

PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF DIVORCE ON NIGERIAN WOMEN

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Abstract

This paper strives to discuss the psychological effects of divorce on Nigerian women. Divorce is considered as the formal legal dissolution of a legally constituted marriage. Divorce is necessary for some couples because they are stuck in a toxic, unhealthy, and dangerous marriage. There are so many reasons why people seek for divorce after marriage. The psychological effects of divorce on Nigerian women can be devastating and it has many effects on them. Some Nigerian culture upholds that the family is the basic unit of society and thus, divorce should not be considered as an option. Because Divorce is discouraged in Nigeria, most women are usually scared to tow this route because they fear stigmatization, rejection and ostracization.

Keywords: Marriage, Divorce, Stigma, Rejection, Women, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

In Nigeria, marriage is regarded as a sacred institution. Marriage seems to be the biggest celebration in the country. During the wedding ceremony, the joy that radiates from the faces of the couple show that they are in love and that the union would last forever. Unfortunately, it is not always the case. There is an increase in the rate of divorce cases in Nigeria. On the other hand, it is interesting to note, that in the past, divorce was not something that was mentioned or discussed in the public. The idea is that once you are married, you are expected to stick with your partner for better and for worse. This makes a lot of people not to accept or admit that they are having problems in their marriages. In a nutshell, some ethnic groups consider it a taboo because it would bring shame to their families and culture.

At this point, it is pertinent to ask an important question. What is divorce? The dictionary of Sociology defined divorce as the formal legal dissolution of a legally constituted marriage. The conditions necessary to terminate a marriage in divorce vary widely from culture to culture and over time (Scott & Marshall, 2009, 187). A divorce enables the former partners to carry on separate lives legally although the former partners might continue to interact if they had children. Considerable rescripting of roles is often necessary for couples to change from spouses to nonintimate co-parents. Partly to reduce the stigma attached to the term divorce, it is now sometimes called dissolution of marriage (Starbuck & Lundy, 2016, 404). Divorce is necessary for some couples because some partners are stuck in a toxic, unhealthy, and dangerous marriage. Many health risks can as well make one to leave the marriage. The bottom line is that when it becomes difficult for couples to live under the same roof, divorce becomes an option. This enables them to heal from their wounds and move on to a healthier future.

It is true that divorce seems to be the better option for a failed marriage. However, in Nigeria the process of getting a divorce is not always easy. Divorce usually involves the cancelation or reorganization of the obligations of marriage, thereby dissolving the matrimonial bonds between a married couple under the rule of law of a particular country or state. For most Nigerian women, the process runs many of them dry. In fact, it could be extremely grueling and challenging psychologically and financially for women. The fear of these long-drawn-out and difficult times is what stops many women in Nigeria from going through this process. The worst aspect of it is that those who are divorced already inform other women who are in the process of the devastating effects. Unfortunately, Nigeria as a country does not have a strong system the cares for divorced women in the society (Gunjan & Zurada, 2021, 292).

Divorce in Nigeria

Marriages in Nigeria are between families, not between the bride and the groom; consequently, families do all they can to resolve issues that may plague the marriage in order to avoid a divorce, which could be an embarrassment to both sides. However, sometimes, divorce is inevitable. When this is the case, women suffer a lot. Even when they are divorced, both families continue to work towards finding a solution to the problem so that the couple could be reunited. This is most important if the couple have children, because Nigerians frown at divorce even more when children are involved than if the marriage was childless. Nigerian cultures never encourage the thought of children growing up with either parent, and families make every effort to ensure that the children will grow up with both parents in the same house (Osagie, 2011, 24).

Divorce happens more in the urban areas of Nigeria than in the rural areas. The reason for this appears to be that in the rural areas every influential member of the lineage wades into the problem the brother (the husband) and the wife. The reason is because in Nigeria, the woman is not just married to her husband alone but to his lineage. Therefore, this means that her children belong to her children's lineage and take their appropriate position among the members of the lineage or lineage. Looking at this context, one will find out that it is normal for the elders to come in and settle cases for married couples. The elders try to interfere and settle quarrels in order to save marriages (Adams & Trost, 2005, 35).

Recently in Nigeria, the divorce rate is on the increase and many people are worried. As such, many are asking what could be the problem. There are many reasons for divorce in Nigeria ranging from minor misunderstandings to complex issues, such as infidelity, desertion, stubbornness, lack of love, constant beating, battering, unforgiveness, lack of love, lack of communication, barrenness, habitual drunkard or a drug addict, bestiality, mental illness, distance in relationship, financial problems, domestic violence, Incompatibility between couples, etc. Divorce does not occur spontaneously, the problems grow gradually until it becomes unbearable for the couples. However, we will discuss the major causes of divorce in Nigeria.

Primary causes of divorce in Nigeria

There are so many reasons why people seek for divorce after marriage. The list is long because of individual differences. However, in this work we will present the main causes of divorce in Nigeria.

A. Infidelity: Infidelity is a threat to the couple, Nigerian social structure and basic unit of human life. At this point, we need to ask the ultimate question, what is infidelity? *Infidelity is the act of having a romantic or sexual relationship with someone other than a wife, husband, or committed partner; also referred to as cheating, adultery, or having an affair* (Sperry, 2015, 120). This definition emphasizes that one partner breaks the vows of marriage and violates the promise of being committed sexually and emotionally to the other partner. Therefore, it is important to note that one of the big reasons why relationships struggle after the discovery that a spouse has been unfaithful is because it breeds a devastating amount of distrust and trust is sacred in all marriages. It also causes an incredible amount of grief, not only to the person who finds out their partner has been cheating, but also to the cheating party. Feelings of insignificance, anxiety and depression, mixed with frustration and anger can cause the relationship to spiral into a place of no return. A victim of an affair may even withdraw from those around them in order to avoid the pain of confronting the reality of their circumstances (Yusuf & Yusufu, 2020, 35).

The unfortunate thing about divorce in Nigeria, most of the divorces are due to adulterous connections on the part of the wife. *Adulterous men are commonly excused and the blame* their actions on women. The worst part of it is that most men give reasons for being their act of cheating and feel that women are forbidden to cheat. The notion is that women are supposed to be faithful in marriage and tolerate men's extramarital affairs. Some cultures in Nigeria do not see men's infidelity as a fundamental threat to marriage (Jankowiak, 2008, 228).

B. Barrenness: Barren means not producing or incapable of producing offspring; sterile: a barren woman. It also means something that is not productive or fruitful. Mentally unproductive; dull, and not producing results. It is also a state (usually a woman) of the ability to conceive, in order to have a child, and in a man, it is an inability to impregnate a woman (Mambu, 2021, 222). For married couple to be childless or wife to be barren is not only considered a disgrace, but a curse in some Nigeria societies. When a childless wife becomes frustrated in her matrimonial home, divorce is not far away the corner. In some societies, a woman who miscarriages is looked down upon as a 'witch' nickname as 'eating her children in the womb' (Yusuf & Yusufu, 2020, 35).

A childless marriage cannot last in Nigeria of today. So if a wife is unable to have children by her husband she is likely to end her marriage. Many women leave their marriages when the treatment from the husband and his family become unbearable. The woman's family members do not keep quiet in such matters, when physical and psychological damage to the woman in particular becomes obvious and unbearable, her family may forcefully withdraw her or even put an end to the marriage. In some cases, men are the cause of childlessness in the marriage. Unfortunately, they often lord it over to the women. The culture discourages women to challenge the men in this state of childlessness (Izekwe, 2015, 76). The above point stresses the fact that if a bride is incapable of producing an offspring, the family of the husband tends to maltreat her and encourage their brother to divorce her. It is really a pity that sometimes in Nigeria, the picture of bareness appears like a heinous crime for a woman who is childless.

C. Lack of trust: Trust refers to reliance on or confidence in the dependability of someone or something. In interpersonal relationships, trust refers to the confidence that a person or

group of people has in the reliability of another person or group (Woody, 2019, IX). Trust unites a couple and is essential for any relationship. Trust in a relationship or marriage is crucial. However, lack of trust can destroy a marriage. No one likes to feel their partner does not trust them. When trust leaves a relationship, people begin to make assumptions, and the relationship turns into chaos.

Breakdowns in trust can take place in a number of different ways. Small, subtle acts that fail to meet expectations accumulate over time can gradually erode trust and create a climate of betrayal. This is likely to be true of most types of trust, although breakdowns in trust might be the result of an explosive event, they are more likely to be a result of a series of small disappointments, each potentially unimportant, but adding up over time (Burns et. al., 2016, 158). Lack of trust one of the main reasons of divorce because distrust brings forth the worst in people: jealousy, suspicion, anger, self-doubt, possessiveness, withdrawal, as well as psychological problems such as anxiety, depression, and alcohol or drug abuse. Another reason why distrust often leads to divorce is that many people find it very difficult and even impossible to restore the trust they had (Louw & Louw, 2020, 321).

Psychological effects of divorce on Nigerian women

The effects of divorce on Nigerian women can be devastating and it has many effects on them. We will discuss the psychological effects that are more common in Nigeria.

A. Anxiety: It is not so easy to come up with a specific definition of anxiety because we at times confuse the term with fear. Anxiety is considered as a *mood state characterized by strong negative affect, bodily symptoms of tension, and apprehensive anticipation of future danger or misfortune* (Mash & Wolfe, 2015, 507). There are several reasons why divorce causes anxiety for Nigerian women. They worry about the financial upkeep of the new way of living. Starting a new life is not important especially if she was a housewife before the divorce took place. They worry about the future: living alone after being with a partner for a long time, whether she will remarry, relocate to another state, find a job, how the people will see her new status, etc.

Anxiety is a tricky emotion. It is horrible to feel anxious. When one is anxious, you do not feel like you have control of your thoughts. Anxiety often masquerades in difficult ways. Anxiety makes it difficult to get through your day. Symptoms include feelings of nervousness, panic and fear as well as sweating and a rapid heartbeat. To this effect, divorce women in Nigeria are worried and anxious about affection, finances, and their esteem (Gaur, 2022, 13). Anxiety is manifest by disturbances of mood, thinking, behaviour, and physiological activity and accompanying disturbances of sleep, concentration, social and/or occupational functioning. Also, it is associated with restlessness, feeling keyed up or on edge, being easily fatigued, difficulty in concentrating or mind going blank, irritability, muscle tension, and irritability (Adwas et al., 2019, 587).

B. Insomnia: Insomnia is a condition that describes difficulty with sleep. Insomnia may involve difficulty initially falling asleep, frequent and/or prolonged awakenings in the middle of the night, waking up too early in the morning, or non-restorative sleep. Many individuals with insomnia spend excessive amounts of time in bed in fruitless efforts to obtain more sleep. In actuality, the more time a person with insomnia spends in bed trying to get sleep, the more

fragmented sleep becomes, perpetuating insomnia (Aminoff & Daroff, 2014, 708). For most divorced women in Nigeria, they actually do not know when insomnia begins but knowing the types of insomnia will help us to understand what they are passing through.

There are three main subtypes of insomnia: difficulty initiating sleep (sleep-onset insomnia), awakening frequently during the night (sleep-maintenance insomnia), and awakening long before the desired time to get up (early-morning awakening or terminal insomnia). The various types emphasizes that insomnia refers to a total lack of sleep (Mattice et al., 2012, 118). The sleeping difficulty should also be accompanied by daytime impairment, such as difficulty concentrating, memory difficulties, fatigue, stomach problems, irritability, or reduced motivation. Poor sleep can have major adverse effects on daily functioning due to fatigue, poor concentration and memory problems. Insomnia can occur in all age group (Guglietta, 2015, 122). Insomnia is very common among divorce women in Nigeria. Most Nigerian women that are divorced find themselves awake with trouble returning to sleep, tossing and turning during the sleep period, feeling tired upon awakening, and feeling irritable or moody after the major sleep episode (Mattice et. al., 2012, 118).

C. Identity crisis: A period of confusion concerning an individual's sense of self and role in the society, which occurs most frequently in the transition from one stage of life to the next. It is often expressed by isolation, negativism, extremism, rebelliousness. In a nutshell, it is an uncertainty about one's place in society and the world (O'Toole, 2017, 664). This is a period when most divorced women in Nigeria question themselves on who they are. There is a constant inner conflict to find an answer to one's identity. Everything about life comes into question. Identity crisis of divorced women is caused majorly by their adjusting to a new lifestyle. Some withdraw from organizations where majority of the members are married women. Again, they find it hard to join groups that are made of singles because they have children from the previous marriage. They struggle with the feeling of being single with children. Unfortunately, the culture in which they find themselves frowns at such attitude.

D. Depression: The termination of marriage in Nigeria arouses a lot of feelings. Many individuals encounter feelings of sadness or depression once the divorce papers are finalized. It is very common for Nigerian woman to become severely depressed after divorce. Many times people use the term depressed interchangeably with sadness. They are not the same. Depression is generally anger turned inward associated with hopelessness. This is different from sadness, which is usually associated with loss. Sadness is inevitable and necessary. It goes with many important events in our lives, and is another way for us to know how important someone or something we've lost has been to us. Sadness is a genuine feeling, so it has a beginning, middle and end. When expressed, sadness can be brought to closure. Depression is a state of living without access to the core self (Wyman, 2001, 162).

Depression is often caused by a combination of factors including the emotional turmoil of ending a significant relationship, feelings of loss and grief, financial challenges, disrupted social networks, co-parenting difficulties, and a diminished sense of self-esteem and identity. Again, many Nigerian women who are divorced display different symptoms including; loss of interest, apathy, irritability and frustration, changes in weight, diet, energy levels and sleep patterns, anxiety and agitation, reduced concentration and productivity, back and neck pain, and potentially suicidal thoughts (Hughes et al., 2019, 140). Some family members often attest that these women who are depressed find it difficult to

sleep. Thus, it affects their concentration and their attention span seems to be shorter. Unfortunately, when they speak their conversation may suggest, or even express, feelings of worthlessness and despair (Philips, 2001, 158).

E. Substance abuse: Substance abuse is characterized by a cycle of periodic or chronic intoxication that is detrimental to an individual and society and is produced by the repeated use of the substance (Friedman, 2016, 249). Further, the definition of substance use disorders and substance-induced disorders contains an abundance of negative outcomes, such as addictive disorders, lower levels of self-control, impairments of the brain, intoxication, withdrawal including mental, psychotic, bipolar, depressive, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive, and sleep disorders (Brownstein, 2016, 187). Divorce may drive Nigerian women into substance abuse and addiction. Addiction is a complex issue that can have significant effects on an individual's mental health. Substance abuse can also damage one's relationships with family and friends. Substance abuse can have serious effects on a person's behavior and habits. Use of a drug can change the brain's ability to focus and form coherent thoughts and ideas. Most divorced women in Nigeria that abuse drugs may be aggressive, lethargic, depressed, or see changes in their social network (Marion & Oliver, 2016, 265).

Social stigma associated with divorced women in Nigeria

A. Discrimination: The dictionary of psychology defines discrimination as the ability to make judgments between items, such as in size, amount, brightness, sound. The second definition is treating some people favorably or unfavorably on the basis of arbitrary criteria, such as ethnicity, gender, race, political ideology, religion, in our own case divorce (Corsini, 1999, 284). In Nigeria, People treat women unfairly, including bullying them, because they are divorced. They believe that they have no one to defend them. Divorced women often find themselves discriminated against in the workplace, church groups, friends, village meeting, during the job interview, social groups, politics and hiring process. People often have the conception that they are not responsible, troublesome and would not like the person to influence the members of the group.

At times, some Nigerians tag them as wayward people since they do not have a man controlling them. Thus they can do whatever they want at any given time. It is unfortunate that this discrimination is common in most places in the Nigerian society. Taking the workplace as an example, these women personal time may be considered less important than that of married co-workers because you do not have a husband and children waiting at home for you. They are expected to work late or come in on weekends while married teammates go home (Kao & Tien, 2003, 124).

B. Rejection: What is rejection? Rejection is dismissing or refusing a person's affections, proposals, or ideas; denying an individual social acceptability (Strayhorn, 2016, 51). Feelings of rejection can be overwhelming. Most times, rejection makes the person not to sound logically and think clearly. The greatest damage rejection causes is usually self-inflicted. Our natural response to rejection can be very damaging to us. These women call ourselves names, lament their shortcomings, and feel disgusted with themselves. Doing so is emotionally unhealthy and psychologically self-destructive. Thoughts of rejection are connected to our memory from trauma or stressful experiences. These thoughts are toxic and are root problems in our thought life, behavior, attitude, and our relationships (Brown, 2019, 7). It is important

to remember that rejection makes these women angry and destabilizes their sense of belonging.

Possible solutions

There are many reasons why divorce would not be the best option for marital problems. When problems arise in a marriage, it is advisable for couples to go for counseling. A professional marriage counselor will always help the couple to develop skills to confront and solve their problems. The amazing thing is that during the counseling, couples would find out that most of the covered up emotional pain and distress are solvable.

Again, some couples opt for divorce because they hardly communicate or spend quality time with each other. There are some couples who will never communicate what is in their mind because they feel that their partner should know what he or she is thinking. Communication is important because in sharing your worries, expectation and ideas, appropriate solutions are found. Spending time together and communicating often helps to avoid potential conflict and makes one's partner feel like a team.

In addition, we are in an era where everything seems to be perfect on the cyberworld. At times, some couples tend to treat their partners as computers. It is always important to remember that one's wife or husband is a human. Human beings are bound to make mistakes. The more couples understand that their partners are humans, the more they will not be upset when they fall short of their duties. To this effect, patience, forgiveness, understanding, encouragement and love should be practiced by every couple.

Conclusion

Going through a divorce is hard, painful, embarrassing, scary, humiliating, devastating and life altering. No doubt about it (Rubenstein, 2006, 4). Nigerian women who are divorced often experience unhappiness and some symptoms of distress. Many of them feel bad because they do not know how to start all over again. Part of the reason why they are happy is that some of the women think that divorce usually represents failure. Guilt and shame often beclouds the thinking of these women. Some women feel that divorce will put their children at risk. Sometimes, they think that they have not tried enough to save their marriages. Unfortunately, the Nigerian society and culture cannot help them because they frown at divorce. Nigerian culture upholds that the family is the most basic unit of society and thus, divorce should not be considered as an option.

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