times, contradictory ways. Abebe (2015) likewise reported that divorce entails a range of challenges for women, including financial, social, and psychological difficulties. The study further showed that women employ a wide spectrum of survival strategies, reflecting their agency during and after the divorce process. On the other hand, the study by Hansson and Laidmäe (2014) found that divorced women reconstructed their post-divorce identities through three primary types of narratives: success stories, sad narratives, and narratives centered on post-divorce parenthood. The findings further indicate a reciprocal relationship between changes in the social context and attitudes toward divorce, and the post-divorce condition. In this regard, Kavas (2010) likewise reported that negative attitudes toward divorced women persist even in cases of remarriage, and that these women continue to receive less external support even after entering a subsequent marriage.

Similarly, Aghajanian and Moghaddas (2008) found that divorced women experience economic hardship and greater psychological distress, and that their children exhibit higher levels of emotional disturbance and delinquent behavior. The results of Mauldin's (2008) analysis also indicated that the most significant determinants of whether women exit poverty immediately following marital disruption (divorce) include current employment status, job training, educational attainment, race, and the presence of a child under the age of six. In the present qualitative study, the authors' theoretical sensitivity, as an epistemological tool for a deeper understanding of the lifeworld of divorced women in the city of Bandar Abbas, was developed through three sources. First, through deep immersion in the existing literature and the theoretical traditions of sociology and psychology. This theoretical grounding enabled the researcher to move beyond surface-level descriptions and to become attuned to latent cues and implicit codes in participants' accounts, without imposing these frameworks on the data. The second source of theoretical sensitivity was the researcher's lived experience and deep familiarity with the socio-cultural context, norms, and traditional–modern layers of the coastal society of Bandar Abbas, which enabled the establishment of an empathetic rapport and facilitated a nuanced understanding of the participants' linguistic and behavioral subtleties. Finally, theoretical sensitivity in this study was accompanied by a process of continuous reflexivity and the technique of bracketing (*epoché*); that is, throughout all stages of data collection and analysis using Colaizzi's method, the researcher consistently suspended prior assumptions and personal judgments to ensure that the extracted codes emerged directly from the women's lived experiences rather than from the researcher's subjective biases.

Material and Methods

In the present study, a qualitative phenomenological approach—specifically of the hermeneutic type—was employed to explore and describe the experiences and consequences of divorce, as well as the post-divorce strategies and coping mechanisms of women. In phenomenological terminology, it refers to the study of phenomena. A phenomenon is that which appears, manifests, and becomes evident (Dartig, 1997). Therefore, phenomenology is concerned exclusively with the structures and activities of human consciousness, based on the fundamental assumption that the world in which we live is constituted within our consciousness, and that although an external world exists, it acquires meaning only through our consciousness (Craib, 2002). The field site of the

present study is the city of Bandar Abbas, with a focus on divorced women for whom at least one year has elapsed since their legal divorce and who have clearly experienced and perceived both the positive and negative consequences of divorce. Accordingly, the inclusion criteria comprised having experienced divorce, the passage of at least one year since the legal dissolution of marriage, and willingness to participate in the study. Additionally, given that the aim of this study was to describe the lived experiences of women following divorce in the city of Bandar Abbas, purposive sampling combined with a snowball technique was employed, and participants were identified and recruited through counseling centers and local networks. To initiate the interview process, the researcher selected the first participant from among her acquaintances. The initial participant subsequently introduced another individual (the second participant), and successive participants acted as intermediaries for recruiting further cases, thereby enabling access to a network of participants. Through the first participant, data collection from six individuals was made possible. Thereafter, the researcher, through a familial connection of a friend, succeeded in accessing an additional participant. Using the snowball technique, four more participants were subsequently interviewed. Finally, access to the remaining participants was achieved through the tenth participant, who had been introduced by the director of a counseling center. Accordingly, the participants comprised 15 divorced women, and data collection continued until data saturation was achieved. Accordingly, to elicit participants' perspectives and gain insight into their experiences, in-depth semi-structured interviews were employed. Throughout the interviews, the researcher—who possessed relevant academic and research experience and was familiar with the sensitive issue of divorce—initiated the interviews after introducing herself, outlining the objectives of the study, and emphasizing the principle of confidentiality. The duration of the interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes, conducted within a single session. The interviews were initiated with several introductory questions aimed at creating a friendly, comfortable, and trustworthy atmosphere for the participants. As the interviews progressed, the researcher actively guided the flow of discussion and sought clear and explicit information. Above all, attentive listening to the participants' accounts and empathetic engagement with them constituted a central component of the interview process. The researcher posed questions in a manner that created space for participants to fully articulate what was meaningful to them, without feeling compelled to align their responses with the researcher's interests, concerns, or preconceptions. In this way, the interview setting remained

open and non-directive. Most interviews were conducted in counseling centers and in participants' homes, and participants were assured that their privacy would be fully protected.

In the present study, strategies to enhance rigor—such as credibility and transferability—were employed to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the data. To ensure the credibility of the research data, the researcher allocated sufficient time for data collection, examined the data from multiple perspectives, and engaged in iterative analysis with step-by-step documentation of the analytic process, including recoding. To enhance transferability, a rich description of the context and participants was provided. Additionally, to further enhance the trustworthiness of the data, techniques such as member checking and the use of external auditors were employed. Specifically, the categories and their corresponding descriptions were shared with the participants, and their feedback was incorporated. Furthermore, to assess internal consistency, external auditing was employed; accordingly, the data and the interpretations derived from them were provided to two experts in the field, and the accuracy of the analytical procedures was thereby verified.

Finally, the collected data were interpreted and analyzed manually using Colaizzi's method, which comprises the following steps:

1. Reading the interview transcripts to identify their fundamental meanings.
2. Extracting and recording significant statements and phrases alongside each interview.
3. Formulating meaning units
4. Organizing the formulated meanings into clusters to identify sub-themes and themes.
5. Integrating the findings to define the phenomenon under investigation and to achieve an overall structural description.
6. Validating the findings by returning to the participants for confirmation (Member checking) (Samavatian, 2018).

Participants' Information

The interviewees recounted aspects of their lives specific to their personal experiences of marriage and divorce; however, common thematic categories emerged.

Table 1. Participant Information

Pseudonym	Age	Education Level	Occupation	Marriage Duration	Number of Children	Child Custody
Fatemeh	54	Primary education	Self-employed	12 years	3	Mother
Mahdieh	37	Upper secondary education	Salaried Employee	4 years	1	Father
Shokufe	36	Lower secondary education	Salaried Employee	6 years	2	Mother
Zahra	37	Bachelor's degree	Salaried Employee	6 years	2	Mother
Zohreh	45	Upper secondary education	Self-employed	10 years	1	Mother
Nasrin	35	Master's degree	Salaried Employee	9 years	2	Mother
Masoomah	24	Upper secondary education	Salaried Employee	11 years	1	Mother
Azam	38	Student	Salaried Employee	5 years	1	Father
Nahid	21	Upper secondary education	Unemployed	6 years	-	-
Shiva	20	Student	Student	3 years	-	-
Rezvan	36	Upper secondary education	Homemaker	2 years	2	Mother
Elaheh	32	Bachelor's degree	Unemployed	9 years	1	Mother
Zakieh	23	Lower secondary education	Unemployed	8 years	1	Mother
Elmira	26	Bachelor's degree	Salaried Employee	4 years	-	-
Mehrana	37	Lower secondary education	Salaried Employee	5 years	-	-

Ethical Considerations in Research

Each interview was audio-recorded using a mobile device with the participant's consent. Participants were assured that the recordings would be deleted after the researcher completed the transcription of the interviews; consequently, no resistance to audio recording was observed among the participants. All participants were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the interview at any time if they did not wish to continue. The comfort, dignity, and rights of the participants were taken into account. During moments when certain parts of the conversation evoked painful and distressing memories for the participant, the researcher remained calm and professional, sought to manage the participant's emotions, and handled the interview environment in a way that allowed the participant to continue in a calm and comfortable state.

Results

After examining and analyzing the interview data, the consequences and post-divorce experiences were organized under four overarching categories: precarious economic status, psychological and emotional trauma, social punishment, and sexual challenges. In addition, women's strategies and coping approaches after divorce were organized under two overarching categories: personal development strategies, including (Self-reconstruction management of social advancement), and social adaptation strategy, including (Social isolation, Homophilous socialization, and divorce concealment) .

1. Post-divorce Experiences and Consequences:

Table 2: Post-divorce Experiences and Consequences

Significant Statements	Sub-themes	Main Themes	
- Lack of financial support - Financial dependency	Financial Strain	precarious economic status	
- Lack of stable employment - Job Insecurity - Engagement in low-income occupations	Unemployment		
- Ex-spouse child support non-compliance - High costs of child-rearing	Sole Child Custody		
- Co-residence with Parents - Barriers to Independent Housing	Homelessness after divorce		
- Becoming a Hard Worker - Rolling in Money	Economic Empowerment		
- Persistent crying -Self- Belittlement	Perceived Worthlessness and Social Isolation		psychological and emotional trauma
-Hopelessness about the future and success -Perceiving one's life as lost	Sense of Devastation and Perceived Failure		
- Distrust in Others	Structural Insecurity and Chronic Anxiety		
-Fear regarding the children's future - Self-blame	Internalized Guilt and Self-Reproach		
-Restrictions in social Interaction - Monitoring Home Entry and Exit - Surveillance of Phone Calls and Messages	Intensified social control	Social punishment	
-Labeling as "Widowed" or "Divorced"	Social stigma		
-Limiting interactions with others -Self-Imposed Isolation	Social Isolation		
-Cold treatment by those around Them - Friends Severing Ties with the Divorcee	Social exclusion		
-Being placed in the position of the accused - Unwarranted Judgments -Unfounded accusations	Reputational damage		
-Sexual Harassment - Being Viewed as a Temporary Plaything - Being Viewed as a Sexual Object	Sexual objectification		
-Lack of role in social life -Loss of Motherhood and spousal status	Decline in social status		

- Refusal to Engage in Sexual Relationships - Rejection and Neglect of Intimacy - Loss of Interest and Sexual Disillusionment	Sexual disinterest	sexual challenges
- Pretending to Have No Sexual Needs - Dismissing the Importance of Sexual Relationships	Sexual Repression	
- Engaging in Sexual Relations with Other Men - Increased Vulnerability in Interactions with Other Men - Inclination Toward Relationships with Other Men	Illicit Relationships	

1.1 precarious economic status

precarious economic status was abstracted from the following subcategories: Financial Strain, unemployment, Sole Child Custody, Homelessness after divorce, and Economic Empowerment. The experiences of the participants in the study field indicated that the intensity of precarious economic status constitutes one of the most important and significant post-divorce concerns among the interviewees. Next, we describe each of the subcategories of precarious economic status and present short quotations from the participants.

Financial Strain: Financial Strain is one of the categories that creates economic challenges for divorced individuals. The majority of interviewees did not have financial means at the time of divorce and had no income to support their daily living and meet basic needs.

Mahdieh, 37 years old, with four years of married life, stated: "When I got divorced, I had nothing at all—neither was I a wealthy person with unearned income, nor did I have any savings, gold, or anything. I was dependent on having bread for my nightly meal."

Shokufeh, 36 years old, with a wounded spirit, recounted: "I became completely destitute; I had nothing in this world of God to sell in order to feed myself and my children."

Unemployment: Unemployment is one of the components involved in economic challenges. The majority of divorced women were unemployed at the time of divorce and had no income. After divorce, the lack of a permanent job, job security, and engagement in low-income jobs further exacerbate economic concerns.

Masoomeh, 24 years old, says: "I got a job at a date packaging company. But it had neither insurance nor proper salary; I just had to work from morning to night, exhausting myself."

Nasrin, 35 years old, an empowered and aware woman, stated: "Thank God I had a degree; with a bachelor's degree, I went to work. I'm not ungrateful, but this isn't really a proper job. Just say something, ask for leave, or request overtime, and they fire you."

Sole Child Custody: One of the subcategories that intensified economic challenges among the interviewees was mothers taking custody of their children. The majority of the divorced women interviewed had custody of their child/children, and the high expenses of raising children combined with the ex-husband's failure to pay child support placed women in Financial Strain.

Zahra, 37 years old, says about this: "The court granted me custody of the children, and I'm very happy about that, but the expenses are very high, especially in these times. Their father is an irresponsible person who doesn't spend even a penny for his children."

Zohreh, 45 years old, a strong and resilient mother, stated about this: "I took custody of the child; at that time, he was supposed to pay 50,000 tomans per month, but I didn't even pursue it. Now, 16 years have passed, and my child is preparing for the university entrance exam. There are so many expenses, but in return, I have a good daughter."

Homelessness after divorce: One of the components arising from precarious economic status among the interviewees was Homelessness after divorce. For divorced women, Homelessness after divorce One of the components arising from precarious economic status among the interviewees was Homelessness after divorce is a multifaceted experience of instability and insecurity that affects various dimensions of their lives. Losing a home and having to find a new place to live are accompanied by numerous financial, legal, and social challenges, often leading women to move

in with relatives, become dependent on others, rent housing under difficult conditions, or even experience homelessness.

Shiva, 20 years old, speaks about her bitter two-year experience of married life: “I know my brother checks my phone. If I had a place of my own, I would not cause so much trouble for others, and I would live separately on my own.”

Economic Empowerment: Economic Empowerment of women after divorce refers to the range of changes and developments in women’s financial and economic circumstances following separation from their spouse. It may include efforts to achieve financial independence, manage new resources, and ultimately improve and upgrade their economic situation over time. This category was abstracted from the codes “Becoming a Hard Worker” and “Rolling in Money.” It should be noted that post-divorce Economic Empowerment is considered one of the positive outcomes and the hidden dimension of women’s lives, remaining largely concealed and understated on the margins of their experience.

Zohreh, 45 years old, a strong and resilient mother, stated: “Taking responsibility for life was very, very difficult, but I did not lose myself; I moved forward, pursued my goals, kept working, and God helped me. You wouldn’t believe how money started flowing in for me.”

1.2 psychological and emotional trauma

After divorce, women are confronted with an onslaught of unpleasant, negative, and distressing emotions that may emerge suddenly and intensely. Most participants in the study reported feelings such as loneliness, failure, regret, guilt, self-blame, emotional devastation, worthlessness, insecurity, longing for their spouse and children, and fear for the future of their child or children. In the following, we present participants’ quotations to elaborate on these feelings.

Rezvan, 36 years old, a housewife responsible for her children, says: “After the divorce, I have a sense of defeat, a deep sadness that is always with me. I feel that this loss can never be compensated for by anything.”

Mahdieh, 37 years old, with four years of married life, stated: “When I got divorced and went to see my child, it was very hard for me to see my husband. He had a long beard and looked miserable and completely worn out. He had become weak; I would come back crying and say to myself, maybe I was the reason for his condition. I felt very guilty for going to work, and when I saw my work conditions, I would say, ‘I wish he were here; even with all the mess he was, at least he was around.’ Later, I regretted it and said, ‘Oh, why did I do that? I wish things had stayed the same, but he had been there with me.’”

1.3 Social Punishment

The subcategories of intensified social control, social stigma, social isolation, social exclusion, Reputational damage, Sexual objectification, and decline in social status constituted the category of social punishment. As a result, the participants’ social lives were severely affected, and their interactions were placed under significant strain. The following quotations from the participants illustrate this theme.

Intensified social control: One of the components of social punishment is excessive control by the natal family over various aspects of life, including restricting the divorced person’s relationships, giving orders and prohibitions regarding social interactions, and monitoring the person’s comings and goings as well as phone calls by family members.

Mehrana, 37 years old, stated: “Unnecessary family sensitivities are upsetting. I currently live on the upper floor of my father’s house. Even though I am separated, they always want to control my comings and goings. As soon as I come back from outside, my mother comes upstairs, supposedly to check on me. My family wanted me to stay close to them so they could keep an eye on me; otherwise, I was capable of renting a place myself.”

Shiva, 20 years old, speaks about her bitter two-year experience of married life: “In a way, everyone wants to watch over me, as if I cannot manage on my own. They even say who I should

go with and who I should not go with; they warn me not to ever go anywhere with my son's classmates. I even know that my brother checks my mobile phone."

Social stigma: In the present study, social stigma refers to the negative attitudes, stereotypical beliefs, prejudices, and discrimination that society applies toward an individual or another group due to a particular characteristic or status. Labeling another person is a precursor to disrupting relationships and typically leads to the invalidation of the divorced individual and a reduction in their sense of self-worth (Vogel et al., 2013). Participants expressed dissatisfaction with the use of labels such as "divorced," "widowed," and "child of divorced parents" in social interactions. These labels significantly affected the interactions of the interviewed women and carried a negative connotation for them. Social stigma manifests in everyday interactions, ranging from heavy, judgmental glances from others to discrimination in the workplace and daily life, exposing women to negative judgments, incorrect gender-based stereotypes, and various prejudices.

Shokufeh, 36 years old, with a wounded spirit, recounted: "Whenever I passed by the street, I would hear the neighbors pointing at me and saying, 'She's a widow.' The word 'widow' really bothers me; wherever I go, they call me 'widow,' 'widow.'"

Elmira, 26 years old, stated about this: "Unfortunately, in our society, a person who gets divorced is not seen as an independent and positive individual, and derogatory terms such as 'divorced,' 'widow,' 'unprotected,' and so on are used for them. It is truly regrettable."

Social isolation: Social isolation refers to a significant reduction or absence of meaningful and satisfying social relationships, which women experience in the aftermath of divorce. The experience of social isolation for divorced women is not only about having fewer interactions with friends, family, and society, but also includes a profound sense of loneliness and self-imposed confinement. Divorced women feel marginalized in society and face fewer opportunities for social interaction, which has significant negative impacts on their mental health and quality of life. The concept of social isolation is another category within social punishment, which itself was

abstracted from codes such as “Limiting interactions with others” and “self-imposed isolation.” The following quotations illustrate this:

Shokufeh, 36 years old, with a wounded spirit, recounted: “I no longer have any friends at all. I’ve reached a point where I have no friends and just focus on my own life.”

Zakieh, 23 years old, who married at the age of 19, stated: “I go everywhere cold and reserved; I don’t allow anyone to enter my life or figure out what’s going on in it. I don’t allow any stranger to enter my life.”

Social exclusion: The concept of social exclusion is another category of social punishment that emerges from the way people around the divorced individual treat them; others reject the divorced person and do not accept them into their social circles. This category was abstracted from the codes “Cold treatment by those around them” and “friends severing ties with the divorcee.”

Zahra’s quote, 37 years old, can illustrate this category: “I have experienced a lot of harm from my friends. I had friends with whom we had rotating dinner parties since university. From the time they found out I had separated, they no longer invited me and started ignoring me.”

Reputational damage: The component of Reputational damage is a subcategory of social punishment, which itself was abstracted from codes such as Being placed in the position of the accused, Unwarranted Judgments, and Unfounded accusations. In fact, women not only face the challenges arising from separation but must also grapple with the heavy burden of these unfair judgments and the negative image imposed upon them by society.

Nasrin, 35 years old, an empowered and aware woman, stated: “One or two of my colleagues reproached me and said, ‘If you were that kind of person, your husband wouldn’t have left you. Look, you tried so much, tried to save your life, were loyal to your husband, endured so much, and still you hear such things.’”

Azam, 38 years old, who separated after six years of married life, stated: "People say, 'This woman has never been, and is not, a proper woman; it's her own fault; she just wants to be free.'"

Elaheh, 32 years old, an unemployed woman who has custody of her only child, stated: "My Cousin's wife said, 'It's not clear who she goes with and who she turns to; otherwise, how can a young woman live without a husband?'"

Sexual objectification: Participants in the study field spoke about experiencing objectification after divorce. In this context, women are regarded merely as a means for sexual pleasure and are less often seen as complete human beings with their own personalities, emotions, and independent values. In this state, women's full humanity is overlooked, and attention is focused solely on their physical and sexual attractiveness. As a result, women experience feelings such as worthlessness, insecurity, anger, and humiliation, which can seriously harm their mental health, self-confidence, and social relationships. The category of "Sexual objectification" was derived from the codes of sexual harassment, being viewed as a temporary plaything, and being viewed as a sexual object.

Mahdieh, 37 years old, with four years of married life, stated: "My boss, even though he had a wife, took advantage of my situation. When we went out with our friends, many times they told me, 'You're a widow; what do you want except for us to pay your expenses and be with us?' Many times they put a price on me; I was very upset."

Zahra, 37 years old, says about this: "If they find out that a certain woman is divorced, that she's young and has a good appearance, they want to deceive you and sit under your feet."

Decline in social status: The component of decline in social status includes instances such as Lack of role in social life, Loss of Motherhood and spousal status, and simultaneously fulfilling both paternal and maternal roles for a group of interviewees who have custody of their child or children. Therefore, it can be said that with the phenomenon of divorce, women lose their social status and

are forced into a position in which they must redefine themselves once again. In the following, quotes can be cited that reveal the component of decline in social status.

Mahdieh, 37 years old, with four years of married life, stated: “The thing that bothers me the most is being away from my child and my dependence on my husband, even though 14 years have passed since then. I had gotten used to being a wife and a mother; my eyes still fill with tears, and I can’t believe I don’t have them anymore and that I’m alone.”

Fatemeh, 54 years old, with a broken heart, stated: “I was only thinking about my children; in 2005, the year I got divorced, all my hair turned white from how much hardship I endured. For my children, I fulfilled both the father’s and the mother’s role. It was very hard, very hard.”

1.4 sexual challenges

sexual challenges are abstracted from three categories: sexual disinterest, sexual repression, and illicit relationships. By “sexual challenges” is meant the issues and topics that bring up the challenges of sexual relationships in women’s lives after divorce and that are interpreted as a tool for women’s independence and reclaims of control over their bodies and emotional lives, but which are not expressed due to social taboos. Women's sexual relationships after divorce can be a very personal and unique experience, shaped by various factors including the reasons for the divorce, the woman's emotional state, her support system, cultural background, and her personal desires and beliefs about relationships and intimacy with another person. Some women may experience a sense of sexual freedom after divorce, while others may go through a period of reduced sexual activity or interest. Women who are unable to freely express their sexual needs and desires experience numerous negative consequences and tensions that have profound and fundamental impacts on their lives. In the following, we will describe each of these three categories:

Sexual disinterest: Sexual disinterest in divorced women is defined as a lack of desire for sexual activities. Some women, after divorce, become disinterested in sexual relationships due to unpleasant and painful experiences they have had, and they have no desire to establish physical intimacy or the emotions associated with sexual relationships. Sexual disinterest in divorced women is a silent and deep wound that few people see, and it serves as a defense mechanism to

protect themselves from new harms. Women who once entered married life with the warmth of love and hope now, in their spiritual isolation, do not even accept the simplest touches. Many women report that after divorce, their bodies have become like "moving corpses" that perform only social roles without being able to experience real pleasure or passion.

Fatemeh, 54 years old, with a broken heart, stated: "From the beginning, I disliked my husband; I didn't want him. I've also come to dislike all men, and now I have no desire for any man at all."

Sexual repression: By sexual repression is meant the prevention, restriction, and control of sexual feelings, desires, or behaviors in women after divorce. Women consciously or unconsciously ignore or suppress their sexual desires after divorce due to concern about judgment, fear of social consequences, and environmental and family pressures. Sexual suppression brings about numerous problems for women, including psychological issues such as anxiety, depression, and reduced self-confidence, which ultimately leave a negative impact on their mental state and personal lives. As a result, women are unable to respond to their needs and sexual desires as they should.

Zahra, 37 years old, says about this: "As a psychologist, I am aware that sexual desire, the more it is strengthened, the stronger it becomes; the less it is strengthened, the weaker it becomes. Of course, it doesn't disappear completely. This applies to healthy people—someone who has no spiritual or psychological problems and is also aware of this matter—it is completely controllable for them."

Illicit relationships: Illicit relationships after divorce are another category within sexual challenges and refer to emotional and sexual bonds outside the framework of formal marriage. Women turn to informal relationships due to legal and cultural restrictions on remarriage. Women who, after the collapse of their shared world, become trapped in the whirlpool of illicit relationships are often silent victims of a society that has abandoned them. These women, who once left marriage in hope of a better life, now fall into the trap of transient and often destructive emotional bonds and, due to fear of judgment or rejection, keep these relationships hidden. Economic pressures, social

rejection, and emotional void push women toward connections that sometimes come at the cost of losing self-esteem, social respect, and even their psychological security. In fact, for women, these relationships are a painful escape from an isolation that deepens every day.

Mehrana, 37 years old, stated: "I'm not thinking about remarrying; a woman who has become independent will hardly be willing to marry again. It's true that I live on the upper floor of my father's house and my family wants to control me, but I have friends, connections, and everything I need working out for me. You can easily become friends with someone, and if you don't want to, you break up. No one finds out. But if you marry, you'll once again put yourself into trouble, commitment, and responsibility."

2. Strategies and tactics of women after divorce

Table 3. Strategies Adopted by Women After Divorce

Significant Statements	Sub-themes	Main Themes
-Self-awareness - Reflecting on One's Position - Identifying New roles and Responsibilities - Modifying Behavior	Self-reconstruction	Personal Development Strategy
-Continuation education -Professional Certification Acquisition -Economic advancement -Economic dynamism	Management of social advancement	
Diminished Kinship Interactions -Weakened Peer Relationships -Social withdrawal	Social Isolation	Social adaptation strategy
- Seeking Open-Minded Peers - Socializing with Other Divorcees	Homophilous Socialization	
-Avoiding interaction with strangers -Pretending to Be Widowed -Obtaining a new identity document	Divorce Concealment	

Women, when facing the bitter experience of separation, adopt strategies and tactics to adapt to and cope with divorce. "Strategies and tactics of women after divorce" refers to the set of conscious and unconscious actions that women use to adapt to new life conditions, confront post-separation challenges, rebuild and redefine their personal identity, and repair emotional damage in their lives. The strategies women employ is usually shaped by cultural, economic, and psychological factors and can lead to either personal growth or be destructive. Whether constructive or destructive, these

strategies and tactics reflect women's efforts to survive and give meaning to life after the collapse of an important social institution. Differences in the choice of these strategies not only reflect the resources available to women but also demonstrate the impact of dominant social structures on their lives. Each strategy tells a unique story of resistance, adaptation, and surrender to post-divorce crisis conditions. To a large extent, these strategies indicate the emergence of a new generation of women who, instead of passively accepting conditions, are actively working to change social structures.

1.2 Personal Development Strategy

This refers to the set of strategies and methods that a divorced person selects as a result of making individual decisions related to themselves. It falls under personal development and individual rehabilitation and includes the strategies of Self-reconstruction and Management of social advancement.

Self-reconstruction: Self-reconstruction is a process that leads to changes in the divorced person's attitude, behavior, and role, and consequently brings about changes in the objective conditions of their life. This category is abstracted from the codes of self-awareness, reflecting on one's position, identifying New roles and responsibilities, and modifying behavior to masculine behavior. In the following, quotes from interviewees on this matter are presented:

Azam, 38 years old, who separated after six years of married life, stated: "At first, divorce was very hard for me, but I knew myself. Wherever I went, my respect was intact, my personality was intact, and I behaved in such a way that no one would dare to tell me, 'Your eyebrow is above your eye,' or to take even the slightest advantage of me."

Shokufeh, 36 years old, with a wounded soul, recounted: "At first, I cried so much and kept asking, 'Why me? Why does this have to happen to me?' I didn't know what to do, until I thought: I shouldn't just sit and do nothing; I must change my life."

Zahra, 37 years old, says about this: "In order to be able to live in society, I was forced to be a man, to get into fights; women usually don't do these things; you have to show violence constantly."

Management of social advancement: Management of social advancement is an important strategy that individuals use to manage and alleviate social pressures. Some women, by adopting active strategies such as returning to education and developing job skills, seek to create an independent and meaningful life. This component is abstracted from the codes of continuation education, skills training, dynamism, and economic progress. In the following, brief statements from interviewees in this regard are presented:

Zohreh, 45 years old, a strong and resilient mother, stated about this: "I took responsibility for my life and didn't let myself lose; I moved forward. I earned my degrees, opened a beauty salon, got my driver's license, bought a car. God held my hand—you wouldn't believe how money poured in from above my head. I was able to pull myself up."

Mehrana, 37 years old, stated: "I earned my master's degree, I attend language classes, I've made a lot of progress, and I've gotten far ahead of many of my friends."

2.2 Social Adaptation Strategy

Social adaptation strategy refers to the set of important strategies and tactics that an individual uses to alleviate societal pressures and interact with others. In most cases, it is based on adaptation, and women employ it to redefine their social position and rebuild an independent identity in society after divorce. This strategy is abstracted from the categories of social isolation, Homophilous Socialization, and Divorce Concealment.

Social isolation: This is a mechanism that a divorced person creates in their relationships to reduce psychological pressure and blame from those around them. It leads to fading social connections or cutting off contact with friends and acquaintances, and ultimately exacerbates the individual's isolation. The component of social isolation is abstracted from the codes of diminished kinship interactions, weakened peer Relationships, and the divorced person being pushed into isolation.

Shiva, 20 years old, speaks about her bitter two-year life experience: “After a while, when you see the relatives’ behavior, even if they invited you, you wouldn’t go. I distanced myself from relatives and acquaintances because you always have to answer questions.”

Elaheh, 32 years old, an unemployed woman who has custody of her only child, stated: “Before the divorce, my friends trusted me, but now they think I want to become friends with their husbands. Because of this, I no longer socialize with my friends.”

Homophilous socialization: One of the important strategies that individuals use to manage social pressures and strengthen their social interactions after divorce is selecting aligned interactions and choosing similar people who have the same experience, or selecting individuals who are capable of understanding the person. The category of Homophilous socialization is abstracted from the codes of seeking open-minded peers and socializing with other divorcees.

Rezvan, 36 years old, a housewife mother who has the responsibility of her children, says: “After my divorce, I tried to get to know and socialize with open-minded people who wouldn’t blame me, wouldn’t make snide remarks to me, and would give me positive energy.”

Masoomeh, 24 years old, says: “When people give you a bad look, you’re forced to only spend time with people who are like yourself, to socialize with them because it’s easier and they understand you and guide you. I chose a few friends like me, and we keep in touch with each other occasionally.”

Divorce concealment: This is a mechanism that women use after divorce to prevent being viewed instrumentally in their new social situations, and they hide their divorce. This component is abstracted from the codes of avoiding interaction with strangers, pretending to be widowed, and obtaining a new identity document. In the following, quotes are presented:

Nahid, 21 years old, who married at a young age, stated: "When I go to look for work, I don't say at all that I'm divorced; if they ask, I say my husband died."

Zohreh, 45 years old, a strong and resilient mother, stated about this: "Even though I was a hairdresser, I never wore flashy clothes and didn't wear heavy makeup; I looked and dressed like a female teacher so that no one would find out I had gotten divorced."

Fatemeh, 54 years old, with a broken heart, stated: "I didn't tell anyone that I had gotten divorced, not even my distant relatives or my husband's relatives. Once, I saw one of my husband's distant relatives who didn't know I had divorced; he asked, 'How is Saeed?' I replied, 'He sends his greetings.'"

Discussion

The present study was conducted to address two main research questions: What has been the lived experience of women regarding the consequences of divorce in Bandar Abbas city? And what are the strategies and tactics of women in Bandar Abbas city when confronting divorce?

In response to the first question, four main categories were identified: precarious economic status, psychological and emotional trauma, social punishment, and sexual challenges. Among the most significant consequences experienced in women's lifeworld is the precarious economic status, which itself is abstracted from sub-categories such as Financial Strain, unemployment, Sole Child Custody, homelessness after divorce, and Economic Empowerment. Among the mentioned categories, Economic Empowerment was common among all interviewees. The economic situation, which is among the concerns and challenges of the interviewees, is consistent with the studies of Quah (2020), Khan and Hamid (2021), Abbe (2015), Yarigar Rosh (2022), and Khalajabadi et al. (2017). On the other hand, women who had custody of their children faced intensified life challenges due to the high costs of raising them and the failure of their former spouses to provide child support, which further exacerbated their difficulties. This finding is consistent with the studies by Ahmaddoost et al. (2017), Hemmati and Karimi (2018), and Hanson

and Lidma (2014). psychological and emotional trauma was another consequence of the lived experiences of women after divorce, as reported by the participants. This encompassed a range of distressing emotions, including loneliness, a sense of failure, regret, feelings of guilt and blame, devastation, worthlessness, insecurity, longing for a former spouse and child, and fear regarding the child's future. Divorced individuals commonly encounter such negative emotions following divorce, which tend to persist over time. However, these emotional experiences are not uniform across all women and manifest in diverse ways. These findings are consistent with the results reported by Ahmaddoost et al. (2017) and Zayerzadeh and Pirkhaefi (2014). Social punishment was abstracted from the subcategories of intensified social control, social stigma, social isolation, social exclusion, reputational damage, sexual objectification, and decline in social status. Among these subcategories, social stigma, sexual objectification, and a decline in social status were common to all participants and were considered shared sources of suffering among the women. The category of intensified social control is consistent with the findings of Ahmaddoost et al. (2017) and Khalajabadi et al. (2017). The categories of social stigma, social exclusion, and reputational damage were among other distressing consequences experienced by the participants. According to Goffman, being divorced is considered a form of stigma that can affect an individual's identity. Those who do not understand the circumstances of divorced individuals often impose psychological pressure through judgmental looks, insinuations, and the use of labels such as "widow." In some cases, they may even suspect divorced individuals of engaging in covert relationships with other men. Such attitudes can lead divorced individuals to avoid interactions with acquaintances and friends, thereby altering their social relationships. These findings are consistent with the studies by Yarigar Ravesh (2022), Khalajabadi et al. (2017), Kinstam et al. (2016), and Kavas (2010). Sexual objectification was also consistent with the findings reported by Ahmaddoost et al. (2017). Another relational consequence identified among the participants was a decline in social status, which creates a form of role ambiguity for divorced women. As Cohen noted, women after separation often describe themselves as being neither wives nor fully recognized as members of society. The new role they experience is neither learned through socialization processes nor supported by adequate social structures. Moreover, when they assume custody of their children, they must also adapt to paternal or traditionally masculine roles. These findings are consistent with the results reported by Ahmaddoost et al. (2017). Additionally, sexual

challenges as another post-divorce issue, with all participants experiencing an inadequate fulfillment of their emotional needs.

In response to the second research question concerning the strategies adopted by divorced women in Bandar Abbas after divorce, two main approaches emerged: the personal development strategy and the social adaptation strategy. The personal development strategy was abstracted from the categories of self-reconstruction and the management of social advancement. The component of self-reconstruction is a key concept that enables individuals to re-envision their identity, as reflected in Herbert Mead's theory of the self. According to Mead, the essence of the "self" lies in its flexibility. The self evolves through the individual's capacity to adopt the perspectives of others within their imagination and to engage in self-reflection. In other words, the uniqueness of each self-results from a distinctive combination of others' perspectives; this configuration is so individualized that no two persons share an identical composition of the self (Coser, 1994). Accordingly, just as individuals acquire new identities through marriage, they lose these identities with the occurrence of divorce, which leads to changes in their self-perception. Therefore, the need for self-reconstruction after divorce becomes significant, and it is employed as an important strategy. Among the participants, this strategy emerged through codes such as self-awareness, Reflecting on One's Position, identification of new roles and responsibilities, and Modifying behavior. The component of self-reconstruction is consistent with the findings of Bastani et al. (2022) and Mohammadi et al. (2023). The component of management of social advancement, as part of the personal development strategy, also overlaps with the results of Mouldin (2008). The components of self-reconstruction and the management of social advancement were commonly experienced by all divorced women interviewed. However, within social adaptation strategy, only the component of divorce Concealment was shared among all participants, a finding that is consistent with the results reported by Khalajabadi et al. (2017). The primary contribution of this study lies in redefining and extending sociological and psychological concepts related to post-divorce life within the context of a society in transition with hybrid traditional–modern structures, such as Iran. The findings indicate that the lived experiences of women after divorce in Bandar Abbas are neither merely an individual emotional crisis nor solely a structural challenge; rather, they constitute a complex process involving the interaction and integration of agency and structure. In this process, women are simultaneously influenced by pressures, stigmas, and restrictive social

structures—reflected in categories such as precarious economic status, psychological and emotional trauma, and social punishment—while at the same time actively engage in reconstructing their identities and re-meaning their lives. In contrast to classical approaches that predominantly interpret divorce through a pathological lens or as mere stigmatization, the findings of this study—articulated through categories such as self-reconstruction and the management of social advancement—demonstrate that these women have transformed spaces of exclusion and marginalization into arenas of resistance and reflexivity (Giddens, 1991). This study also makes a distinctive contribution by moving beyond the rigid and homogeneous portrayal of divorced women often reproduced in previous research, instead revealing the multiplicity and dynamism of their lived experiences. These findings can serve as an up-to-date empirical foundation for social policymakers and scholars in the fields of women's and family studies, enabling them to move away from stereotypical perspectives and to redesign support programs based on the objective realities, as well as the lived and often hidden challenges, of the target population.

Research limitations

1. Prolonged time for data collection due to some participants' unwillingness to cooperate in conducting the interviews.

Recommendations

1. Create more opportunities for qualitative research on divorce and to uncover the true realities of life at the time of divorce.
2. Examine the status and living conditions of children of divorce using qualitative methods, which will lead to obtaining accurate information about the situation of these children.
3. One of the important problems and challenges for women is economic problems; it is recommended that supportive organizations create conditions for women to achieve stable employment.
4. Another challenge for women is the interactive consequences; it is suggested that officials in cultural affairs take action to raise awareness and prevent the possibility of women's vulnerability to psychological pressures from those around them.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by ethics committee of University of Hormozgan.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection and analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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