

Risk Factors Hindering Resilience of Women Divorcees in Ethiopia: Lived Experiences of Divorced Custodial Single Mothers in Adama City

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Abstract

Divorce has become a frequent outcome of troubled marriages, making it essential to promote resilience alongside addressing root causes. The purpose of this study was to identify risk factors that hinder resilience of women divorcees in Adama, Ethiopia. The study explored the lived experiences of 15 purposefully selected divorced custodial single mothers from the family court in the city. Data was collected via in-depth interviews and analyzed using phenomenological approach. The major risk factors emerged as key themes include: lack of personal income, conflicts with ex-spouses over property and child maintenance, limited parental support, a slow justice system, societal stigma, and gender-biased mediation practices. These challenges reflect long-standing systemic disadvantages faced by women in hierarchical societies, despite ongoing gender mainstreaming efforts. The findings highlight the importance of empowering women divorcees to leverage personal strengths and external resources for resilience. They also provide valuable input for policymakers and social welfare agencies addressing the specific needs of custodial mothers dealing with socioeconomic challenges in the divorce aftermath. The role of elderly mediation in community interventions remains significant though the issue of women's representation warrants further research.

Keywords: Risk factors, Hindering resilience, Women divorcees, Ethiopia

Introduction

Existing research has extensively examined the prevalence, causes, and consequences of divorce (Fagan and Churchill, 2012; Mulugeta, 2019; Yeshiwork *et al.*, 2019). These studies primarily focus on reducing divorce rates by highlighting its causes and negative outcomes. However, despite such efforts, divorce continues to rise globally, becoming a frequent outcome in highly conflicted marriages (Amato, 2010).

In Ethiopia, as elsewhere, divorce has been practiced for centuries (Tilson and Larsen, 2000) and has surged with rapid urbanization

(Augustyniak, 2009). For instance, a study conducted in Bahir Dar City reported a rise in divorce rates from 24% to 49.72% within three years (Yeshiwork *et al.*, 2019). Similarly, research in Robe City, Bale Zone, highlighted high divorce prevalence with complex, multidimensional causes (Mulugeta *et al.*, 2020). Adama City, 99 km southeast of Addis Ababa, reflects the same trend. The preliminary data from the city's family court indicate a rising divorce rate, aligning with the above patterns. The family court resolved 573 divorce cases in 2017, rising to 1,628 in 2018 and 2,312 in 2021 (Key Informant, July 2022). According to the key informant, 8,030 divorce cases were

registered over five years, with 85% involving children placed in their mothers' custody.

The rising divorce rate highlights the need for strength-based research focusing on how families can adapt to its challenges. While addressing the root causes and consequences of divorce is essential, the present researchers emphasize the importance of helping divorced families positively sustain life despite its challenges. Women and children, being particularly vulnerable, often face significant stress. In most cases, women custodians are left with children and insufficient support (Yohannes, 2015). In addition to managing domestic chores, custodial single mothers must secure family income to maintain social stability and ensure their children's safety (Setiamanah *et al.*, 2021). To handle these challenges effectively, they need to stay healthy and productive (Cheeseman, 2010). Enhancing resilience, a positive adaptation to adversity, is a key strategy to empower such custodial single mothers to sustain healthy family life (Jakson and Watkin, 2004). Hence, resilience study, which examines the ability of at-risk individuals to remain functional despite adverse events like transitioning from intact to divorced family life, is believed to address this requisite.

Resilience is studied in the context of adversity – psychological or environmental conditions linked to a high risk of maladjustment (Luthar *et al.*, 2015). Thus, this article highlights risk factors hindering the resilience of divorced custodial single mothers. Adversity, also conceptualized as a mismatch between needs and available resources, becomes stressful when demands exceed resources (Aldwin, 2004). According to Aldwin an individual evaluates adversity through two appraisals: a basic one to assess whether the event is threatening; and a secondary appraisal to determine coping resources. The stress level depends on resource availability; sufficient resources mitigate stress, while scarcity exacerbates it.

Resilience is well grounded in divorce studies. The term resilience in the context of divorce can be defined as the ability of a single-parent family to maintain functioning, recover, or

grow despite its threatening risk factors predicting vulnerability (Bonanno, 2012; Greeff and Merwe, 2004). A risk factor describes lack of accessible resources during significant adversity (Aldwin, 2004; Antonella *et al.*, 2019). However, it is related to resilience as its mild form can activate underutilized personal and environmental resources to enhance resilience (Jakson and Watkin, 2004).

However, many of the resilience studies on divorce focused on children (Bonanno, 2012; Masten, 2018), while the well-being of custodial parents, typically mothers, also requires attention as their vulnerability worsens the children's wellbeing. Although there are some global studies done on adults in the context of divorce, they have limitations in scope, context, and methodology (e.g., Greeff and Merwe, 2004; Ko and Kim, 2015; Natarajan, 2014; Willen, 2015). Greeff and Merwe (2004) used a cross-sectional survey to identify resilience-promoting variables, but quantitative methods may miss uncommon risk and/or protective factors and participant perspectives, better captured through in-depth qualitative approaches. On the other hand, global studies, like those by Ko and Kim (2015), Natarajan (2014), and Willen (2015), employed qualitative methods but focused on specific contexts limiting their generalizability to Ethiopia.

Similarly, local studies by Afomia (2015), Yohannes (2015), and Dereje (2014) explored different aspects of divorce, including custodial fathers' perceptions and women's experiences in rural and urban Ethiopia. Afomia (2015) undertook a phenomenological study on perception of the pre and post-divorce experience of divorced child custodial men in Addis Ababa, which is similar to the current study in targeting custodial divorcees. This has created an opportunity to compare some post-divorce experiences of men and female custodial parents. Likewise, phenomenological studies by Yohannes (2015), and Dereje (2014) explored the lived experiences of divorced women in Southern part rural Ethiopia, and Addis Ababa, respectively. Yet, they investigated specific experiences of both custodial and non-custodial women divorcees

from deficit or problem-based perspective. However, some of their findings revealed positive adjustments among women divorcees. This paradox has contributed for the inspiration of the current researchers to emphasize exploring resilience factors in custodial single mothers in a different site, Adama City. As part of this main study, this paper focuses on presenting risk factors hindering positive adaptation of women divorcees since resilience is studied in the context of adversity and its risks (Kolar, 2011).

Materials and Methods

Sample Size and Sampling

This study employed a phenomenological approach, which prioritizes depth of insight over sample size (Sim *et al.*, 2018). The in-depth interviews focused on eliciting participants' rich experiences, as the quality of data relies on researcher's skills and participants' willingness to share. While there is no right or wrong sample size in phenomenological studies (Smith *et al.*, 2013), this research began with seven participants and added eight more to achieve saturation of the required meaning to answer the research questions. Thus, it involved a total of 15 participants.

The study used a purposive sampling to recruit divorced custodial mothers who met specific criteria: divorced for 3–6 years, had children from the marriage, were granted custody, had accessible contact address at the court, and were willing to share their experiences. A minimum of three years post-divorce was set based on literature to allow participants to articulate their experiences (Bannister, 2007), while a six-year maximum was meant to minimize variations related to time since divorce.

In qualitative research, researcher is often the main instrument for data collection (Flick, 2013). In the current study, the principal researcher served this purpose conducting in-depth interviews in natural settings to explore participants' lived experiences. Using a semi-structured interview guide with demographic

and open-ended questions aligned with research goals, interviews were conducted in local languages, audio recorded, transcribed, validated through member checking, and translated into English for coding. Questions were refined after each interview to incorporate emerging themes. Interviews were held at home-town locations chosen by participants for comfort and security, facilitated by the researcher's connection to the trusted city family court.

To build rapport, the main researcher engaged in some informal, off-record conversations before formal interviews. Sharing residency in the same city helped the researcher to start conversation over common socio-economic topics. The participants were informed the study's objectives, their rights to withdraw at any time, and anonymity options. Verbal consent was obtained for audio recording, and participants chose numerical identifiers for anonymity. Interviews, lasting 90–150 minutes ($M = 120'$), were conducted between July 20, 2022, and July 13, 2023 (one year), allowing for parallel data collection and analysis. This prolonged engagement also fostered familiarity and follow-ups for clarifications or second interviews as needed.

Subsequent interviews were guided by themes emerging from previous data until thematic and meaning saturation was reached. In phenomenological research, which relies on participants' lived experiences, raw data may vary based on personal backgrounds, and what saturate are the themes or categories derived from the data. However, some researchers argue that the focus should also be given to achieving meaning saturation, a comprehensive understanding of both the descriptive and underlying concepts within the data (Constantinou *et al.*, 2017). Saturation of meaning is achieved when the data are rich and adequately explain participants' perspectives, with little new information emerging, ensuring the study's objectives are fully addressed (Guest *et al.*, 2020).

This study aimed to achieve both thematic and meaning saturation, aligning with its objective of gaining in-depth knowledge on the resilience

and vulnerability factors faced by divorced women, through exploring their lived experiences using in-depth interview and a phenomenological approach. New themes noticeably declined after the 11th interview, and by the 15th, researchers determined that additional data would not significantly affect their understanding or addressing the research questions, prompting a decision to conclude data collection.

Data Analysis

This study employed a phenomenological qualitative approach to analyze and interpret themes emerged from participants' lived experiences. Interviews were transcribed verbatim in the original languages, with the first two scripts checked by the participants for validation. Then, the scripts were translated into English and repeatedly reviewed to ensure familiarity. They were then coded being read line by line, beginning with descriptive codes and progressing to analytic codes that explored deeper processes and contexts. Next, related codes were grouped to identify emerging themes, which were summarized and tallied for recurrence. The coding of each sample script was done by independent coders and reviewed together where consensus was reached on how to code the other scripts throughout. Rooted in the constructivist perspective, the study prioritized participants' views and was not guided by a specific theoretical framework.

Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness in data collection and analysis, this study adhered to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability criteria. The principal researcher, a cultural insider, facilitated effective communication encouraging participants to share detailed experiences. This insider-outsider perspective enhanced understanding of participants' contexts and emergent themes. With extensive qualitative research experience, the researcher employed bracketing to reduce personal bias, using reflective commentaries and triangulating data

with field notes. Applying member check ensured script accuracy, while independent coding and debriefing verified analytical consistency. Supervisory input, as part of the dissertation process, further strengthened the study's rigor and credibility. To ensure anonymity, the participants chose to be represented by numbers preceded by capital letter, 'P'. for example, P1 (for Participant 1).

Limitations

This study involved participants from a single city. Coincidentally, the participants also share nearly similar backgrounds in terms of age, education level, economic status, and family size, warranting research on whether young couples with lower education and economic challenges have been facing higher divorce risks. Thus, implementation of the findings of this study should consider this context.

Results

This study was conducted on the resilience of divorced single custodial mothers in Adama City, Ethiopia, through exploring their lived experiences. As part of a resilience study which identifies risk and protective factors in the context of adversity, this article focuses on presenting and describing major risk factors emerged from the thematic analysis of the data, to call attention of concerned bodies towards reducing them, and promoting resilience of women divorcees. A summary of the demographic data is also presented to give the background of the participants.

Demographic Data

Relevant demographic and sociocultural data such as age, education, years since divorce, number of custodial children, and income changes were gathered to understand their impact on post-divorce adjustment and resilience (Table 1).

Table 1. Demographic Data of the Participants

Participant (P)	Divorce duration	Current age	Level of education	No of children	Source of income before divorce	Source of income after divorce
1	3+	25-30	1 st degree	2	Trade, husband	Trade + Maintenance
2	5	36	Grade 8	2	Husband	Parent + Maintenance
3	3	26-30	Diploma	1	Salary	Salary
4	4	29	10+3 (TVET)	1	Husband	Maintenance fee
5	3	26-30	6	1	Husband	kiosk + Maintenance
6	4	26-30	12	2	Husband	Maintenance + Parent
7	3	26-30	10	2	Husband	Parent + Maintenance
8	3	29	10+3 (TVET)	2	Husband	Day Labor + Broker
9	5	30	7	2	Husband	Parental support
10	3	30	10	1	Husband	Social support
11	3	25	8	1	Husband	Personal (daily labor)
12	4	28	8	1	Husband	Personal (maid)
13	3	25-30	8	2	Husband	Personal (maid)
14	6	35	8	2	Husband	Selling local drink
15	3	25-30	10	2	Husband	Petty trade

Family resilience competence has multidimensional predictors, including demographic factors. As shown in Table 1, all participants had been divorced for over three years, between 25 and 36 years age range. Nine mothers had two custodial children, while six had one. Educationally, only one held a degree, three diploma, and the rest Grade 8 or below. Economically, only P3 had independent income, while others were reliant on their husband in marriage. After the divorce, only P1 and P3 had reliable income, while the others relied on child maintenance, parental support, or low-skilled work like day labor job, housemaid, and petty trade.

Main Data

This study examined resilience and risk factors of women divorcees by exploring the participants' perceptions of divorce and its associated risk factors as part of their post-divorce experiences. The findings are primarily presented through direct and block quotations, allowing the data to convey the participants' voices in line with qualitative research principles.

Perception about Divorce

The participants perceived divorce as a profoundly adverse life event, marked by fear, misery, and despair. For instance, P2 described

It: " divorce is almost as fearful as the hell" (Interview, August 2022), highlighting her struggles with lack of income, concerns about providing for her children as a single parent with limited education, and hopelessness. This reflects the overwhelming adverse challenges she experienced during divorce.

Another participant uttered:

My ex-spouse suddenly disappeared when I desperately needed his support being pregnant. I was uncertain of what to do next. I was dealing with pregnancy complications, and concern of accumulating rent. His friends refused to help me, even in searching for him, which made me suspect them of having hand in our separation (P8 interview, January 2023)'.

This quotation illustrates the multifaceted impact of divorce on the participant, including loss of care and protection during pregnancy, financial stress from rent concerns, and lack of support from neighbors. These challenges compounded her trauma, adversely affecting both her health and pregnancy, making divorce a profoundly traumatic experience for her.

Major Risk Factors

The analysis of interview scripts identified various risk factors at personal, familial, and community levels. This paper focuses on the

most recurring themes: lack of personal income, prolonged conflicts with ex-spouses, insufficient parental support, challenges within the justice system, social stigma toward divorced women, and gender-biased mediation by elders.

Individual Level Risk Factors

Lack of Personal Income. The study revealed one very critical challenge worsened the lives of the women divorcees: lack of independent income. Only one participant had a steady income, while the rest depended on their spouses during marriage. Six participants had an education level of Grade 8 or below, and even the educated ones faced challenges like coercion from ex-husbands, which disrupted their personal businesses (e.g., P1, & P4). In the post-divorce, only four participants started business, often with parental support. Others struggled, relying on inadequate child maintenance, irregular social support, or low-income jobs such as day labor, petty trade, or housemaid work. One participant vividly described this hardship.

'Lack of education has left me at home, relying on child maintenance, and support from my parents. I could not feed and teach my children in a better school. I'm on the verge of offering my body to men who use my financial crisis as an opportunity to approach me (P2, interview, August 2022).'

The extract highlights the extent of economic challenges complicating the participant's life. She faced sexual harassment, which deeply affected her moral dignity as a mother of two and a woman who once had a respected marriage. She found herself on the brink of surrendering to engaging in the antisocial behavior she dislikes, due to the lack of alternative income.

Family Level Risk Factors

Extended Conflict with Ex-Spouses: Ten of the 15 participants reported prolonged conflicts with their ex-spouses over property division, child custody, or failure to provide proper child maintenance. For example, P2 and P3 were

forcibly removed from homes they were entitled to share. P3 recounted: "As soon as I requested a divorce, he [the ex-spouse] forced me out of my house. I had to live at a relative's house for eight months" (Interview, August 2022). Others identified inadequate and inconsistently delivered child maintenance as a major source of conflict. P11 explained: "One thousand birr in maintenance was not enough; not even to afford a litter of milk for a month; and after a while, he stopped paying even that" (Interview, March 2023).

Another source of conflict with their ex-husbands involved child custody. Some participants reported that their ex-husbands tended to place the children with their own parents, brutally separating them from their mothers (P1, P2, P7, P12, & P15). One mother, for example, shared:

'When I let the children visit him [ex-husband], he forces them to stay with his mother just to avoid paying maintenance. He doesn't care about their psychosocial needs. My elder daughter was even forced to drop out of school for a year because he deceived her into staying with his mother far away for over three months (P7 interview, October 2022).'

This participant lauded lack of collaboration from the ex-spouse. While she occasionally allowed the children to visit their father, he abused that to persuade them to stay with his mother, who lived far from their school. This tactic was used to evade paying child maintenance, claiming the children no longer lived with her. He showed no concern for the children's education. She regretted that her daughter had to drop out of school for a year due to this situation.

Lack of Family Support: Parents are typically seen as a primary source of support for divorced women, second only to their personal efforts. However, some participants revealed that they received insufficient support from their families, relatives, and ex-spouses for various reasons. This lack of support left them vulnerable to severe socioeconomic hardships, including starvation.

'I do not have a father. Although my poor, old mother tried to help me, there were times when I couldn't even afford to buy food. I often spent days without eating, along with my child. Even now, we survive solely on the child maintenance ordered by the court three years ago" (P4 interview, September 2022)'.

The quotation describes the destitution the participant endured after her divorce. She experienced profound loneliness and helplessness, struggling with starvation as the maintenance she received was insufficient to cover basic needs' expenses. Turning to her impoverished, elderly mother who herself needed support added further strain. With a limited social network, her life faced threats on multiple fronts.

Some participants shared that their families and relatives were unwilling to support them due to disapproval of their divorce and their decision to take child custody (P5, P7, & P12). P13 explained: "They [her parents] were not supportive of letting me rejoin them. They disapproved the divorce I decided on due to frequent conflicts" (Interview, May 2023). Similarly, P7 noted: "My own parents do not treat me with the same respect as my married sisters after my divorce. My father even warned me to return the children to their father and find work or remarry" (Interview, October 2022).

The quotations above illustrate that a significant post-divorce challenge for these women was the lack of support from their parents. Seeking refuge from violent spouses, they instead faced further conflict. Rather than receiving comfort for the profound loss of a marriage, they were ignored and judged even being pressured to give up their beloved children, who meant everything to them. Being misunderstood and discriminated against by their own parents, who should have been their pillars of support during such a difficult time, was deeply disheartening. Left with no choice, they were forced to seek alternative means of survival in the immediate aftermath of their divorces.

Ecological Level Risk Factors

Challenges Related to the Justice System: Participants highlighted several challenges they faced within the justice system, describing the court process as 'boring' and 'demanding' (P3, P7, P9, P11, & P13). The legal proceedings, involving numerous appointments, were both time-consuming and costly. This was especially difficult for unemployed mothers urgently needing their share of marital property or maintenance to support their children. P9 shared: "We divided the property after three years of a tedious court process. Even now, I can't access share of land because my ex-spouse threatens me. Although I repeatedly reported this to the police, they haven't enforced the court's decision" Interview, February 2023). Similarly, P11 noted: "The court process was sluggish. It's where I cried a lot" (Interview, March 2023). The financial burden of pursuing justice also proved overwhelming for some participants (P3, P7, & P13). P3 recounted: "I was asked to pay a per diem to the police to bring him [ex-husband] back after he fled" (Interview, August 2022). Some participants suspected corruption and bias in the justice system, particularly favoring divorcing men who might have connections or offered bribes (P2, P9, & P10). P10 lamented: "My request was simple – child maintenance. Yet, I couldn't get a decision because he [the ex-spouse] had friends in the court" (Interview, April 2023).

These quotations reveal the divorcees' dissatisfaction with the lack of timely services and adequate legal protections. The prolonged legal process exacerbated their economic hardships, leaving them increasingly frustrated. They suspected that the system favored men, further deepening their sense of injustice.

Social Stigma. Participants emphasized some negative attitudes in their communities toward divorce, and divorced women, as a significant challenge affecting their confidence. They expressed disappointment at the diminished respect they experienced from some community members, including close friends and family, after their divorce. P7 remarked: "Society holds the wrong belief that a divorced woman may be a bad example for those in

marriage” (Interview, October 2022). Another participant shared:

‘Many married women and young girls avoid associating with me. The community disregards divorced women and looks down on us. Most people have little respect for a divorced woman like me. They rarely believe that we can build another life’ (P13 interview, May 2023).’

The above quotations highlight the additional forms of violence faced by women who often divorce to escape dangerous conflicts within their marriages. They are subjected to disrespect and social discrimination, effectively blaming the victim. P13 describes herself and other divorced women as a minority, reflecting a deep sense of marginalization. This feeling of inferiority underscores the psychological and social harassment they endure, which can drain their confidence and energy, hindering their ability to move forward.

Participants also reported being targeted for sexual harassment by some men within their neighborhood communities. P8 said:

‘After the divorce, some men tried to sexually harass me; so I was forced to move to a different place. Even there, people gossiped about me. They assumed I had the children out of wedlock and labeled my babies as ‘children of woman’ or ‘fatherless’ (Interview, January 2023).’

This quotation reveals that the minority status of divorced women extends to their children, who are labeled as "fatherless" or "children of woman". This stigma is even more painful for custodial mothers to endure than the personal challenges they faced. They were deeply concerned about how their children might be labeled by peers in the neighborhood or at school.

Gender-Biased Elderly Mediation: A customary conflict resolution institution, locally known as ‘Shimglina’ in Amharic or ‘Jaarsummaa’ in Afan Oromo, plays a crucial role in assisting formal courts with resolving disputes in the social sphere, including divorce. As reported by

the study participants, courts sometimes grant divorcing parents a "cooling-off" period to ensure they are not making decisions based on emotional impulses (P1, P3, P14). The court also encourages couples to attempt resolving their disputes through mediation by elders, if possible. Four custodial mothers shared that they significantly benefited from elderly mediation during their divorce in sharing some properties, which they could not win at court as their ex-spouses had already transferred ownership to their parents' names (P1, P5, P7, & P12).

On the other hand, there were participants who expressed disappointment with the biased decisions imposed against their interest by elders in mediation to stay in the violent marriage. “They [the elders] often believe that a woman should tolerate violent behavior of husband to save marriage. I was forced to stay in the conflicted relationship almost for a year in such a way” (P14 interview, June 2023).”

The bias implied in the above quote was further emphasized by another participant, who attributed it to the lack of female representation in the elderly mediation team:

‘Our traditional elderly mediation rarely allows women to defend their rights. They push them to stay in the marriage for its sake. I faced such decisions several times before I finally left the relationship. I think they rarely sense our real pain as all the members of the elderly team are men (P15 interview, July 2023).’

As we can see in the above quotations, the participants suffered from biased decisions of the elderly mediation. Since it is a traditional institution trusted by their society, the divorced women felt unable to reject the decisions, even when they sensed unfairness. They could not defend their rights because of the cultural belief that women are expected to preserve their marriages, even at the expense of their own well-being. The second quotation clearly highlights that women’s voices are not heard in the elderly mediation process due to the lack of female representation in the team.

In general, many of the risk factors reported by the participants appear to stem from the patriarchal culture of their society. These include low education and poor economic backgrounds for women, automatic award of child custody to mothers without adequate maintenance, gender bias in the legal system, and social stigma toward divorced women.

Discussion

This article presents the risk factors affecting the resilience of divorced women in Ethiopia, focusing on the experiences of custodial single mothers in Adama City. Resilience is viewed as the ability to adapt and grow despite adversity, relying on personal competence and ecological resources, rather than the absence of challenges (Kolar, 2011). Adversity refers to traumatic events or unfavorable conditions that pose risks of maladjustment unless mitigated by protective factors (Bonanno, 2012). While adversity can be problematic without solutions, it also acts as a catalyst to unlock personal potential and utilize environmental resources as protective factors. Resilience emerges from the interaction between risk and protective factors, as these elements continuously shape one another (Allen *et al.*, 2022).

To this end, this paper aimed to identify participants' perception and experiences with divorce and its potential risk factors, which provides a context for studying their resilience. In this section, the researchers briefly discuss the findings presented in the results section.

Divorces as Adversity

The study explored whether participants perceived divorce as adversity, a term defined by individual perception of insufficient resources to counter its risks (Aldwin, 2004). As shown in demographic table, participants relied on ex-husbands' income during marriage and lacked personal income post-divorce. With limited education, they struggled to find jobs, and dependent children further restricted their options. Some were unable to engage in low-skill jobs or seek refuge with parents. Additionally, delays in legal decisions on property and maintenance rights, combined

with social discrimination, and neighborhood harassment, undermined their ability to function as single mothers. Consequently, the participants viewed divorce as an adverse transition exposing them to multiple risks. This aligns with Feeney and Monin's (2016) findings on divorce's socioeconomic disruptions threatening family adaptation, and with research identifying divorce as a highly stressful life event (Sbarra, *et al.*, 2012).

Divorce Risk Factors

This study identified six major divorce risk factors based on participants' lived experiences. These include: lack of personal income, ongoing conflict with ex-spouses, insufficient family support, challenges with the justice system, gender-biased elderly mediation, and social stigma against divorce and divorcees. Resilience literature suggests that individuals, as social beings, can either be vulnerable to risk or protected in the face of adversity at multiple levels: individual, familial, and societal (Kolar, 2011). Adversity-risk and protective factors interact at these levels during the resilience process. Therefore, the major risk factors discussed in the results section are analyzed within these three levels.

Individual Level Risk Factors

Individuals are the first agents to identify and manage risks associated with adversity. When we recognize that an event presents potential risks, we must assess our assets to control the situation. Assets are shaped by personal traits, including experiences with challenges, patience, confidence, hope, optimism, communication or social skills, professional knowledge, and financial or material resources (Reivich *et al.*, 2011). While these resources can serve as protective factors, their absence represents individual-level risk factors (Pearce, cited by Kolar (2011)).

In this study, participants indicated a lack of these resources. For instance, some had limited educational backgrounds, which hindered their ability to find employment, leaving them without sufficient income to support their children. Others struggled to connect with their

parents and lacked strong social networks, possibly due to poor communication skills. For example, P4 had lived on a small amount of child maintenance for over three years and often went without food. Despite these dire conditions, she failed to seek further support, except for attempts to reach out to her impoverished retired mother. She appeared to lack hope and optimism about regaining control of her situation. Similarly, P8 seemed to adopt a victim mentality, blaming her ex-husband's friends as a cause of her divorce. Individuals who blame others for their problems often experience anger, frustration, and helplessness, rather than focusing on how to overcome adversity (Nobel and McGrath, 2005). Margolis and Stoltz (2010) argue that resilience begins with shifting from cause-oriented thinking to response-oriented thinking – moving beyond what caused the problem and identifying aspects of the situation that can be improved.

Overall, the participants in this study revealed individual-level risk factors that made them perceive divorce as a threat to their ability to function as single mothers. This aligns with the idea that a lack of personal and social assets can predict vulnerability to negative outcomes in challenging situations, potentially threatening an individual's functionality, survival, or future development (Masten and Barnes, 2018).

Family Level Risk Factors

Family is the most reliable social entity in one's life, forming the primary social capital – those relationships and networks we rely on during difficult times. When individuals face adversity and feel unable to confront it alone, they seek support from immediate and extended family, close relatives, and significant others for protection (Masten, 2018). While strong family cohesion and emotional, social, and economic support can protect individuals from maladjustment, their absence can increase vulnerability to risk (Baechel, 2007).

In this study, conflicts with ex-spouses and lack of family support emerged as major family-level risk factors for the resilience of custodial single mothers. Ex-spouses, who should ideally

cooperate for the well-being of the children, instead acted as barriers to the participants' ability to move forward. The ex-husbands neither provided emotional support nor paid child maintenance, which caused stress for the women and left their children in shortage. These women continued to suffer from the extended violence inflicted by their ex-husbands, further complicating their adaptation to post-divorce life. Despite this, they still had to regulate their emotions and try to ensure their children felt their fathers' presence, a mechanism also identified in divorcees in Willen's (2015) study.

Participants also reported a lack of parental support for various reasons. Some faced misjudgment, disrespect, and discrimination from family members, while others had weak family networks and poor financial resources. In some cases, parents interfered with the women's decisions regarding divorce and child custody. Divorced women typically seek refuge in their families of origin for support during the legal process (Yohannes, 2015). So, being unwelcomed in such a context adds significant stress, particularly when trying to escape harmful conflicts. However, some participants did report receiving good parental support and reliable child maintenance. Related studies show that divorced women often rely on child maintenance and support from family and significant others (Setiamanah, *et al.*, 2021; Yohannes, 2015). Those with lower levels of perceived family support are at higher risk of stress and depression (Baechel, 2007; Greeff and van Der Merwe, 2004).

Ecological Level Risk Factors

Resilience is a dynamic process shaped by the interplay of personal, familial, and contextual protective mechanisms (Condly, 2006; Masten, 2018; Ungar, 2011). At-risk individuals are expected to seek support, while their social environments must provide resources to facilitate positive adaptation (Ungar, 2011). Vulnerability increases when environmental resources are limited, and individuals lack the competence to navigate and negotiate challenges (Condly, 2006).

In this study, participants identified challenges with the justice system, gender-biased elderly mediation, and social stigma as major ecological risk factors. The justice system, including police and courts, was a frequent point of contact for legal protection and divorce proceedings. Participants expressed concerns about inefficiencies and perceived gender biases in the system. They described the process as costly and stressful, with delays in receiving maintenance payments worsening their financial struggles. However, some participants praised justice system personnel for being cooperative and understanding (e.g., P1, P4).

Similarly, elderly mediation – locally known as ‘Shimgelna’ or ‘Jaarsumma’ was highlighted both positively and negatively. This customary dispute resolution system run by community elders, operates parallel to constitutional courts and is respected for its accessibility, efficiency, and alignment with local values (Tihut and Satterfield, 2010; Mekuanint, 2015). Elders involved are often regarded as wise, fair, honest, and knowledgeable about customary laws (Million, 2021). Four of the current participants benefited from elderly mediation, securing property shares that the courts had denied due to a lack of evidence. However, two participants reported experiencing biased decisions, raising concerns about the system’s fairness. The participants noted that while male elders may approach disputes from socio-cultural perspectives, they often failed to empathize with women’s specific challenges. The lack of women’s representation within the institution was a recurring concern.

Some previous local studies conducted in different parts of Ethiopia have also revealed that elderly mediation is not without limitations. Mekuanint (2015) who conducted a qualitative study on women as agents and subjects of the elderly mediation – ‘Shimglina’, in Meket District, of North Wollo Zone in Ethiopia, identified that women seeking solution from ‘Shimgelna’ rarely participate as mediators, but as petitioners or offenders, in person or through male representatives. Exclusion of women from traditional conflict resolution is also a key finding in a study by

Million (2021) in the Benishangul Gumuz regional state of Ethiopia. Similarly, a study conducted on women’s access to formal and informal legal protections, in Zeghie Peninsula rural area of northwestern Ethiopia, by Tihut, and Satterfield (2010) disclosed that both the legal and the customary institutions were largely disparaging to single mothers struggling to secure their rights to own rural land. In particular, the researchers described the elderly mediation – Shimgelna to be part of the traditional “logics whereby elders expect women to “compromise” their rights in the spirit of harmony and the peaceful resolution of disputes” (p 172). According to these researchers, the elders attempt to make peace at the expense of imposing the women to compromise their rights to justice. The researchers further explained that women who resist such practice risk isolation from social networks and support systems. In the current study, two participants shared similar experiences, reporting that elders pressured them to preserve their marriages by tolerating the violent behaviors of their ex-husbands.

These findings underscore the dual nature of elderly mediation. While it offers valuable, and accessible alternatives to formal legal processes, its impact on women and their exclusion from decision-making roles warrants further investigation. Enhanced representation of women within these institutions and a reevaluation of practices that compromise justice for the sake of harmony are critical areas for improvement.

Finally, community attitude toward divorce and divorced women was a significant challenge reported by the current participants. They described being socially humiliated, discriminated against, and viewed as having bad influences on young girls and married women in their communities. The participants chose to remain single, fearing potential harm to their children from a stepfather; yet, they faced sexual harassment and stigmatization. More troubling was, the stigma extended to their custodial children, who were labeled as “fatherless” or “children of women” (P8 interview, January 2023). This caused deep pain for the mothers, who worried about the

emotional impact on their children when facing such discrimination among peers.

Despite the growing rate of divorce making it among the common social phenomena, this study highlights the persistent cultural stigma faced by divorced women, consistent with prior research (Yohannes, 2015). Culture, as part of the macro-system, strongly influences responses to adversity, with subgroups like women or custodial mothers facing unique stressors. Divorced women are at higher risk of sexual harassment, and custodial mothers often struggle to provide for their children. Similarly, Afomia's (2015) study on divorced custodial fathers in Addis Ababa revealed challenges such as lack of family support, social discrimination, and severe financial strain, emphasizing the need to address post-divorce issues for custodial parents.

The stigma highlighted here calls for community awareness to normalize divorce and foster acceptance of divorcees. Education is a key factor as poor educational backgrounds significantly limited participants' opportunities. While Ethiopia has advanced gender equality in education and politics (Parkes *et al.*, 2017), social and structural barriers still hinder women's post-divorce adaptation. The interaction of individual, familial, and societal risks heightens vulnerability, reduces resilience, and jeopardizes survival and growth amid adversity (Bonanno, 2012).

The findings of this study align and differ with several existing works, despite contextual variances. Participants reported facing multifaceted post-divorce risks, which significantly impacted their lives. The study echoes Nataraja's (2014) research on first-generation Indian American divorced single mothers, where participants in both studies reported finding peace and freedom in post-divorce, compared to their previously violent marriages. However, while Nataraja's participants generally enjoyed economic stability post-divorce, the current participants experienced socioeconomic upheaval, reflecting the importance of education and economic independence for women divorcees. The current study also resonates with findings

from Ko and Kim (2015), and Willen (2015), though it extends beyond their focus on social and emotional impacts to identify more intricate risk factors. Locally, the results align with studies by Yohannes (2015) and Dereje (2014), which highlighted the psychosocial and economic challenges faced by divorced women. However, this study uniquely uncovers the compounded effects of child custody, a dimension less explored in previous research. The child custody sophisticated the participants' vulnerability, demanding significant personal sacrifices to ensure their children's well-being, on one hand, and make them put more efforts in positive adaptation offering them purpose for living, on the other hand.

Conclusion

This study concludes that divorced custodial single mothers perceive divorce as a potentially traumatic event, with complex risk factors threatening their functionality, survival, and future development. These risks are deeply rooted in the long-standing structural disadvantages women face in patriarchal societies.

The findings highlight the high vulnerability of these mothers and emphasize the need to assess and promote protective factors that empower them to navigate post-divorce challenges effectively. The study offers valuable insights for policymakers and social welfare agencies to address the unique socioeconomic needs of divorced custodial women in contexts similar to the study area.

Implications

Resilience involves the interaction between adverse life risks and protective factors that mitigate their effects, requiring stronger safeguards as risks increase. The risk factors identified in this study are multidimensional, necessitating interventions at multiple levels.

Divorced women should be capacitated to leverage personal strengths and community resources. The government must prioritize

gender mainstreaming in education and services, implementing family-based development programs to empower custodial single mothers, and support their vulnerable children. Families and communities should provide understanding and support, while media, policy advocates, and welfare practitioners must collaborate to ensure fairness, implementation of social protections, and raise awareness about divorce and its implications.

Finally, social institutions like elderly mediation are instrumental for community based interventions. However, gender equality has been a question. So, the issue of women representation in social institutions on their matters warrants further research

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Declaration of conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Research Ethics

The current study had gone through ethical review process at School of Social Work, College of Social Sciences, at Addis Ababa University

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