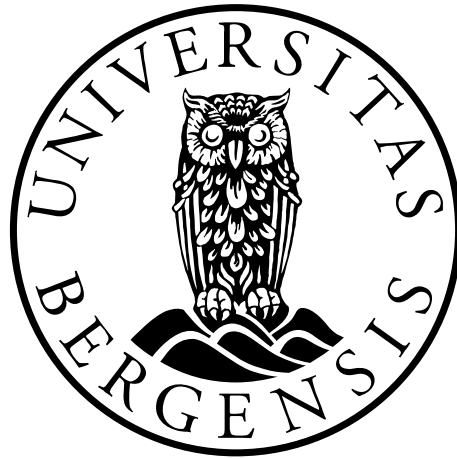


**Social Changes and Women-Initiated Divorce in Dhaka,  
Bangladesh: Gaining or Loosing Power?**

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Dedicated with Love and Respect  
to  
my parents who have been source of inspiration of my work.

# **Thesis Abstract**

The study attempts to explore the nature of women-initiated divorce in Dhaka, considering the social changes of Bangladesh. The study focuses particularly on the urban middle class women as the scope of the study. By employing a qualitative in-depth interview method with the combination of Focus Group Discussions and participant observation, the present study critically explores the perspectives of divorce of middle class women from the point of view of their own experience, their understanding of marital disruptions and the consequences of divorce on them. The study finds that a mix of traditional and modern values and expectations persists in the urban middle class women in Dhaka. Similar tendency follows in the reasoning of their marital discords, which leads them to seek divorce. The reasons of divorce are multi-dimensional for the women. The study discloses many traditional reasons of divorce such as dowry, husbands' failure in provider role, presence of alcohol and drug addiction, infertility, sexual incompatibility and physical violence, and many modern reasons of divorce such as value clash, husband's lack of love and commitment, lack of freedom, obstacle in self-development through education, husband's involvement in extra-marital affairs and emotional torture to be push factors of divorce. While, socio-economic factors like education and employment opportunity, legal development in relation to the possibility to divorce and the presence of children are found to be pull factors of divorce. The study also finds that by leaving abusive marriages, women gain several individual positive changes, such as escape from physical and emotional torture, a good career, and ability to provide a better environment to children. But the post-divorce consequences are severe for women in relation to social reactions of their divorce. The study finds that women are faced by social exclusion and stigma, harassment in working place, difficulties in a second marriage, downswing changes in lifestyle in the face of social expectations, and psychological and physiological disturbance in post-divorce situations.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

BBS- Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics.

WB- World Bank.

DSS-Demographic Surveillance System.

RDRS- Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Service.

MFLO- Muslim Family Law Ordinance.

ADB- Asian Development Bank.

CEDAW- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

NCWD- National Council for Women's Development.

NAP- National Action Policy.

FGDs- Focus Group Discussions.



# Introduction

If one is to imagine the life of a woman in Bangladesh, the first thing comes to mind is her marriage. Like in other South Asian countries, marriage is near universal in Bangladesh and it is considered as the turning point of a woman's life, on which her fortune depends (White, 1992, p. 89). According to Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), on average, a woman is married before the age of twenty (BBS, 1998). Therefore, a significant part of her life is ordained by marriage. Traditionally, a woman is perceived as a potential mother and home-maker in the patriarchal society of Bangladesh (Begum, 1992). She has been restricted from individual rights and power in her life. Thus, the status of a woman in Bangladesh is derived from her family and marriage.

Divorce is another potential aspect of a woman's life, integral to marriage. In Bangladeshi society, women are always in a disadvantaged position if they get divorced. However, recent decades have witnessed a significant social transformation in the lives of women in Bangladesh (WB, 2008). There are "considerable socio-economic development and changing values relating to women's family status" (Sultana & Karim, 2005). These include changes in health conditions, life-expectancy, age at marriage, education, employment opportunities, family structure, and women's family status (WB, 2008). These socio-economic changes have also affected the family life, including marriage and divorce. According to a report of BBS on marriage, divorce and separation in Bangladesh, the number of divorced and separated people in 1994 was 0.19 million (BBS, 1998). By 1996, this had increased to 0.23 million (ibid). Moreover, divorces are increasingly initiated by women. According to another report of BBS, the crude divorce rate for women was two times higher than men (BBS, 2008). According to the report on marriage, divorce and separation in Bangladesh, Dhaka city, the capital of Bangladesh, represents the second highest rate of divorce in the country and the majority of the divorces were also initiated by women (BBS, 1998). A report of the Arbitration Council of Dhaka City Corporation states that in 2006, female initiation of divorce was 67.14 percent of the total number of divorces, whereas 32.68 percent of the divorces were initiated by men (Arbitration Council, 2006). With such a dramatic change in divorce attitudes, the question of what the driving forces are that lead women to initiate divorce more than men in such a restricted patriarchal society as Bangladesh, arise. This question requires empirical enquiry,

and therefore, the women initiated divorce is the thematic focus of this study. More specifically, it focuses on the urban middle class divorced women living in Dhaka, who initiated their divorces. The focus on urban middle class women is particularly important, because they have not received much attention as subjects of investigation. I have therefore, chosen urban areas as the study locus for an exploration of the nature of recent women-initiated divorce trend.

Divorce has received significant attention in many developed countries because of its striking effects on individuals and society. In Bangladesh, it is yet to receive significant attention from the research community. From a sociological perspective, the study of divorce is important because it indicates the changing patterns of the most important institution in the society-family and marriage. From a legal perspective, the empirical study of women's divorce investigates, to what extent women are capable of benefiting from the legislative possibilities that exist in Bangladesh.

The present study explores women initiated divorce from the perspective of women's experience. This is important in order to understand ongoing social processes in the area of divorce in a society where conditions related to marriage and divorce play a fundamental role for the whole life course of women. Moreover, most of the social science literature on Bengali women deal with women's inferior status rather than emphasizing the importance of traditional female roles (Mansoor, 1999). However, recent socio-economic changes in women's behaviour in Bangladesh suggests that despite of a disadvantageous social structure, women are able to negotiate their social positions and act as agents in their own lives. As a woman of Bangladesh and a student of gender and development, I believe that there is an urgent need to explore the women-initiated divorce from a feminist perspective in order to reveal the existing roles, attitudes and expectations of women in relation to their marriage and divorce. A feminist perspective implies the generation of research questions that focus on women's own experience, because it has profound implications for social life (Harding, 1987). It is hoped that this will produce new knowledge about the recent trend of divorce in Bangladesh, more specifically women-initiated divorce among the middle class of urban Dhaka.

## **Structure of the Thesis:**

The first four chapters are conceptual chapters focusing the conceptual and methodological framework of this study. Chapter 1 presents a review of relevant literature. This includes literature on divorce in developed and developing countries and particularly in Bangladesh. In chapter 2, I discuss the context of gender relations of Bangladesh to provide the readers with a picture of women's life in Bangladesh. This chapter presents the socio-cultural and legal status of women within which women's lives are defined. In chapter 3, I discuss the theoretical framework of my study. I use two feminist frameworks, namely *patriarchal bargaining* by Deniz Kandiyoti (1988) and *empowerment* by Naila Kabeer (1999, 2005), and Anthony Giddens' (1990, 1991, 1992) notion of *modernity in relation to self identity and intimate relationships*. I elaborate the framework as much as this study requires. Chapter 4 deals with the methodological approach to the fieldwork. In this chapter, I present my access to the field for data collection, information about the selection of methods of data collection used, my role as a researcher in the field, challenges met during the field work, methods of data analysis, and ethical concerns encountered during field work and in data analysis. Chapter 5, 6, 7 and 8 are the empirical chapters of this study. In chapter 5, I discuss and analyse empirical data related to the marriages of the informants. This study mainly focuses on the divorce experiences of the informants, but they cannot be separated from their marital experiences. I present data on the decision making process related to getting married, their age at marriage, their educational situation at the time of marriage, the structure of their family, the role of their families in their marriage, and the conjugal understanding. In chapter 6, I discuss and analyse the marital problems leading to the divorce of the informants. This includes the rise of marital problems and the way the informants dealt with the problems. Chapter 7 discusses and analyses the process of divorce. This chapter includes data related to dower and maintenance costs, children's role in the decision to divorce, and custody of the children. Chapter 8 deals with the post divorce life of the informants. In this chapter, I present data on the post divorce situations of the informants and discuss post-divorce consequences including social, economic and psychological consequences for divorced women and also for their children. And finally, in chapter 9, concluding remarks are presented.

# **Chapter-1: Literature review**

## **1. Introduction:**

Before looking into the urban divorce trend in Bangladesh, it is important to discuss divorce across societies. Like marriage, divorce is also almost universal in all societies but to varying degrees. Divorce has been studied in many societies, significantly in developed countries, because of the rise in divorce rates in many such countries. Divorce rates are not so high in Bangladesh as it is in developed countries. This may be because of the cultural and religious magnitude involved in the kinship and marriage systems in Bangladeshi society. But the past few decades have seen changes in marriage and family structures, and simultaneous developments in women's legal and socio-economic status. The rate of divorce is increasing in Bangladesh. It has nevertheless, been paid less attention to Bangladeshi society, perhaps due to the cultural and social sensitivity of the issue of divorce. In any case, few initiatives have been made to explore divorce in Bangladesh. In this chapter, what I would like to do is to critically review a few of the major studies on divorce done in developed countries and also in the Asian regional context and in the context of Bangladesh. From developed countries, I include studies mostly from America and also from England, Wales, Scotland and Australia. From the Asian context, I include studies done in India, Nepal, some Southeast Asian context, and Bangladesh. I emphasise most the studies done in Bangladesh, since my research is carried out in this national context. I have included some relevant studies from other regions that mostly focus on the socio-economic and the consequential aspects of divorce, because I am also seeing divorce in relation to processes of socio-economic development in Bangladeshi society. This literature will provide a picture of divorce in developed and modern societies so that I can compare modern divorces in developed societies and Bangladeshi divorces. I would like to review literature to the extent that is useful for my research, because it is important to contextualise the issue of divorce. It would be interesting to note that the findings of some of the studies reviewed here contrast to my findings, whereas others entail similar findings. Thus, by reviewing some of the relevant literature, I hope to depict how my research connects to earlier research and also how my research identifies new ideas and issues that has not been addressed in previous literature on Bangladesh.

## **1.1. Divorce in Developed Countries:**

### **1.1.1. Demographic and Socio-Economic Factors of**

#### **Divorce:**

Glenn and Supancic (1984) in a study of social and demographic correlates of divorce and separation in the United States based on data from seven US national surveys conducted in the 1970s and 1980s, examine the role of ten social and demographic correlates on marital dissolution. Of the ten, they find race, age at first marriage and frequency of attendance of religious services to be the strongest correlates. Their main finding was that several of the high dissolution social and demographic categories were characterized by relatively low social integration. More explicitly, according to their study, people of the high dissolution categories of correlates (who infrequently or never attended religious services, those with no religion, and residents of the central cities of the larger metropolitan areas) were unlikely to be highly integrated, along with their spouses, into social groups characterized by solidarity, value consensus, and effective social controls (Glenn & Supancic, 1984). On the other hand, people highly integrated into such groups often were deterred from marital disruptions. Therefore, Glenn and Supancic's study reveals that social and religious integration largely influence the possibility of marital dissolution.

Smith (1997) in a study of the growth of divorce in Great Britain finds that in the post-war period, legislative changes had temporary impact on the increase of divorce. His study includes the data from England, Wales and Scotland. His study finds many other factors significantly related to the growth of divorce in Great Britain such as women's increased opportunity of labour force participation and technological development in fertility control. According to his study, welfare facilities in the post-divorce life and difference in income of spouses had no role in the growth of divorce (Smith, 1997). Thus, Smith's study reveals that on the macro-structural level, divorce related legislative changes are not causally related with the growth of post-war divorce in Great Britain, while women's increased economic opportunities and technological development have influenced the growth of divorce of Great Britain.

The sharp rise of divorce in Australia in the late 1960s and early 1970s has been investigated by Carmicheal and McDonald (1988), who brings forth demographic and socio-economic factors as causing the rise of divorce in Australia: the potential greater longevity of marriages due to early age at marriage and rising life expectancy; rising expectations concerning the quality of marital relationships; women's growing capacity of economic independence; the principles of the women's movement facilitating demands for more egalitarian role sharing and emotionally fulfilling marriages; lengthening intervals between marriage and the first birth, which facilitate the termination of unsatisfactory marriages; conflicts about when to forego the second income in order to have children; unfavourable economic conditions; greater possibilities for both sexes to meet other potential marriage partners owing to the movement of more women into the workforce; and declining adherence to religious beliefs (Carmicheal & McDonald, 1988, in Jones, 1997, p.101).

South and Spitz (1986) in a study of determinants of divorce over the life course in America based on longitudinal data identifies the wife's labour force participation and the husband's employment and urban residence seem to influence the probability of divorce, irrespective of the stage in the marital life course. At the same time, the effect of the wife's education appears to decrease the probability of divorce in the early marital duration but to increase in the later duration (South & Spitze, 1986).

Thus, many researchers have found that modernization and urbanization processes foster anonymity and impersonalization of social interaction, which in relation to the family weakens the stigma of divorce, and in turn increases divorce (Ogburn & Nimkoff, 1955; and Godde, 1971 in Ahmed, 2007, p.45; Breault and Kposowa, 1987). The development of urban and industrial economy and improved educational and employment opportunities for women have also been identified as causally related to the rising levels of divorce in western societies (South & Spitze, 1986).

The above literature highlights that along with changes in demographic factors, socio-economic factors have played a significant role in the rise of divorce in developed countries. More explicitly, urbanization and industrialization, women's education and employment and the socio-economic status of spouses are identified as causally related with the changes in conjugal perceptions and the consequential rise of divorce in modern societies.

### **1.1.2. Consequences of Divorce:**

Divorce is probably one of the most stressful events that individuals may experience in their personal life. Divorced people tend to experience increased depressive feelings over time (Menaghan & Lieberman, 1986). Menaghan and Lieberman, in a study of changes in depression following divorce in Chicago, USA, find great psychological changes as a result of the decline in standard of living, current economic difficulties, and reduced availability of intimate, reliable support following divorce. Thus, according to their findings, even though “marital termination provides some escape from a distressing relationship, the transition of divorce brings a change in life conditions that has depressive consequences” (Menaghan & Lieberman, 1986, p. 326).

Weitzman (1985) in a study of social and economic consequences of divorce for women and children in America finds unequal economic and social consequences of divorce for men and women and their children. Weitzman’s study shows that divorce causes a more downward economic and social mobility for women and children than for men in America. According to his study, reduction of income after divorce frequently result in inferior residence, move to less recreation and leisure, and intense mental pressure due to inadequate time and money. These factors may lead to extreme social consequences for women and children. Women’s economic hardships lead to social dislocation and loss of emotional support and social services and to intense psychological stress for women and children (Weitzman, 1985). However, his findings also show that despite of many pervasive economic and social consequences of divorce, women experience “a rise in competence and self-esteem” during the first year after their divorce. The majority of his informants found themselves functioning better in life than during their marriage. Thus, he finds a portrait of simultaneous resilience and resourcefulness of American women following their divorce.

Kitson and Morgan (1990) argue that consequences of divorce are multi-dimensional and may vary according to gender, ethnicity, life cycle, social support, and social networks and continued attachment to ex-spouses. In their review of multiple consequences of divorce in America based on data from the 1980s’ research on divorce, Kitson and Morgan outline health and economic and social consequences of divorce. They find a heightened level of psychological and physiological risks for divorced and separated, as compared to single and often, widowed (Kitson & Morgan, 1990). Their review also shows sudden decreases in the

standard of living of women and that divorce is economically less problematic for men. They also found difficulties in the performance of social roles for both partners at divorce.

Thus, the consequences of divorce are unequal for men and women and it also depends on the social, cultural and institutional arrangements of a country. Uunk (2004) investigates institutional effects on the economic consequences of divorce for women in the European Union by using longitudinal data from the European Community Household Panel survey from 1994-2000. According to his study, welfare state arrangements have a strong impact on the economic consequences of divorce. A country's level of social welfare and public childcare provision reduces negative economic consequences of divorce for women (Uunk, 2004). Women's reduced economic positions at divorce depend on the state's basic arrangements affecting women's income position, particular role of the state attached to it, the welfare provisions, the level of social inequality, and the public encouragement of female employment.

Kalmijn and Uunk (2007) in a study of social consequences of divorce in the light of stigmatization, finds that in regions where there is more disapproval of divorce, women experience greater decline in contacts with friends and relatives after divorce, both men and women experience greater decline in neighborhood contacts. They found that the stigmatization effect is primarily present for divorcees who did not move after divorce (Kalmijn & Uunk, 2007).

The above literature reveals that divorce is stressful for both men and women in a range of modern societies, but women are in a more disadvantaged position after divorce. Decline in the financial ability after divorce makes women socially more isolated than their male counterparts. Even though divorce carries so many negative consequences for them, it has some positive outcomes too. Despite the common features of divorce outlined above, the consequences of divorce largely differ across societies based on the cultural, social and institutional arrangements.



## **1.2. Divorce in Regional Context:**

The trend of divorce is not as wide spread as in the neighbouring region of Bangladesh including South and Southeast Asia, as it is in many developed countries. The rate of divorce in this context is also lower than it is in developed countries.

Pothen (1986) in a study of causes and consequences of divorce in Hindu society based on 200 husbands and 200 wives in India, argues that divorce is a product of multiple factors; biological, psychological and environmental (familial, economic, social etc.). Causes of divorce are also multi-dimensional and overlapping. She finds a considerable number of causes of divorce in Hindu society in India such as, cruelty, husbands' interest in other women, husbands' failure in the provider role, and interference of in-laws / relatives (Pothen, 1986). According to her study, the post-divorce consequences for the divorced were severe. Most of the divorced were stricken by personal problems like frustration, inferiority complex, shyness, loneliness, economic hardship and ill health. But the consequences of divorce were unequal for men and women. According to her study, women were subjected to more criticism and neglect than men. Men had no economic problems, while such problems were severe for women. On the other hand, women showed greater progress in education and employment in the post-divorce period. Remarriage more often for men compared to women. Pothen also found that the consequences of divorce were quite striking for the children. The majority of the children were not happy in their life and they experienced a divided loyalty, either for their mother or their father. Most of them were kept by their mothers. Thus, Pothen's study reveals that the life of children is also affected by the divorce of their parents, even though they are protected from total family disruption because of the traditional family and the culture as a whole.

A study done by Moinuddin (2002) on current position of divorced and separated Muslim women of two gram panchayats<sup>1</sup> in two districts of West Bengal finds extra marital relationships of husbands, poor economic conditions of both parties and family quarrels as the most prominent reasons of divorce. Other reasons for divorce like dowry issues, infertility, second marriages and a reestablishment of relationship with the first wife were also present (Moinuddin, 2002, in Ahmed, 2007, p.44).

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<sup>1</sup> It is the local arbitration council of the village based on social and customary practices.

Acharya (2005), based in a study among different caste and ethnic groups residing in Pokhara, a sub-metropolitan city of Nepal in 1997-1998, explores the causes of divorce in the city's growing urban context. His study identifies as causes of divorce - socio-economic differentiations such as educational differences between spouses, occupational status, unequal social and family background, role conflict and physical defects (Acharya, 2005). He also finds economic incompatibility and differences in the economic expectations of spouses, cruelty, and sexual incompatibility of the spouses after marriage as major causes of marital disruption. Acharya's study also reveals occupational mobility and the situation of agreement to the opposite sex, low age at marriage and immaturity, adjustment problems of new wives, and clashes between traditional and modern expectations among brides, mothers-in-law and sisters-in-law to be causal factors of divorce in Nepal.

The flow urbanization and industrialization are not alone major causes of the rise of divorce. The rate of divorce in a society is also related to broader social forces like cultural, social, religious and institutional settings. Drawing on Goode's argument about the link between modernization and divorce, Jones' study on divorce among the Malay-Muslims in Islamic South-East Asia shows that despite rapid economic growth, urbanization, rising levels of education and increases in women's economic participation, the divorce rate in Islamic South-East Asia was in decline in the 1960s and the 1970s (Jones, 1997). He identifies women's rising age at marriage and preference for self-selection of mates, strict official regulations against divorce, the role of women's groups in generating less tolerant community attitudes towards divorce, legislative measures to strengthen marital stability, and increasing religious orthodox in relation to divorce as some of the significant factors influencing the decline in divorce.

Thus, the finding of Jones study is a clear contrast from the findings from the reviewed studies of western societies, where modernization largely is identified as the main reason for the increased rate of divorce. His study suggests that divorce patterns across societies are relative, where variations in internal forces and factors influence the contexts of divorce in different directions. Moreover, a contrast between the studies of developed countries and the Asian context is that whereas divorce has been studied in developed countries as an outcome of broader structural changes, divorce in the Asian context has been studied as an outcome of personal and familial problems. A similarity in the studies of these two regions is that both regions show severe consequences of divorce for women. Social and cultural values and

structural arrangements influence the attitudes of divorce in a society. Therefore, the more stigmas related to divorce, the more severe the consequences of divorce, particularly for women.

### **1.3. Divorce in Bangladesh:**

The existing literature on divorce in Bangladesh is not very extensive. This may be due to the conservative attitudes towards divorce, or researchers' reluctance to study a sensitive issue like divorce. However, the existing literature relevant to this study is being presented here.

#### **1.3.1. Socio-Economic Factors and Reasons of Divorce:**

Ahmed (1987) in a study of socio-economic determinants of divorce in Bangladesh based on data collected from ever-married women aged 15-49 by the 1975 Bangladesh Fertility Survey, finds divorce to have a strong inverse relation with education. Moreover, it is related to current and childhood residence, regional origin, and age at marriage. It is more common among illiterates, Muslims, and rural and workingwomen. Certain other factors, like social status through educational achievement, variation in egalitarianism in the conjugal life, women's failure of adult role performance at marriage, and variation in the negative sanctions by kinsmen between social classes were found to underlie the determinants of divorce in Bangladesh (A. U. Ahmed, 1987). Economic factors like failure in the provider role and in providing demanded gifts and dowry frequently also become important challenges to the marital stability. Childlessness is found to be strongly associated with divorce, and the duration of marriage at divorce is found to be very low in Bangladesh. Ahmed finds that divorce is causally related to socio-economic and demographic factors. The quality of conjugal life, social sanctions and women's performances are also related to divorce.

Shaikh (1998) has studied social and demographic correlates of divorce in rural Bangladesh by using data from the Demographic Surveillance System (DSS) for the region Matlab for the period 1974-1993. His study finds age, education and fertility to be important factors of divorce. His findings show that the number of divorce initiated by males declined during the period of 1975-1992, while the overall divorce rate was on the increase among younger couples in the rural Matlab. He also finds that a continuously declining rate of the median age at divorce for husbands has prevailed during the period, whereas a continuous increase in the

median age at divorce for wives was noticeable in this period (Shaikh, 1998). Shaikh's study reveals that divorce mostly occurs in cases, where the husband is older than his wife but where the age gap is not more than 10 years. According to his study, divorce is also related to the level of education of the husband and wife, with the incidence of divorce tending to decline with higher levels of education. Shaikh also finds that the incidence of divorce was closely related to the number of children (ibid). The presence of children is likely to make marriage more stable and the propensity to divorce declined significantly with the increase in family size. This study reveals that factors like fertility, age gap between husband and wife, level of education of husband and wife, occupation of husband and duration of marriage influence the propensity of divorce in Bangladesh. This also supports Ahmed's finding mentioned above.

Another study by Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Service (RDRS) finds underage<sup>2</sup> of wife for marriage, complaints of the husband's family members to the husband against the wife, physical and sexual incapability of spouses, dowry, mistrust related to marital relationships between spouses, and economic incapability of husband to be some of the significant reasons of divorce (RDRS, 1990). Thus, the study finds age, quality of marital relations and physical and economic factors causally related to divorce.

Bhuiya et al (2005) in a study of divorced, abandoned and widowed women in a rural area of Matlab, Bangladesh, find second marriage and desertation by husband, non-fulfillment of the claim for dowries, physical and sexual abuses of the wives as the prevalent reasons for the marital disruption of the rural women (Bhuiya, Chowdhury, Momen, & Khatun, 2005 ). Their study shows that divorced women faced lack of social support at the time of marriage termination and financial inability in their post-divorce life. Divorced women's lack of sources of regular income to support themselves and their children, heavy dependence on their parents and brothers, total responsibility for rearing the children, feeling of being guardian less and support-less, public ridicule, and insecurity and difficulty in the marriage of their grown up daughters were found to be the main problems faced by divorced women in their post divorce life. Thus, the study reveals that divorce causes severe economic, social and psychological consequences for women in Bangladesh, as it does for women elsewhere in the world.

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<sup>2</sup> The majority of divorces took place at first marriage when the girl was 8-13 years old.

### **1.3.2. Components of Divorce:**

In Bangladesh, the conditions of divorce depend on several components, such as the delegation of power of divorce to the wife, dower, maintenance of children, marriage registration etc. Rahman's study (1996) of the concept of and opinions about dower, dowry and marriage registration among middle class families in Dhaka city shows that a majority of the middle class families had adequate knowledge about dower (Rahman, 1996). Many of them had opinions against the dowry system, but agreed to accept dower. Some of the married women also had adequate knowledge about marriage registration. Rahman's study indicates an increasing consciousness among middle class people about marriage.

Another study by Rahman (1997) on marriage, separation and divorce among middle class families in Dhaka city finds that as a result of modernization, increased social consciousness and education, the age gap between bride and groom was decreasing. A major finding of her study is that most of the respondents considered remarriage after divorce essential and acceptable due to the economic conditions of women (Rahman, 1997). She also suggests some factors to be considered for the establishment a peaceful conjugal life such as age at marriage, age gap between spouses, social consistency between spouses, mutual understanding between spouses, individual patience and, significantly, financial solvency. Thus, both studies done by Rahman (1996, 1997) reveal that urban settings and class matter in the level of knowledge and consciousness about marital life.

Sultana (2004), in a study of polygamy and divorce in rural Bangladesh based on 360 case studies collected from 16 study villages, finds gender biased polygamy and divorce practice prevalent in Bangladesh. According to her study, women's lack of awareness about the legal procedure of divorce, deprivation of local administrative support at divorce, various illegal processes like holding a second marriage without the permission of the first wife, divorce without paying any alimony, and verbal divorce without following legal procedures, is common in Bangladesh. She finds the following main features related to divorce- gender biased and conflicting laws and regulations, gender biases in religious law and customs, lack of gender sensitive law reforms to deal with changes over time, lack of implementation and enforcement of existing laws, limited access to justice due to unaffordability and lengthy period of legal procedure, patriarchal attitudes and lack of gender awareness and sensitivity in the society as a whole, misinterpretations of religion by local elites and religious groups

causing socio-legal gaps in the practice of polygamy and divorce in rural Bangladesh (Sultana, 2004). Her findings show that people in rural Bangladesh follow social customs rather than concentrating on legal options for the practice of polygamy and divorce. Thus, the study shows a clear contrast with the findings of the previous studies done by Rahman (1996, 1997). It is important to note that whereas Rahman's studies show a rise in consciousness on marital relationships and general knowledge of marriage related legal procedures of urban women, Sultana's study finds that a lack of awareness and knowledge of marital and legal procedures make rural women's life even more vulnerable in marriage. Therefore, their studies indicate a rural-urban divide in quality of marital relationships and knowledge about marriage related rights.

### **1.3.3. Initiatives to and Consequences of Divorce:**

Jesmin & Salway (2000), in a study of urban slum areas in Dhaka city, suggest that marital breakdown is relatively more common among urban people than in rural areas, and that it might be increasing. According to them, reduced social control against divorce and weaker familial ties because of increased female labour participation have given more freedom to women. Consequently women are more likely to be able to escape out of domestic violence by rejecting unfavorable marital ties or re-partnering (Jesmin & Salway, 2000). At the same time, this study found that women appeared to be suffering under the increasingly unstable and uncertain nature of marriages. Hence, on the one hand, separation from kin and familial ties gives urban slum women more freedom to decide marriage dissolution and re-partnering, on the other hand, the nature of marriage among urban slum dwellers is increasingly unstable.

Ahmed (2001) argues that divorce is more common among rich and middle class, though it is not absent among poor. However, divorce is easier for poor because of the lack of large dowry and dower payments at the time of marriage. He also finds that instead of actual divorce, in most cases permanent or long separation is preferred (S. Ahmed, 2001). At the same time, divorce tends to disgrace the divorced women and their family, and children often become a burden if women cannot marry again. Whereas the previous study done by Jesmin and Salway (2000) finds a rural-urban difference in the rate of divorce, this study finds a class difference in divorce.

Kafi (1982), in his research on divorced, separated, abandoned and deserted women from eleven districts in Bangladesh, finds that 89 percent of divorces were initiated by husbands. It is noticeable that men were initiating divorce more often than women, as three decades later, Ahmed (2007), in his recent study on the psycho-social and economic conditions of divorced women in Dhaka city, has found that the majority of the divorces are initiated by women (N. Ahmed, 2007). Most of them claimed not to have been influenced by others in their choice of divorce, and almost 97 percent of the divorced women had got the delegated power of divorce from their husband at the time of marriage. Nonetheless, among the informants of his study, the social situation of divorced women was not good. That is, 63.5 percent of them felt that they were the subjects of conversation of others, whereas only 31.5 percent never thought that their social status had suffered due to the divorce. 66.5 percent of the divorced women suffered from anxiety and insomnia, 73.5 percent of them had social dysfunction problems, and 66 percent of them had severe depression (N. Ahmed, 2007). The study also shows that the majority of the divorced women were not economically well off and had not received maintenance during the transitional / trial period. Many of them deferred dower and maintenance for their children from their spouses. Thus, the above studies show a change in the initiation of divorce over times, where Kafi in 1982 found that men initiated divorce most frequently; Ahmed in 2007 finds that women initiate divorce most frequently.

The findings of the above studies of Bangladesh can be summed up in the following way: Demographic factors like age and fertility, and socio-economic factors like education of spouses, occupation, class, and location of residence, influence the rate of divorce in Bangladesh. Over the last decades the gender of the person initiating divorce has also been changed drastically. Together, this indicates a significant transformation in the divorce behaviour in Bangladesh.

#### **1.4. Gap Identified:**

The existing studies on divorce in Bangladesh reviewed above reveal the following gaps:

- Even though the previous studies find changes of gender in divorce initiation, they do not explain why and how it is changing. What are the reasons behind these changes? The studies lack any reliable explanation of these changes. My research focuses on

women's own divorce narratives in order to explore their own perception and reasoning behind initiating their divorce.

- Divorce has been studied in Bangladesh mainly from two perspectives: from the legal perspective, and in terms of its demographic and socio-economic factors. Very few studies focus on consequences of divorce for women. My research attempts to investigate the consequences of divorce for women, experienced by themselves.
- Almost all the literature posits women as the victims of divorce, and thus ignores the perspective of women as actors in their own life. Even though the atmosphere surrounding divorce in the context of Bangladesh is detrimental to women, they may still act as agents in their own life when getting divorced. This perspective is not covered in the existing literature. There is a missing link between the findings of the previous studies that find that women now initiate the majority of the divorces, while at the same time the presence of severe consequences of divorce for women is established. If they are so vulnerable in divorce, why do they still initiate divorce more often than men? What are the related factors that lead them to initiate divorce? This question naturally leads to the further question that since women are initiating divorce more often than men, does this indicate that they achieve a better life by so doing? My study attempts to investigate these questions not addressed by the previous studies, and thus attempts to bridge the gaps between the findings of the previous studies.

Therefore, in order to explore the above stated questions, the main objective of my study is:

- To explore how middle class women who have initiated their divorce are perceived by themselves and their social surroundings in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

The specific objectives of the study are:

- To explore the reasons behind divorce initiated by middle class women in Dhaka.
- To explore how middle class women's changing gender roles influence them in their own divorce.
- To explore post divorce conditions of middle class divorced women in Dhaka.
- To explore the negotiations between middle class women initiating their divorce and the existing patriarchal marital structures in the light of social change or modernity in urban Bangladesh.



## **Chapter-2: Context**

### **2. Introduction:**

To understand the divorce attitudes of middle class women in urban Bangladesh, it is important to analyse the context in which the divorces take place. The existing gender relations are important to know in this regard. Therefore, the present chapter provides the cultural, socio-economic and legal context of Bangladesh in relation to women's status. It reflects the cultural, socio-economic and legal positions within which women's lives are regulated. It also discusses women's status in the most significant part of their life, during marriage. The chapter also includes the changes and developments that have occurred in women's position in Bangladesh over the decades, including socio-economic and legal status.

### **2.1. Gender Relations in Bangladesh:**

Bangladesh belongs to what has been described as the belt of *classic patriarchy*<sup>3</sup> characterized by extremely restrictive codes of behaviour for women, including *pardah* or seclusion of women (Kabeer, 1988). This implies that the social practices of Bangladesh are institutionalized within a patrilineal and patrilocal system. Family, kinship and marriage plays a major role in shaping social gender practices.

Reinforcing the social, cultural and religious traditions, the society of Bangladesh promotes a division of social space and difference in behavioural norms between men and women (Sultana, 2004). From childhood, women are raised with an awareness of their inferior position in relation to their brothers (Ameen, 2005). They are taught to develop their sense of modesty and secure physical chastity, because these female virtues are intertwined with the honour of the family (ibid). Daughters are asserted to follow their mothers as to be modest, emotionally soft, homemakers and care givers, whereas sons are asserted to follow their fathers as to be future guardians and therefore, qualifying themselves as providers. Thus, discriminatory gender norm practices for men and women begin at home and govern the rest of their life.

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<sup>3</sup> The term has been taken from Kandiyoti (1988).

The practice of patrilineal descent clearly devaluates women by allowing them no independent social identity (Kabeer, 1988). Children are identified by their father's name. The social arrangements associated with marriage, with stress on village exogamy and patrilocal residence functions in further devaluation of women's autonomy (Kabeer, 1988, p. 101).

Women are also in an inferior position concerning socio-economic status compared to men. Even though they constitute of half of the total population, they are far beyond their male counter parts in relation to education, health and employment opportunities (Sultana & Karim, 2005). Since women are considered as subjects to be protected, the household remains their primary domain, for them to be secured. Therefore, they are assigned the role of home-makers (Begum, 1992). Consequently, there are less stress on formal education for women, which makes them dependent on their male guardians (Ameen, 2005). More over, investments in daughters are limited by the idea of "watering the neighbour's tree; you take all the trouble to nurture the plant, but the fruit goes to someone else"(Kabeer, 1988, p. 101). This implies that there are few benefits from investing in daughters, since by marriage they become the assets of their husband's household.

Culturally, women's sufferings to the benefit of brothers, fathers, and children are cultivated as their glorifying qualities of self-sacrifice (Ameen, 2005). At a structural level, as the male participation dominates the political spheres, the system runs in favour of men, while it subordinates women (ibid). Moreover, religious sensitivity is attached to social practices like sex segregated labour and responsibilities. The institution of *purdah* limits women's physical mobility and make them confined to private spheres (Kabeer, 1988). Thus, "the structural elements of patriarchal control are reinforcing and include aspects of kinship system, political system and religion" (Cain, Khanam, & Nahar, 1979, p. 406).

In marriage, patience and sacrifice are recognized as the primary qualities of women that will turn their fortune in favour of them (Ameen, 2005). Thus, if a woman is modest, patient, and sacrificing during her life, she is considered as a good woman and good wife, and this reflects that her origin is from a good lineage (ibid). In case of failure to maintain these qualities, abuse and beatings become the fate of many women in Bangladesh. Thus, the pre-existing male dominance makes them face domestic violence, polygamy, divorce and subsequent ill-treatments (Sultana, 2004). Particularly in the post-independence period, abuse of and violence against women has increased to an unprecedented scale (Kamal, 2001). According to

the UNFPA 2000 report, 47 percent of Bangladeshi women experience physical assaults by their husbands and other men (UNFPA, 2000; cited in Ameen, 2005, p. 3). In reality, the extent of violence might even larger than this. Furthermore, extensive use of *Fatwas*<sup>4</sup> since the independence, which tend to speak against the interests of women in marriage related issues, has intensified the violence against women (Ameen, 2005).

The practice of the dowry contributes in marital tensions and divorce (Alam, Saha, & Ginneken, 2000). However, it is a recent transformation of marriage culture in Bangladesh, which is negatively related with the fate of Bangladeshi women. Instead of bride price, the practice of dowry emerged in urban areas of Bangladesh<sup>5</sup> and particularly among wealthy families in order to get a desirable groom for their daughters (Lindenbaum, 1981). While this practice started among wealthier people in the 1950s, it was adopted in Bangladesh massively across classes over during the 1960s and 1970s in the face of the economic crisis at the time. Currently, the educated class does not practice dowry very strictly, and they tend to call it gifts for the groom rather than dowry. To many extents, the practice of dowry among educated and the middle class is promoted with the intention to please their daughter's in-laws and thus securing their daughter's honour and position among their in-laws. It has become optional and natural to the extent that lack of dowry related violence has increased to a severe scale.

There is no big difference in the gender norms for rural and urban women (Ameen, 2005). However, it is generally argued that women's education, employment, and fertility, and the social processes associated with it, affect the status of women. The process of economic modernization, urbanization and the related migration has also had a great social impact on the urban people of Bangladesh (Afsar, 2000). The institution of *pardah* is also not as strong among urban women as it is among rural women (Begum, 1992). Moreover, the higher rates of education among urban women contribute to change their social roles, attitudes, and aspirations. Thus, the urban people of Bangladesh are also gradually embracing external knowledge and value systems; thereby accelerating the changes in the social norms towards western culture (A. U. Ahmed, 1986a). Therefore, the urban culture is not highly traditional. While increased education brings mental transformation of by empowering the individuals

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<sup>4</sup> Fatwas are religious verdicts pronounced by a priest.

<sup>5</sup> Bride price is the gift or money provided by the groom's family to bride's family before, while now it is paid by the bride's family to grooms family in the name of dowry, demand or gift of the grooms.

with information, consciousness, capabilities and confidence; labour force participation brings them out of the stereotype traditional roles (Afsar, 2000). According to Salma Khan<sup>6</sup>, Bangladesh is passing through a social transformation, which is related to the rise of divorce. Particularly, Dhaka the center of education, urbanization and economic opportunity, and the destination of an extreme internal migration, represents a different environment for its inhabitants. To her, the emergence of Dhaka as a mega city has created a culture of anonymity, which eases the stigma of divorce for both men and women and increases the tendency of divorce. She thinks that big changes have also occurred within the families' perceptions at their female members, which makes it easier for them to move out of abusive marriages.

## **2.2. Legal Status of Women in Bangladesh:**

Both secular laws and *Shariah*<sup>7</sup> laws are present in the regulation of women's lives in Bangladesh. This, in many cases, creates contradictions and confusions between secular laws and *Shariah* laws. Paradoxes emerge, particularly in regard to women's status. Whereas the secular principles of the constitution are compatible with the idea of women's emancipation, the Islamic *Shariah* principles are institutionalised by the notion of *pardah* or seclusion of women (Kabeer, 1988). After the independence of Bangladesh, the constitution of the Democratic Republic of Bangladesh was formulated with the urge of social and legal emancipation of women from the emotional consideration about the female war victims of the liberation war, which was secular in its nature (Monsoor, 1999). The statutory law recognises the equal rights, opportunities and participations of women in all spheres of public life. It guarantees that "the state shall not discriminate against any citizen on the grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth" (Khan, 2001, p. 70). But the civil law covers only the public aspects of women's life. As, it is already stated that the legal status of women is determined by both secular statutory laws and *Shariah* based personal laws. In reality, it is the personal laws that regulate the lives of women in Bangladesh. The Muslim Family law of Bangladesh have been formulated following the Hanafi<sup>8</sup> school (Kamal, 2001). The

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<sup>6</sup> Salma Khan, a prominent women's rights activist at the national level and human rights practitioner at the international level, now the president of Women for Women: A Research and Study Group-pioneering women's Organization of Bangladesh established in 1973. I was privileged to get an interview with her during my fieldwork in September 2, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> *Shariah* is the code of conduct according to the religious law of Islam.

<sup>8</sup> Muslims are broadly divided in two sections- Sunni and Shia. The Sunnis follow one of the four different schools of law, the Hanafi School that most Muslims in the Asian subcontinent adhere.

development of the Muslim Family Law in South Asia can be seen as the codification and modification of Islamic customary rules and practices along with the Quranic explanations. The Muslim Family Law Ordinance (MFLO) of 1961 has been considered as a significant family law reform in Pakistan in the attempts to protect individual women's civil rights (Monsoor, 1999). However, despite the attempt to improve the rights of women by the MFLO of 1961, it was still discriminatory against women in many personal matters. The Family laws now implemented in Bangladesh have adapted the MFLO of Pakistan<sup>9</sup> of 1961 (Monsoor, 1999). Even though in the post-independence period, equal fundamental rights to every citizen were guaranteed by the constitution, the discriminatory Family Laws remained intact (Kamal, 2001).

The personal laws of Bangladesh incorporate the law for all the major religions present in Bangladesh: Islam, Hinduism, Christianity and Buddhism. For the purpose of this study, I limit my discussion on the Muslim Personal Laws of Bangladesh. The aspects of Muslim women's lives that are dealt in the Muslim Family Laws are marriage, divorce/dissolution of marriage, maintenance of wife and children, guardianship and child custody, and inheritance. The Muslim Family Laws, with the religious and customary practices, regulate women's lives by discriminating against them and denying them their equal rights and dignity within marriage (Kamal, 2001). One of many discriminatory examples is that according to the Muslim Personal Law, men enjoy the right to marry women from a different religion, whereas Muslim women do not have the right to marry men from different religions (Khan, 2001). In so doing, her marriage would be considered as illegal and the offspring as illegitimate, and she will be deprived of her rights of dower and inheritance and also her religious identity. In the case of a man, his marriage would be considered as irregular but not illegitimate and his offspring will be legitimate. Moreover, the practice of polygamy is permitted to men under the Muslim Family Law of Bangladesh, while women are not permitted to practice polygamy. The devaluation of women is played out in almost every sphere in marriage. According to the MFLO of 1961, the registration of marriage is compulsory, while the registration of divorce has not been made as compulsory in the Muslim Family Law of Bangladesh (Monsoor, 1999).

In Bangladesh, there are different types of marriage dissolution: *Talaq*, *Khula* and *Talaq-e-tafweed*. While *Talaq* refers to the unilateral right of divorce of the husband, *Khula* refers to

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<sup>9</sup> Bangladesh was part of United Pakistan, known as East Pakistan and liberated in 1971 from United Pakistan.

the agreement between both parties to dissolve the marriage by the wife's foregoing of dower, and *Talaq-e-tafweed* refers to the complementary right of divorce of the wife delegated by the husband<sup>10</sup>. Thus, men enjoy the unilateral right to divorce, whereas women have the delegated right to divorce provided by the husband. In the MFLO of 1961, women are provided with the delegated right to divorce in the form of *Kabinnama*<sup>11</sup>, itself which is benefiting the women in exercising their right to divorce (Monsoor, 1999).

The dissolution of marriage by either party can be initiated by both judiciary and non-judiciary procedures (Monsoor, 1999). For non-judiciary procedures, men who desire *Talaq* have to notify to the arbitration council in written form about the decision of divorce and also provide a copy to the wife (N. Ahmed, 2007). Divorce will not be effective until ninety days (*Iddat*) after the day of providing the divorce notice. Within this period an arbitration council will try to arrange reconciliation between both parties. If the reconciliation process is unsuccessful, after the *Iddat* period, divorce will be effective. But if the wife is pregnant by the end of the *Iddat* period, divorce will not be effective during the pregnancy period. Women can also go for a non-judiciary process by initiating *Khula* or *Talaq-e-tafweed*. Under the Muslim Marriage Dissolution Act of 1939, women can seek divorce through a court intervention on any ground prescribed in the Act (N. Ahmed, 2007).

The MFLO of 1961 includes the clause of Dower (*Mohorana*), which is given to the bride by the groom's family and is considered as a kind of security for the bride (Khan, 2001). Dower can usually be paid in two parts, as prompt and deferred (ibid). The prompt part of dower has to be paid before consummating the marriage. The deferred part of dower is payable in the face of the dissolution of the marriage either by divorce or by the death of the husband. But if the wife desires, she can pardon her husband from paying dower. The clause of dower mentioned in the MFLO of 1961 has remained the same law in Bangladesh<sup>12</sup>. But there is an increased tendency recently that instead of *Talaq*, men are more likely to prefer *Khula*. This is in order to be free from the responsibility of paying deferred dower to the wife. Consequently, women are deprived of the right to get dower (Monsoor, 1999).

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<sup>10</sup> For details, see Monsoor (1999).

<sup>11</sup> The marriage contract form.

<sup>12</sup> For details, see Monsoor (1999).

Concerning the issue of maintenance, women are provided the lawful right to maintenance from their husbands during marriage and also after the dissolution of marriage. But the law of maintenance in Bangladesh creates a confusion in the implementation due to the amalgam of codified law, local traditions and traditional Muslim laws (Monsoor, 1999). According to the Muslim Personal Law, in case of divorce, the husband is bound to provide maintenance costs to the wife and children during *Iddat* and until the wife remarries (Khan, 2001). In practice, women have little prospects to receive maintenance after divorce. Moreover, women are devaluated as a mother by the law, as the mother is never entitled legal guardianship of the children (ibid). Women are considered as caretakers and the custodians of their children only. In case of divorce, mother can keep the sons until they are seven years old and daughters until they reach puberty.

On the issue of inheritance rights, women are discriminated by the law in Bangladesh mainly because of the religious restrictions. Legally, women get an unequal share, that is, half of her brother's share (Zaman, 1999). Moreover, in practice, women face a double discrimination, since in the name of local custom and culture, married daughters are expected to give up their share to their brothers in order to secure the support of his father's/brother's house after marriage (ibid). Therefore, women are discriminated economically by legal and cultural sanctions and remain economically dependent and vulnerable all through their lives. As formulated by Kamal, "women are captives of a complicated system made of laws, customary practices and beliefs" (Kamal, 2001, p. 49).

## **2.3. Transitions in the legal status of women in**

### **Bangladesh:**

In the post-independence period, many family law reforms have been enacted aiming to enhance the legal status of women in Bangladesh (Monsoor, 1999). Even though the personal law system has failed to make any big reforms, there are many changes in the general law regarding marriage and divorce, violence against women, dowry, cruelty, the establishment of family courts, and so on<sup>13</sup>. Many of these legal mechanisms have been devised in order to

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<sup>13</sup>*Dowry Prohibition Act, 1980, prohibition for cruelty to women by the Cruelty to Women (Deterrent Punishment) Ordinance, 1983, the Family Courts Ordinance, 1985, the Muslim Marriage and Divorces (Registration) Act, 1974, Child Marriage Restraint (Amendment) Ordinance, 1984, the Dissolution of Muslim Marriages (Amendment) Ordinance, 1986, the Dowry Prohibition (Amendment) Ordinance of 1982, 1984 and 1986, the Cruelty to Women (Deterrent Punishment) (Amendment) Act, 1988, the Muslim Family Laws*

provide women with equal rights (Mansoor, 1999). *The Muslim Marriages and Divorces (Registration) Act* of 1974 and 1975 are good examples in this regard. Whereas the Muslim Family Law Ordinance of 1961 provided women with the right to divorce, the right delegated by the husband at the time of marriage, the codification of *Muslim Marriages and Divorces (Registration) Act* of 1974 and 1975 have simplified the process of marriage and divorce; thus it has eased the opportunity for women to exercise their rights in terms of marriage and divorce (Kamal, 2001). Furthermore, *the Dowry Prohibition Act* of 1980 and *the Dowry (Amendment) Ordinance* of 1982, 1985 made the practice of dowry a punishable offence in order to protect women from dowry related violence. Another initiative, *Cruelty to women (Deterrent Punishment) Act* of 1983 and *Cruelty to Women (amend) Ordinance* of 1988 was enacted in order to combat violence against women. After a long period of mobilization, *the Family Court Ordinance* of 1985 and *the Family Court (amendment) Ordinance* of 1989 was a significant step in the legal reforms of women's status (Monsoor, 1999). Even though many of these legal initiatives have not been as successful as expected because of the social and cultural obstacles and bureaucratic loopholes, they have opened up the legal ground for women to battle for their rights, which was even unimaginable to them before. Even though in reality, legislative mechanisms cannot operate outside the patriarchal interpretation of the laws, these laws have provided a legal avenue to the women's rights and protection in Bangladesh. If women face challenges regarding the fulfillment of their rights, at least they can seek for legal assistance.

## **2.4. Recent Socio-Economic Changes in**

### **Bangladesh:**

Aside the legal reforms experiencing women's rights, over the past decades Bangladesh has experienced a socio-economic transformation that has resulted in the alteration of the rigid patriarchal attitudes towards women. As a result of this modification of the *classic patriarchy*, now significant numbers of women are becoming visible as actors in their own life instead of merely remaining the subjects of social practices in Bangladesh. Since the beginning of the International Conference on Women (1975), Bangladesh has expressed its solidarity with the worldwide movement of women's advancement, and it has ratified the Convention on the

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*(Amendment) Ordinances* of 1982, 1985 and 1986, *the Muslim Marriages and Divorces (Registration) (Amendment) Ordinance*, 1982 and *the Family Courts (Amendment) Act*, 1989, *the Repression Against Women & Children (Special Enactment) Act* of 1995.



Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (with some reservations to some of its clauses) to protect women from discrimination (WB, 2008). Bangladesh is one of the few countries which have a separate Ministry of Women's Affairs, established in 1978 and at the national level, in order to enhance gender equality National Council for Women's Development (NCWD) was established in 1995 (ADB, 2001). Moreover, in order to integrate women into the broader policy and plan framework, several noteworthy efforts have been made including: (1) formulation of the fifth Five- year Plan (1997-2001); (2) declaration of the National Policy for Advancement of Women in 1997; and (3) adoption of the National Action Plan (NAP) for Advancement of Women in 1997: implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action (PFA)<sup>14</sup> (ibid). Furthermore, along with NGO driven micro credit programs and government policies of health, family planning and education, the export oriented garments industrialization has brought change in the traditional gender roles since the 1980s. This has resulted in large scale migration of informal labour and dramatic demographic changes like decline in the fertility rate, increase in age at marriage and changing household structures (WB, 2008). An increased number of educated women's involvement in formal employment as teachers, lawyers, journalists, and government employees has further contributed to the transformation of the traditional values and gender roles among Bangladeshi women (Dil, 1985). One of the successful government policies is the increase in female literacy. The literacy rate of women has increased from 54.3% in 1995 to 67.15% in 2007 (BBS, 2008). All these developments have been raising the consciousness among women of their gender identity. The existence of many progressive women's organizations has also represented an important break with past efforts to change women's lives by the transformation of individual consciousness (Kabeer, 1991). Notwithstanding all the barriers of *purdah* and patriarchy, women's perception of their political role has also been changing (ibid). Whereas a few decades ago there was no question of women's rights and women's liberation, now middle and upper class women are beginning to demand to have a say in what to study, whether to work, and when or whom to get married to. Identity and self-esteem building, having voice at home and achieving dignity are becoming more important (Sultana & Karim, 2005). Middle and upper-middle class urban women find significantly more avenues for changing their traditional roles than do poor, rural women (ibid).

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<sup>14</sup> For details, see ADB (2001)

## Chapter-3: Theoretical framework

### 3. Introduction:

“Theory consists of plausible relationships produced among concepts and sets of concepts” (Strauss & Corbin, 1994,p.278, in Silvermann, 2010, p.109). In qualitative research, these sets of concepts provide “both a framework for critically understanding phenomena and a basis for considering how what is unknown might be organized” (Silvermann, 2010, p. 48). Thus the use of theories as analytical tools helps to shape the structure of qualitative research. Therefore, I intend to use some sets of concepts as analytical tools in order to develop a critical understanding of my research. In this chapter, I first introduce the theoretical concepts, I plan to use in my research and then elaborate them as far as necessary for the purpose of this study. Finally, I discuss how these concepts can be useful in the analysis of my research. I use Kandiyoti’s concept of *patriarchal bargaining*, Kabeer’s concept of *empowerment* and Giddens’ concept of *effect of modernity on self-identity and intimate relationships* as analytical tools of this study.

### 3.1. Patriarchal Bargaining:

Deniz Kandiyoti (1988) develops the concept of *patriarchal bargaining* and defines it as the way that “women strategize within a set of concrete constraints”, which may vary from class to class, caste to caste and ethnicity to ethnicity (Kandiyoti, 1988, p. 275). Kandiyoti argues that these patriarchal bargaining are also distinct across geographical locations. Thus, she specifies two types of *patriarchal bargaining*. One is prevalent in the Sub-Saharan Africa in the form of resistance and refusal of their male counterpart in oppressive situations. The second is the manipulation and subservience of women prevalent in the “patriarchal belt”, by which women maximize their security. Kandiyoti limits her focus of patriarchal bargaining to societies, which she considers, represent as *classic patriarchy*, prevalent in the geographical areas of North Africa, the Muslim Middle East (including Turkey, Pakistan and Iran), and South and East Asia (specially India and China).

For the purpose of this study, I only focus on Kandiyoti’s articulation on the *classic patriarchy* as prevalent in the *patriarchal belt*, which Bangladesh belongs to. According to Kabeer, the key mechanisms of the patriarchy to maintain the social control of men over

women are the organization of family, kinship and marriage (Kabeer, 1988). Kandiyoti (1988) distinguishes classic patriarchy as characterized by dominant “patrilocal and patrilineal systems”.<sup>15</sup> This patrilocal and patrilineal system posits women in subordination to men. Women’s physical separation from their natal family after their marriage results in losing the control over their father’s patrimony (Kandiyoti, 1988, p. 279). A woman as a young bride enters her husband’s household as an effectively dispossessed and subordinate individual and gains power in new place by producing male offspring. Over time, they adopt and internalize the norms of patriarchy and become experts of negotiating their life.

Kandiyoti (1988) further goes on that the reproduction of classic patriarchy continues in the operations of the patrilocally extended household, in which women are subordinate to her husbands and all senior members of the family (Kandiyoti, 1988, p. 278).

According to Kandiyoti, this subordination is transient by nature and women appropriate it by the future possibilities of control and authority over others by virtue of their seniority. Thus it fluctuates in a cyclical way. Kandiyoti specifies manipulation of the affection as the coping mechanism of patriarchal bargaining in classic patriarchy. According to Kandiyoti, these coping mechanisms may not have a short term significant role on the structural level; women obtain tactics in negotiating with patriarchy and maximize their life choices (Kandiyoti, 1988, p. 280). At the same time, in the way of negotiating with patriarchy, women actively reproduce their own subordination in the label of their status concern (Kandiyoti, 1988, p. 280). Thus with the strategy of tolerance, negotiation and adoption, women maximize their opportunity. This relates to Kabeer’s concept of “effective” and “transformative” agency, which I present later.

Kandiyoti (1988) further argues, “patriarchal bargains are not timeless or immutable entities, but are susceptible to historical transformations that open up new areas of struggle and renegotiation of the relation between genders” (Kandiyoti, 1988, p. 275). Decrease of the material and ideological institution of the traditional practices has a significant affect in undermining the normative structure of these patriarchal bargains (Kandiyoti, 1988). She exemplifies that despite classic patriarchy’s prevailing notion of “male breadwinner and

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<sup>15</sup> Patrilocal system indicates the social practice where women leave their father’s house at marriage breaking relationship with their natal family and replace themselves in their in-laws for rest of their life and patrilineal system indicates the social practice of biological paternity as the basis of assigning children.

domesticated housewife” classic patriarchy is going through alterations (Kandiyoti, 1988, p. 284). She states that “the necessity of every household members’ contribution to the survival, has turned men’s role of economic protection of women into myth” (Kandiyoti, 1988, p. 282). Thus, Kandiyoti identifies the impacts of market forces and capital penetration as some of the significant driving forces in the alteration of gender relations in classic patriarchy (p. 281). In Bangladeshi society, the normative order of patriarchy has taken a more paradoxical form, where “male authority has a material base while male responsibility is normatively controlled” (Cain, et al., 1979, p. 410).

I use Kandiyoti’s (1988) concept of *patriarchal bargaining* as an analytical tool of analysis when seeking to understand the way women strategize in the critical moment of divorce in a male dominated patrilineal context of Bangladesh. The concept of *patriarchal bargaining* is particularly useful for my research because Kandiyoti’s characterization of *classic patriarchy* provides a standard of women’s positions from, which they negotiate their lives. Bangladesh is a classical patriarchal society. Patriarchal norms and values define the traditional society of Bangladesh with female seclusion, subservience subjugation and segregation (Mahtab, 2007). On the other hand, after the emergence of independent Bangladesh, the techno-economic development is contributing to a social transformation that includes women’s life and leads to the liberalization of many patriarchal rules of the society. Thus, women’s lives are under transition from traditionalism to modernity. It is important to understand how the urban middle class women respond to modernization from their position under the umbrella of patriarchal subordination, to explore how they actively engage themselves in *patriarchal bargaining* and how they strategize in their negotiations regarding their abusive marriages and divorces in an attempt to achieve a better life. Kandiyoti’s concept of *classic patriarchy* is very useful for my research and it helps me to investigate how women in unhappy marriages act and react under this changing patriarchal regime and how they strategize among possible choices in decisions concerning their divorce when they are negotiating from a subordinate position. I consider women’s way of rationalizing their prospect of marriage and divorce and their initiatives to achieve a better life as *patriarchal bargaining* in my research. This will help to understand the reasons for and nature of the increased rate of divorce initiated by women in contemporary Bangladesh. Kandiyoti’s concept of *alteration of classic patriarchy* is very relevant for ongoing situation in Bangladesh and therefore, facilitates an analysis of the changing gender roles of urban middle class women in Bangladesh, through which they seek to increase their life choices by initiating divorce. By seeking divorce, do women

achieve a better life? How do women's changing gender roles influence their life? Exploring answers to these questions is the main objective of my research. Therefore, Kabeer's concept of *empowerment* is evidently useful as an analytical perspective in this work, as will be discussed below.

### **3.2. Empowerment:**

According to Kabeer, the concept of *empowerment* "refers to the processes by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability" (Kabeer, 2005, p. 13). Kabeer argues that to be empowered, one has to be disempowered in the first place (Kabeer, 1999a, p. 2). Therefore, by *empowerment*, she indicates *a process of change* (Kabeer, 2005). Kabeer identifies a number of criteria as qualifiers of empowerment. For instance, choice necessarily implies "the possibility of alternatives"- the ability to have chosen otherwise (Kabeer, 2005, p. 14).

Kabeer distinguishes life choices into two categories, "first- and second-order choices", based on their significance in one's life, "where the former are those strategic life choices which are critical for people to live the lives they want (such as choice of livelihood, whether and who to marry, whether to have children, etc.)" (Kabeer, 1999a, p. 437). These strategic life choices, Kabeer argues, have greater consequences than second-order choices, which are important for the quality of one's life but do not constitute its defining parameters. In connection with empowerment she focuses on strategic life choices. Kabeer sees empowerment as a process in which three dimensions, *resources*, *agency* and *achievements* interact in a cyclical way. That is, *resources* facilitate the expansion of *agency*, which brings about *achievements*. Kabeer's concept of *resources* not only implies economic resources, but also "human and social resources which serve to enhance the ability to exercise choice"(Kabeer, 1999b, p. 437). According to Kabeer, these *resources* are gained "through a multiplicity of social relationships conducted in the various institutional domains which make up a society (such as family, market, community)", which actually "reflect the rules and norms which govern distribution and exchange in different institutional arenas" (Kabeer, 1999b, p. 437).

By the second dimension of empowerment, *agency*, Kabeer refers to "the ability to define one's goals and act upon them"(Kabeer, 1999b, p. 438). To Kabeer, agency does not simply

imply observable action; “it also encompasses the meaning, motivation and purpose which individuals bring to their activity, their sense of agency, or the power within” (Kabeer, 1999b, p. 438). She further broadens the meaning of agency by describing it as a “form of bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance as well as more intangible, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis which can be exercised by individuals as well as by collectivities” (Kabeer, 1999b, p. 438). Kabeer makes a distinction between agency as *passive forms of agency* (action taken when there is little choice) and *active agency* (purposeful behaviour). Another distinction is between *effective agency* and *transformative agency* (Kabeer, 2005). *Effective agency* implies “greater efficiency in carrying out one’s given role and responsibilities” and *transformative agency* implies “their ability to act on the restrictive aspects of these roles and responsibilities in order to challenges them” (Kabeer, 2005).

To Kabeer, these two dimensions, *resources* and *agency* together constitute the third dimension of empowerment *achievements/outcomes*, which she defines as “the potential that people have for living the lives they want” (Kabeer, 1999b, p. 438).

Empowerment is considered as a multi-dimensional phenomenon (Malhotra, Schuler, & Boender, 2002, p. 14). It is played out on many levels, such as economic, socio-cultural, familial/interpersonal, legal, political and psychological levels, many of which are also interrelated (ibid). Drawing on many researchers’ work on women’s empowerment, Kabeer argues that it is not only the economic gaining but also women’s sense of their own value that is linked to their achievements (Kabeer, 1999a, p. 35). Kabeer supports Sen’s claim that “what matters for women’s ability to bargain for a better deal within their households and families is their perceived rather than their actual economic contribution” (ibid). Thus Kabeer emphasizes the psychological aspect of empowerment.

As argued earlier, changes are taking place in women’s position and attitudes in Bangladeshi society. Divorce attitudes of women are not exceptional than this. The changes in women’s divorce attitudes are increasingly being visible in Bangladesh. These social changes could be the consequence of women’s access to resources like education and employment, which leads to women achieving empowerment. I believe that the concept of empowerment as an analytical tool provides a concrete avenue to explore the objectives of my research. The concept of empowerment is useful in examining women’s exercising and negotiation of their

agency, depending on the resources available to them and the changes in their lives. I examine women's decisions concerning marriage, and divorce and their experiences and expectations, by using Kabeer's three interrelated dimensions of empowerment- *agency*, *structure* and *achievements*. Women's education (human resources), their opportunity to work (material resources) and their family background and network of friends (social resources) are considered as resources available to the urban middle class women. Considering these resources as an instrument of expanding agency, I explore, to what extent women are able to exercise their power of decision-making, and how they negotiate and come up with better possible outputs in their lives. In the critical moment of marital disruption, to what extent are they able to use their agency and achieve what they want? I explore how education, economic independence and family background and network of friends open opportunities for women in their negotiations of marriage and divorce. Finally, I use Kabeer's concept of *effective agency* and *transformative agency* to explore whether those women who initiated divorce to escape out of their abusive marriages obtain a better life or not as result. While changes are a reality in women's lives in Bangladesh in every sphere including personal relationships, these changes are not so easy for women themselves. According to Kabeer, people's ability to make strategic life choices depends on institutional structure and cultural values. Hence, ideological norms and values may cause subordination for people (Kabeer, 2005). I explore how these women are faced by cultural and social values while violating these values by initiating divorce.

### **3.3. Effect of Modernity on Self-Identity and Intimate Relationships:**

Along with the above theoretical concepts, I also use Giddens' work on modernity and its effect on self-identity, intimacy and personal relationship as an analytical tool. Giddens has developed a huge and broad ranged articulation on the process of modernity through his series of work. But for the purpose of this study, I focus on his analysis of modernity transforms self-identity, intimacy and personal relationships.

Giddens presents a portrait of modern individuals and how they enter into relationships in modern time. According to Giddens (1991), to the individuals of the modern age, the search of self-identity has become the focus of attention, inspired by the western individualism. The

cultivation of individual potentiality is at the heart of this individualism (Giddens, 1991). Thus the idea of individual self-fulfilment and growth has become the primary aim of modern individuals. To Giddens, a modern individual's life style is characterized by a plurality of choices because of intense social reflexivity and the importance of strategic life planning (ibid). In modern relationships, individuals choose partners voluntarily among this plurality of possibilities or potentialities.

Giddens brings forth the idea of replacement of romantic love by *pure relationships* or *confluent love*. He defines *confluent love* or *pure relationship* as “a situation where a social relation is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only insofar as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it” (Giddens, 1992, p. 58). To him, the notion of pure relationships primarily exists in sexuality, marriage and friendship (Giddens, 1991). Giddens argues that as traditional relations particularly marriage, developed guided by external factors like social or economic life, *pure relations* in modern times are free floating. Even though some of the traditional characteristics of marriage still persist in a weakened form, “the tendency is towards the eradication of these pre-existing external involvements” (Giddens, 1991, p. 89).

Thus, Giddens argues that the arena of intimacy and family has largely become transferred in modern time. To Giddens (1991), before romantic love was associated with marriage and true love derived from the idea that once it is found, it is forever. For *confluent love relations*, erotic needs have become a fundamental element. Intimacy, trust and commitment are required to make such relationships stand a chance of lasting. The relation between intimacy and commitment is that intimacy develops through the commitment of the giving and taking of emotional support to each other (1991). Therefore, there is a continuous negotiation in the development of intimacy in a *pure relation* or *confluent love*.

Like modernity, the *pure love relationship* along with its potential of a better life carries risks for individuals. By this, Giddens indicates that *pure relationship* lacks ontological security. To Giddens, ‘ontological security’ is “the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action” (Giddens, 1990). To Giddens (1991), even though all personal relations are tensionful and rewarding, the *pure relation* in modern time is kind of fragile and



full of anxiety since this relation is very much relation oriented and exist so far it provides satisfaction. That is, *pure relationship* only exists as long as it serves it's own sake and might dissolve if any thing goes wrong with the relation.

The changing features of intimacy and personal relationships in the process of modernity as a theoretical tool provides my research with the necessary space to consider the contextual reality of women's changing attitudes towards divorce in Bangladeshi society. Kandiyoti (1988) and Giddens (1992) develop two different sets of values and behaviours prevalent in classic patriarchy and modern society. Both dimensions are present in Bangladeshi society. Therefore, combined with Kandiyoti's *classic patriarchy*, Giddens' characterization of modern relationships provides my research with a broad ground to explore divergent forms of values and perceptions of marriage and divorce. This sheds lights on women's traditional and/or modern values under the influence of tradition and modernity in Bangladeshi society. At the same time the concept of empowerment, combined with Giddens' modern relationships, helps to examine the rationale of women's dissolving of abusive marriages and their choice to divorce.

## **Chapter-4: Methodology**

### **4. Introduction:**

The overall methodology of the study is qualitative semi-structured interviewing. A qualitative semi-structured interview is neither fully open-ended nor strictly structured questionnaire (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), which facilitates the researcher to uncover the lived world experienced by the informants. Since divorce is a quite sensitive and private topic, I was concerned to find a way to access the lived experience of the informants as much as possible. As Kvale & Brinkmann note, “a qualitative research interview has a unique potential for obtaining access to and describing the lived everyday world” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 29). Qualitative semi-structured method was therefore, useful for my study as a tool to access the every day experiences of the informants and to bring out the experiences as seen from their own perspectives. In addition to semi-structured interviews, I conducted Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and participant observation. This chapter presents the methodological approaches applied during the fieldwork, getting access to the field site, the background of the informants, challenges and experiences met in the field, my position as a researcher in the field and ethical considerations during fieldwork.

### **4.1. Scope and Site of Study:**

As mentioned earlier, the scope of the study is women initiated divorce among the urban middle class during the ongoing social transition of Bangladesh. My target group for the study was urban middle class divorced women. The reason for choosing the urban middle class women was that this class has seldom been the subject of research in Bangladesh. I chose Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, as my field site, because Dhaka is the major center of development, education and employment. As a result, it has also become the center for the middle classes where they seek to fulfill their needs and aspirations. The dramatic increase in the divorce rate in Dhaka shows the significance of the place as the locus of the study. No other place displays better the social transition of Bangladesh. Moreover, I chose Dhaka as the site of my fieldwork also based on the considerations of my familiarity with the place and thereby easy accessibility to the informants.

## **4.2. Approaching the Field and Sampling Procedure:**

In order to approach the field, first I made a list of contacts useful for my fieldwork. Right after arriving in the field, I started contacting my friends because some of them were suitable as informants. The recruitment of informants was designed as both purposive and snowballing strategies. Purposive sampling is a ‘hand picked’ strategy of selecting informants or participants, which implies to select specific people or events deliberately for research because they are seen as likely to produce the most valuable data (Denscombe, 1998). By snowball sampling, I mean the process of reference from one person to the next for selecting informants. In snowball sampling, each informant is asked to nominate some other informants who would be relevant for the purpose of the research (ibid). Since “snowball technique is completely compatible with purposive sampling” (Denscombe, 1998, p. 18), I combined these two together. Nevertheless, I relied heavily on snowballing. I got in contact with every informant with the help of another informant. Since all of the informants were adult and mature, I did not need to achieve permission from their families or someone else. My cell phone was a great help in the recruitment of informants. Since divorce is a very sensitive issue, I was very careful when contacting the informants. First I talked to them on the cell phone for long periods and tried to give them an impression of the subject matter of my study. My approach was first to talk to them informally about general issues related to the effect of socio-economic development on women and the marriage system of Bangladesh, in a manner of girls chatting. Later I shared my plan to work on a similar sort of topic and asked their consent to participate in interviews. In order to recruit informants, I relied on some of my relatives, particularly concerning one of my FGDs, which was completely driven by the older generation of married women. For another FGD, participants were recruited among the divorced women who participated in my interviews and some other women I came in contact with during fieldwork. There were no specific criteria for recruiting them beyond class, education and the age of the participants.

## **4.3. Participants of the Study:**

This study focuses on female perspectives on divorce. Therefore, the target group for the interviews and FGDs was women both divorced and married and from different generations. The total number of participants for individual interviews and focus group discussions were

twenty-two. I collected eleven divorced women for individual interviews and eleven married women for focus group discussions.

According to the initial plan, the informants for individual interviews were to be women from the age of 20- 35 years. However, due to practical difficulties the scope of age of the informants had to be extended to between 25 to 45 years. The participants of the FGDs were from the age of 25-80 years. The selection of participants from the middle class was based on my classification. Several factors were considered to define the socio-economic class of the informants. Mainly, educational qualification, profession, and participants' father's social positions were considered. Moreover, all the informants were asked to define the class they belong to. Most of the informants of the individual interviews were from a good, educated family background. The fathers of the informants were involved in either business or government jobs, having good social and economic positions. Eight of the informants were from middle class background and three of them from higher-middle class background. They were all well educated, either completed graduation or masters degree and also working women except one. List of the key informants is available in appendix 1.

#### **4.4. Data Collection Methods:**

Data was collected from June to mid-September 2010. I designed my fieldwork as a combination of individual interviews and focus group discussions, participant observation and secondary data collection.

##### **4.4.1. Interviews:**

Before conducting interviews I tried to have several conversations with my participants because I wanted to reduce the distance between the researcher and informant and become close to them. At the same time, I chose in-depth interview approach for the individual interviews, because in-depth interviews provide the most suitable method to provide the insight into things like opinions, feelings, emotions and experiences of a sensitive issue like divorce (Denscombe, 1998), which is endemic to my research. Before conducting interviews, I prepared a semi-structured interview guide (see appendix 2) in order to let the participants develop their ideas and speak more widely on the issues raised in the interview. Finally, my interview setting was more like a story telling process rather than asking questions and

receiving answers, so that the informants of my study didn't feel any interruptions while sharing their experiences. Some interviews were conducted at the informants' working place; while some others were conducted at their home, and one interview was in a restaurant. I recorded all of the interviews with the consent of the informants so that I could transcribe their information accurately later. I conducted another three individual interviews among scholars and activists to obtain their opinion about the study. These interviews have status as background information.

#### **4.4.2. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):**

I have conducted two focus group discussions. One was conducted solely by married women of older generation. Nine participants joined in the first focus group discussion. Another focus group discussion was conducted with a mix of married and divorced participants. They were comparatively younger than the women who participated in the first FGD. There were 6 participants in the second focus group discussion. Three of them were divorced and workingwomen; and another three were married and housewives. I conducted two separate FGD according to age differences so that they could share their views freely without caring about each other's sentiments. During the FGDs, I raised questions or themes for the discussion and my participants discussed the themes in random order. It was noticeable that my participants were more open and interested in the discussions than I expected them to be.

#### **4.4.3. Participant Observation:**

While conducting interviews and FGDs, I employed participant observation in order to capture aspects of the informants, which was not possible to grasp only through interviewing, such as body language, facial expressions and contextual atmosphere. It helped me to uncover subtle data in terms of the personal dynamics of the informants. For instance, I was able to notice one of my informants being silent again and again because of the presence of her children. Because she did not want her children know her reality. Another informant was low voiced occasionally because no one in the neighbourhood knew about her divorce.

#### **4.4.4. Secondary Data Collection:**

Along with individual interviews and focus group discussions, secondary data material was also collected. I collected government documents and literature relevant to the study. This was useful for my understanding of the context of my study. This also helped me where to render my focus in order to produce new knowledge in relation to previous studies.

#### **4.5. My Positions and Roles as a Researcher in the Field:**

I was an “insider” in the field, which supported me in my fieldwork. Being a native and speaking the same language, my “insider” identity elevated me above of the problems of language and cultural understanding that an “outsider” has to confront. In Bangladesh, sex-segregated socialization is still the comfortable practice. My identity as a woman privileged me to access the informants and to make them comfortable in sharing their lives. Also my identity as a student doing higher education abroad increased my prestige in their eyes. They were amicable and welcoming towards me when they came to know that I was studying abroad and researching a topic related to them. I was a little afraid that my childlessness might limit my access to some of the experiences of the informants, for instance their feeling for their children, the role of their children in their marital lives and in the decision-making of divorce. But my identity of being a married woman helped me to overcome this on their part; I was able to open them up and they were comfortable sharing their experiences, also those related to sexuality. My middle class identity helped my informants to relate me as their equal and thereby broke the barrier of asymmetrical power relations. My age was also a big support in my fieldwork. Although the participants of the study were of different ages, most of them were around my age and few of them were a little older than me. I got the privilege that most of them treated me as a woman of their generation. Thus, my overall identity as an insider, female researcher, more importantly a married woman, an educated woman, and also having similar socio-economic background, made my participants open and friendly to me. The informants I interviewed, participated keenly and enthusiastically in my fieldwork, because I think that I was researching aspects that dealt with the reality of their lives, and therefore, they related to this quite strongly.

Along with my interest in getting the stories of the informants, I was not inconsiderate to their emotions. For instance, if they were upset while sharing their memories, I took a break from

formal interviewing and changed the topic on funny things like shopping, gossiping or something like that. Thus, I tried to be empathetic towards their feelings and only went back to my interviews after they had full control of their emotional outbursts and were comfortable to share their experiences. While my insider status helped me a lot during the interviews, it one-way affected my fieldwork. Many divorced women refused to participate in my fieldwork because of my familiarity to them. Moreover, while conducting interviews, I noticed that a few of my participants were less expressive on some issues; for instance, sexual activities or dissatisfaction, which are generally very unusual topics to discuss in the cultural contexts of Bangladesh. Instead of sharing their own stories, they used to ask me “do you understand what I want to mean?” Then I used to employ imagined stories similar to their experiences to make them free about the issues. My participants became responsive to my stories and shared their own stories comfortably after that. Thus I was careful not to force my participants, due to ethical considerations.

## **4.6. Challenges Met in the Field:**

### **4.6.1. Collecting Informants:**

When I started collecting participants for my research, I had a great shock from members of my familiar circle who had experienced divorce. First of all, they were one of my inspirations for setting the topic, since I watched many of them passing through bad times in their marriage. Many of them initiated divorce recently. I had expectations that they would be a big part of my informants. But when they came to know the topic of my research, they were not comfortable. In some cases, they avoided me. But at least they helped me get into contact with other divorced women. Thus, my position as their friend has created the dilemma in my fieldwork. As mentioned, I relied heavily on snowball techniques, so recruiting informants for my research was a very slow and uncertain process. I had to rely on every participant to get in contact with the next participant.

### **4.6.2. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):**

I faced challenges in arranging FGDs. Many of my participants are workingwomen. Therefore, I was in trouble in fixing a place and time suitable for all. Many of the participants

wanted a place close to their house or close to their office. Moreover, some of them demanded it to take place in holidays and some others in weekdays based on their interests. It took more than two months to arrange the FGDs. Finally I succeeded at the very end of my fieldwork.

### **4.6.3. Secondary Data Collection:**

There were also challenges in collecting secondary data material from many government and non-government organizations and libraries. Except some libraries, most are not digitalised. Specifically in government offices it was very frustrating. For instance, in the City Corporation Office, I got undocumented and incomplete statistics of divorce in Dhaka city. They stated that the reasons for that were bureaucratic loopholes. In some other places, absence of photocopy or printing facilities lengthened my data collection since I had to rely on my handwriting to collect data in those cases.

### **4.6.4. Practical Challenges:**

During my fieldwork, I faced by many practical challenges. For instance, after staying in a cold country like Norway for the last few years, it was very difficult for me to be comfortable in the burning summer in Bangladesh. I was struggling with my physical fitness due to summer. Moreover, while conducting my fieldwork, the whole country was getting ready for the holly ‘Ramadan’ (one-month Muslim prayer) and the biggest religious festival ‘Eid-ul-fitr’. Dhaka is a highly populated city. Moreover, since it is the largest city of Bangladesh, comprising all facilities, people from other areas of the country generally gather in Dhaka for shopping before “Eid-ul-fitr”. Naturally the city becomes affected by extreme traffic jams. For me, it was quite impossible to do more than one task or to go more than one place every day. I was worrying whether I would be able to finish my fieldwork in time or not. Along with the extreme traffic jams, the poor transport system burdened me with heavy financial costs to rent a private vehicle every day.



#### **4.6.5. Emotional Dilemmas:**

Divorce is not a pleasant matter in any society. This is also the case in Bangladesh. While conducting interviews with divorced women, I made my efforts to obtain comprehensive interviews in every possible way. During interviews, many of the participants became very upset and started crying. I tried to move them out of this situation. At the same time it had a great effect on me. Their life stories affected me so badly that sometimes I became frustrated. I found that many of the informants unburdened themselves during the sharing of their experiences. Sometimes I felt that I was carrying their pains with me. As a researcher, always my attempt was not to melt into the stories of the participants. But, some times I felt myself so patience less. For me, it was a sense of frequent transitions from a researcher to a human being and again from a human being to a researcher.

#### **4.7. Ethical Considerations:**

Before leaving for fieldwork, the proposal for this study was approved by the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD), the national resource centre servicing the research community. Moreover, a general ethical consideration for social scientific research is attaining the consent of informants and treating the collected information confidentially (Kvale, 1996). My fieldwork approach was fully open in the sense that all the informants were fully informed about the research project. I provided my thesis abstract to them to obtain their consents before conducting interviews. Some of them had a look on the thesis abstract, while many of them relied on the conversation with me and thereby did not bother to see the thesis abstract. I ensured the informants that they could withdraw from the interview whenever they want. To secure the anonymity of the informants, I used fake names for them. I also avoided a thorough description of the data to make it unidentifiable in relation to the informants.

#### **4.8. Data Analysis:**

The first step of the data analysis of the study was transcribing the interviews recorded during fieldwork. The interviews were conducted in the local language but I translated them to English, avoiding the pitfalls of translating from one language into a different one as much as possible. Then I structured the data by eliminating digressions and repetitions, distinguishing

between essential and non-essential parts of the data based on the purpose of the study and the theoretical presuppositions. I also tried to concentrate on rendering the data meaningfully by interpreting from their perspectives through a process of meaning condensation, interpretation and data structuring. By meaning condensation, I indicate compressing longer statements of the participants into briefer statements in which the main sense of what is said by the participants is rephrased in a few words (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Meaning interpretation also provided a new insightful meaning to the data and thereby contributed to produce new knowledge of the topic researched. While treating the data, I faked the names of the informants instead of coding or numbering in order to provide the data a more lived impression as well as anonymity. During data presentation, I also made concept-driven categorizations of the data based on the themes in order to provide a systematically organized structure to the study. Focus group discussions and secondary data were also integrated with the interviews during the data analysis.

## **Chapter-5: Marriage**

### **5. Introduction:**

Marriage is one of the most important institutions in Bangladesh. It plays a vital role in societal relationships. For a Bangladeshi woman, a successful marriage opens up a new life, as it provides her unrestricted freedom from her parents' control. Through marriage, a Bangladeshi woman gains acknowledgement of her adulthood and freedom to act in her life in her own way. But all marriages do not bring successful marital lives for women, and sometimes turn into marital disruptions and divorce. This chapter presents the narratives of the informants' marriage processes. This includes age and education at the time of marriage, economic achievements, decision-making in relation to their marriage, the family's role in their marriage and the structure of their newly gained family. It also includes the husband's qualifications at the time of marriage and the informants' views of a good marriage.

### **5.1. Age at the Time of First Marriage:**

The normal age at marriage in a society depends on various cultural and socio-economic factors. Socio-economic factors such as education, social class, and work status before marriage determine the age at first marriage in Bangladesh. Even though it is common to marry early (during puberty) in rural Bangladesh (S. Ahmed, 2001), recent decades have witnessed a dramatic decline in early marriage (WB, 2008). According to Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (1998), on average, a woman is expected to be married before reaching the age of twenty (ADB, 2001). Two of the informants said that they got married at the age of eighteen, while eight other informants were married at the age from twenty-one to twenty eight. Most of the informants added that it is now more or less common that girls, particularly of middle class, think about finishing their studies before their marriage. Except one informant, they argued that their parents also did not impose any pressure on them to marry before they finished their bachelor degree. They linked their expectations about marriage with their father's educational and social status. To them, education contributes to the social esteem of middle class and the upper middle class. Most of the informants shared the opinion of their family members that they would get married after finishing their Bachelor or Masters Degree.

Niva said,

*“Educated parents want their daughters to get married after finishing their education. I was no exception to this. When I got married I was twenty-four years old and had just finished my master degree. So my family also expected me to get married. The situation is now changing so that many educated women want to get a job first, and then marry.”*

Another informant, Rupa, said, *“I finished my education at the university of Dhaka. I passed my masters in 2001 and I took job in an NGO. Three years after finishing my education and starting a job, I got married.”*

Rupa also related this with the position of her family,

*“My father was a government officer and my mother was a school teacher. All my sisters and brothers are highly educated and well established. All of my family members are socially in honourable positions. So it’s quite natural that a good education was always one of my priorities.”*

There were two exceptional cases where the informants got married at the age of eighteen.

According to them, they were manipulated to get married. Dina said,

*“I was eighteen years old and had just finished my higher secondary education, when I was asked for marriage. At the beginning, it was fun for my family and me. And my mother was not ready at all for my marriage in so early age. But gradually, within two months, by the motivation of some of my close relatives and my ex-husband’s family, my mother took it seriously and I got married at the age of eighteen.”*

Mumu had a similar story,

*“Since I loved that man whom I married later, he and his family were very interested in our marriage. I was not ready to marry so early. My parents also did not want me to get married so early. But it was really difficult for me to avoid the situation. Consequently, I got married at the age of eighteen by the pressure of my husband and his family.”*

But for most of the informants, the age at marriage was normal as they finished their studies first and then got married.

## **5.2. Structure of the Newly Gained Family:**

The informants of this study were asked about the family structure of their household after marriage. There were mixed replies about family structures. Eight of them lived in a joint family along with their in-laws. Three of the informants lived in a nuclear family. The

informants were asked about their opinion about the influence of the structure of the family. Instead of the effect of living in a joint family, they focused on their husband's personality. One informant reported that the structure of the family might have a role, but the understanding between husband and wife is personal and important. According to them, the structure of the family remained secondary to them. As Nisha reported, *"I did not have a good relation with my mother-in-law. But I never bothered about this a lot. If my husband is good, no matter how other people receive me. I just dreamt of a good life partner. I think all women dream of that."*

Like Nisha, some other informants also thought that even though they had tensions with their in-laws, their husband's personality was more important. For them it is the husband who even defines a good marriage. Nevertheless, the majority of those informants who lived in a joint family mentioned the role of the in-laws in their conjugal understandings. Five of the informants of joint families shared that their in-laws were exploitative, whereas three informants said that their in-laws were supportive to them. Before asked any question further, one informant, Iva, explained that it is the relationship with the family members, not the structure of the family, which is important in a marriage. She further said,

*"I had a joint family of fifteen members in my in-laws' house. I had a good understanding with all of them except my husband. They always provided me with moral support to adjust with my husband. I think that I continued my eight years of marital life because of their support. They did a lot for my kids."*

In contrast, for most of the informants, the structure of their family had a role in determining the quality of their marital relations; nevertheless the husband was considered the most important factor for a good marriage. However, this view was opposed by one of the participants of the FGD of the elderly married women, as she said, living in a joint family restricts the actions and reactions of a couple, and thus mediating in the conflicts between couples. Therefore, the joint families play an important role in maintaining marital stability.

### **5.3. Economic Positions of the Informants at the Time of First Marriage:**

By economic positions, this study means informants' involvement in employment or any other income driven activities. Economic achievements depend on the educational situation of the informants. Educated women are more likely to get jobs after finishing their education.

Six of the informants had jobs at the time of their first marriage. Two of them had stable and well-paid jobs, another two of them were involved in small business and cultural activities, and two of them left their jobs just before getting married. Those two informants left their jobs because they thought that a job might become an obstacle to their new conjugal life. Five of the informants did not have any job. The reason was that they did not finish their studies before marriage. They wanted to look for a job after finishing their master degree. But all of them were confident that once they finished their studies, they could have a good job. They thought that their education would open up the opportunity for economic achievements in their lives.

## **5.4. Social and Economic Status of the Informants'**

### **Husbands:**

Economic and social status is an important factor in the selection of grooms in Bangladesh. This is very important for the brides' family because their daughters' future depends on it. The informants were asked to explain their husband's social and economic status in relation to them. Both arranged and love marriages were prevalent among the informants. Several of the informants thought that their husbands were unequal in social and economic status compared to them. Four informants said that their husband's educational qualifications were lower, whereas seven informants said that their husband's educational qualifications were suitable for them. In educational under-qualification, the informants included both level of degree and institution of education. At the same time, seven informants thought that their husband's economic achievement was not satisfactory. Two of the informants mentioned their husband's rural family background, which they thought had negative effects in their conjugal adjustment. Thus, the informants distinguished rural-urban dynamics in marital understanding. As Niva said,

*“At the time of my marriage, my husband was not fully established. Moreover, our family status did not match. My ex-husband was from a rural area. My mother did not consider him suitable for me. She was selective, because my father was dead. My mother expected someone better for me. I was born and brought up in Dhaka but my husband's family background was from a rural area. I am not saying that rural settings are bad but it is different. That's why my mother was not happy with my decision to get married. My mother wanted me to marry someone from Dhaka.”*

In the context of Bangladesh, the grooms' economic capacity is seen as the most important determinant factor in choosing a husband. But at the time of marriage, many of the informants' husbands did not have good earning. Due to their love marriage, many informants ignored this at the time of marriage. At the same time, the lack of their husband's economic achievement was considered to be balanced by their husband's father's status. Monami reported,

*“At the time of marriage, my husband was involved in some small business. In terms of profession or earning capacities, he was almost unemployed. But his father's economic condition was good enough to match with our family status. Moreover, my husband was the only son of his parents.”*

What we see from Monami's statement is the reflection of a very traditional way of judging the prospect of her husband, based on the fact that he will inherit of all his father's properties. According to this way of thinking, a father's economic position is synonymous to his son's economic position.

## **5.5. Forms of Marriage:**

Various forms of marriage are practiced across societies. The cultural construction of marriage in Bangladesh encourages arranged marriages, but love marriages are also prevalent. The informants of this study were asked about the form of their marriage. Both arranged and love marriages were present in the cases of the informants. Shila shared, *“my marriage was fully an arranged marriage. I depended on my mother and brothers to choose a husband for me. Always my mentality was that I would marry whomever they will select for me.”*

Almost half of the informants experienced arranged marriage. Within the form of arranged marriage, forced marriage was also present among the informants. Rupa said,

*“I got married through family arranged marriage. Actually my mother and eldest brother selected that man for me. I did not even meet him until three days before my marriage. In fact my brother resides abroad. He came to visit us during a short vacation. Many proposals for my marriage were coming to our house at that time by a matchmaker. My brother met my husband and liked him. Because my brother was a little bit religious minded. And my husband used to work in an Islamic bank and used to pray regularly. He was good-looking, too. I did not like him at the beginning but my brother convinced me by saying that, since he prays regularly and is religious minded, he will respect me. I may not be happy with his economic situation but he will make me happy. I also disagreed because of his religious mentality. I had a fear that since he is religious, he might be conservative and would not let me work outside after marriage. And he did not really let me work outside after marriage. Even though I did*

*not like him, I had to convince myself since my brothers and mother liked him, so I had to adjust with him.”*

Nisha had a similar story,

*“I was not ready to marry when my father wanted me to marry. I was in the middle of my studies and wanted to finish before marriage. But my father was stubborn in his decision. Therefore he forced me to get married in the middle of my studies. I was the eldest daughter of my parents. For them, my marriage was their prime concern, not my education.”*

On the other hand, love marriage was also prevalent in the case of more than half of the informants. For Niva, it was both a love and arranged marriage, as she said,

*“My marriage was in sense a love marriage. I performed in theatre. He was a scriptwriter and theatre director. Once I came in contact with him for the purpose of playing a role in his theatre. He wrote very well, which amazed me about him. We liked each other and then our family arranged our marriage. So it was both a love and arranged marriage.”*

Another informant, Seheli, shared,

*“After I got a job, I came in contact with that man I married later. We used to work in similar profession but in a different organization. He was very intelligent and creative in his job. I was overjoyed to talk to him about my work and everything. He was very attractive by personality. We fell in love with each other. We took just five/six months to get married. His family was very interested to get us married as soon as possible. The reason for this was that he was ten years senior to me and wasn't interested in marriage before. Therefore we got married six months after we knew each other.”*

## **5.6. Role of Families in Choosing Husbands:**

The role and influence of the family in choosing a husband was different for the informants. For many informants, the family played the dominant role in choosing a husband for them. In the case of love marriages, the family accepted their daughter's preference. At the same time, some other informants acknowledged the tremendous influence of their father's being or not being present in their life. Rupa said,

*“My father's absence had a negative impact at the time of my marriage. I was almost forced to choose the man I was married to by my brothers and mother. I saw my mother was uncertain to find a good husband for me because of my father's absence. Therefore I accepted their decision.”*

Niva experienced the opposite, as she shared, *“I think, the absence of my father made my mother more liberal to accept my choice. Even though she was not happy with the*



*qualifications of my husband, she accepted my choice. I think my father's absence mattered in my mother's decision making."*

Shila had a quite interesting story in this regard, as she shared, *"I did not even dream to choose my husband by myself. Since I lost my father long ago, I relied on my brothers to get me married to whomever they select for me."*

In retrospect Monami thought, a father understands his daughters' best future, as she said,

*"I chose my husband by myself, but my father did not like him because of his social position. Nevertheless, I did not change my mind and got married to that man I chose. But I think I was too immature to imagine my future marital life, while my father was concerned about it. And that's why he did not like him."*

In the cases of love marriage, all informants thought that their parents were liberal in relation to their love marriage. It was not that difficult for them to convince their parents about their own choice.

## **5.7. Marital Understanding:**

The informants were asked about the marital understanding with their husbands. For five informants, the marital understanding was good at the beginning of their conjugal life. Rupa said,

*"I always made an effort to adjust with my husband after my marriage. At the beginning, our conjugal life was not bad. My husband was caring and emotionally attached to me. More importantly, he was respectful to me. But he was very introvert by personality. Very often I did not understand him properly because he did not share any thing with me. Moreover, as a new bride, I was too shy to discuss everything openly. I just tried to adjust to what happened."*

Monami had a similar experience,

*"At the beginning of my marital life, we had a good understanding. We had quite good times. Even though my husband did not earn that much, I compromised with his economic incapacity. I lived with my in-laws. I did not have a good understanding with my mother-in-law because she had a complex that I was snatching her son away from her. But I ignored this problem, since I was happy with my husband. Except my mother-in-law, I had good relations with all his family members and relatives."*

On the other hand, for six informants, the marital understanding was not good from the beginning. One informant discovered her husband's sexual deficiency, and another informant

lacked sexual understanding with her husband. For most of them, problems arose from one to three years after their wedding. Some other informants faced problems in their conjugal life already a few days after their marriage.

In the cases of love marriage, the informants shared changes in their husband's attitudes after marriage, which turned into a problem later in their everyday life adjustment. As Nisha said,

*“My husband was a friend first. Among my friends, he was the most friendly and cheerful person. We made fun of many things and enjoyed a lot. But after marriage, he overreacted on simple matters. His view was that he was no more my friend but my husband. I should behave like a wife. I was very confused at his change. I did not understand how to redefine my relation with him as a husband instead of a friend. After marriage, he was concerned more about his control over me than to care about me. Therefore, what happened is, I was facing challenges at every stage after my marriage. Gradually he became a person who was scary for me. He displayed a dominant position as a husband. I became careful about my attitude towards him after my marriage. There was no more fun between us.”*

Another informant, Tania, had a similar story,

*“Before marriage, we were good friends. We understood each other very well. We asked each other about everything for any kind of decision-making. But after marriage, our mental dependency at each other decreased. Before marriage we were just friends with no domination and no one's priority over the other. But suddenly after marriage I discovered that he wanted to be a husband in the true sense, I mean a dominant husband. Conflicts arose in our every day behaviour in that way.”*

## **5.8. Portrait of a Good Husband / Marriage:**

The informants were asked about their expectations of a good marriage. For Monami,

*“A good marriage requires a good husband and good marital understanding. By good marital understanding, I mean to share both partners' life fully with each other. I found my husband very caring and sensitive towards my opinions at the beginning. But I faced challenges in the understanding with my husband when he became careless towards me.”*

In the cases of love marriage, the informants expected their husband to be friendly and generous to them as they were before marriage. For them, a good husband is not dominant or indifferent to his wife. In the cases of arranged marriage, the informants shared their views of a good husband or a good marriage in relation to their expectations. They focused on the husband's earning capacity and responsibility towards them as the primary qualification of a good husband. They also focused on a shared mentality, emotional interdependence, respect, sharing, and trust as important conditions for a good marriage.

## 5.9. Discussion:

As already argued, Bangladeshi society has experienced social transformations over the recent decades. The ideas and perceptions of gender relations and gender identities are also moving away from traditional values and embracing more modern institutions. The narratives of the women of this study show that both traditional values and modern values are at work in their lives. Even though traditional and modern norms and values are not present to the same degree in the women's lives, they coexist in all of them. There is a mix of values in the stories of these women. Now I will show systematically how both traditional and modern norms are prevailing in the lives of the informants. In regard to theoretical consideration, I apply Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of *classic patriarchy* and Anthony Giddens' (1991) modern individualism.

Kandiyoti (1988) uses the term *classic patriarchy* to describe patriarchal gender relations. According to Kandiyoti, classic patriarchy is characterized by dominant patrilocal and patrilineal systems, where girls are married at an early age into an extended family. Family and kinship systems play a crucial role in shaping women's gender norms in classic patriarchy. Kabeer (1988) also describes the patriarchal gender norms and practices prevailing in Bangladesh. Women's marriages are decided and arranged by their male guardians, as in a patriarchal society, women are viewed as docile and dependent and need to be protected, and men are considered as guardians and protectors of women (Kabeer, 1988, pp. 100-101). Key mechanisms of the patriarchal social arrangements to maintain the social control of men over women are the organization of family, kinship and marriage.

My study shows that the ideal types of patriarchal values of a traditional marriage as described above, are present in many of the informants' lives. Dina's narrative is a good example in this regard. As she said, the marriage proposal for her at the age of eighteen was first a joke, but she couldn't avoid it as it became serious because of her family' and relatives' expectations to get her married. This expectation was probably further enhanced by the traditional gender norms prevailing in a patriarchal society that daughters should be married off after their puberty.

This study shows that traditional arranged marriages are still prevailing in Bangladeshi society. Shila's narrative mirrors her expectations of arranged marriage as she said that she

never thought of love marriage. She depended on her family to choose a husband for her. This indicates that it was normal for her to be satisfied with someone selected by her family, without showing much curiosity about her husband before marriage.

In a patriarchal society, parents are considered more competent in selecting husbands for their daughters. Kabeer (1988) argues that in the social arrangement of patriarchal Bangladesh, women are permitted little voice in marriage (Kabeer, 1988). Findings of my study support Kabeer's argument on this point, as some of the informants experienced rejection by their family to consider their opinion about their own marriages. Their opinion was not significant in the selection of their husbands. Their parents thought that they were competent enough to select "Mr. Right" for their daughters. Therefore they ignored their daughter's opinions. As Rupa said, she met her ex-husband just three days before her marriage. It was merely a nominal formality for her family; it was not to ask about her opinion. Even though sometimes daughter's voices were heard, it was not worth considering for some parents. Nisha experienced that she was not ready to marry when her family arranged marriage for her. Nevertheless, her father did not care about her decision and she was forced to marry. This indicates that the patriarchal values of the supremacy of guardians and the importance of relatives' expectations and roles remain dominant in some parents' ideology.

Whatever relation builds up with in-laws after marriage, living in a joint family is normal for women in Bangladesh. Half of the informants were married into an extended or joint family. Despite the tension with the in-laws, living with them was quite natural for them. Sometimes they found it to their satisfaction to live in a joint family. Iva's narrative shows such reflection, as she said that she had a good understanding with all her in-laws except her husband. They always gave her mental support in her crisis. She thought that she lived with her husband so long because of good relations with her in-laws.

These women's narratives also reflect their expectations about marriage, which they imagined in a traditional way to be happy. Rupa's emphasis on her effort to adjust from the beginning of her marriage indicates the social significance of the "female virtue" to be satisfied and to satisfy her husband from the beginning of her marriage. Even though her husband was not open-minded, she was not curious. She was shy and modest, as a new bride should be in a patriarchal society. To her, it's normal to adjust with the situation in marriage. Like Rupa, some other informants reported to have a good understanding since they did not have serious

problems with their husbands at the beginning. To these women, good understanding means a “no crisis” situation. It suggests that to them, the significance is not what they gain but how they balance their role in a new environment. This is what a patriarchal society arranges for and expects from women. At the same time, they expected their husbands to be economically capable and responsible towards them. This indicates their expectations of husbands’ being “provider and protector” as prerequisites for a good marriage, which bears the footprints of the traditional values of patriarchy.

Now I focus on the existence of modern values among the informants. As mentioned earlier, Giddens presents a portrait of modern individuals and how they enter into relationships in modern times. According to Giddens (1991), to the individuals of modern age, the search of self-identity is the focus of attention inspired by western individualism. The cultivation of individual potentiality is at the heart of this individualism (Giddens, 1991). Thus, the idea of individual self-fulfilment and growth has become the primary standard of modern individuals and also in intimate relations.

The narratives of some of the informants indicate the presence of these modern values in their lives. When the informants were asked about the age of marriage, many of them stated that there was a delay in marriage until the completion of their education. They emphasized the need to develop their capacity and potentiality by completing their education first. Many of them insisted on getting a job before they entered into marriage relationship. This indicates the presence of modern values like individual self-fulfilment and growth as priorities in their lives. To these women, education and economic independence guaranteed their self-establishment and identity and provided them with social prestige. Therefore, they prioritised educational and economic achievement over marriage. It is evident in Rupa’s narrative that she first completed her education and took a job before she got married. She further related this to her family’s social prestige and achievements. To her, a good education was always one of the main priorities. Thus age at marriage appears to increase for educated middle class women. This relates to the influence of socio-economic development of women on their age at first marriage in Bangladesh. This finding of the study corresponds with Ahmed’s (1986) study, as he found that women’s education is the strongest determinant of age at first marriage in Bangladesh. Women delay their marriages in order to pursue their education (A. U. Ahmed, 1986b).

The perceptions and roles of the involved families are also important at this point. Many of the informants shared their parents' prioritisation of their study first, than to get them married off. It indicates a shift in parents' aspirations for their daughters in present Bangladeshi society. Parents also emphasized their daughters' education to maximize their potentiality and economic independence; they gave importance to their daughters building of self-esteem and identity, and their ability to achieve dignity. Thus the values of modern individuals are visible in today's daughters and parents' thoughts about marriage.

Giddens (1991) further argues that in modern relationships, individuals choose partners voluntarily among the plurality of possibilities or potentialities. To him, modern marriages are relationship-oriented in the sense that they depend on the quality of the relation one develops with the other (Giddens, 1991).

Giddens (1991) argues that traditional relations, particularly marriage, developed according to external factors like social or economic life, while modern relations, or what he terms *pure relations* or *confluent love*, is free floating. Even though some of the traditional characteristics of marriage (e.g. husband as bread winner and wife preoccupied with home, children and hearth) still persist in a weakened form, "the tendency is towards the eradication of these pre-existing external involvements" (Giddens, 1991, p. 89). The ideal type of the "pure relation" was also reflected in some of the informants' understanding of good marriage. At the same time, they are influenced by the values of romantic love in their expectations of marriage. Some of the informants' narratives indicate an erosion of traditional practices of marriage. For instance, many of the informants' emphasis on love relations influenced by friendship with their husbands, instead of considering external factors like the social or economic background of the husbands. They were satisfied with this kind of relationship. Nisha's narrative is a good example in this regard, as she said that she never bothered about her in-laws. She stated that she was happy at the beginning of her marital life since her husband loved her and treated her well. Because of her love, she accepted her husband's economic incapacity. Some of the other informants' narratives also show that because of love, they disregarded their husband's inferior social background. Instead, they emphasized the unique individual relations they had with their husbands. Their expectations of a good marriage guided their definition of a good husband. Therefore, they expected their husbands to be emotionally supportive, caring, friendly and trustworthy, which are the values of romantic love. Many of the values of romantic love are also present in characteristics of confluent love

such as intimacy and trust. Many of the informants' narratives affirm their emphasis on their individual existence and development at the same time. Thus, a transition seems to appear in the expectations of mating process and family formation in Bangladesh. They are influenced by divergent values in their expectations of a good marriage. This finding resonates Ahmed's (1986) study, as also he found that many of the cultural features of marriage pattern in Bangladesh are under transition (A. U. Ahmed, 1986a). Love marriages are increasingly being visible. According to his study, human capital such as education and economic capacity is increasingly becoming strong factors in urban marriage processes. The importance of the individual involved in Marriage is becoming visible in the marriage process.

Many informants found that their parents shared their liberal attitudes to love marriages. It is evident from Niva's narrative that even though her mother was not impressed by whom she wanted to marry, she did not impose her. To her mother, love relationships are now normal in the society and it is wise to accept it. Many other informants had similar experiences with their parents in relation to the decision-making of their marriage. The liberal mentality of mothers or parents indicates the weakening of the traditional guardian's role in the selection of grooms for their daughters. Therefore, influence of the relation oriented modern marriage as described by Giddens is also evident in the women's life experiences.

Thus the study shows a changing tendency of the overall pattern of marriage and family formation, which supports the study of Jesmin and Salway of slum dwellers in Dhaka city (Jesmin & Salway, 2000). It is found that there is a mix of cultural values and beliefs at work, both within young women and in their families in present Bangladeshi society. Numerically, these narratives might be modest; they nevertheless, indicate that a significant transformation of social and cultural ideology of Bangladeshi society is taking place. Both the values of traditional marriages and modern marriages with the expectations of romantic relations exist in Bangladeshi society, and even more, both traditional and modern values exist within the same persons and families. Marriages (either arranged or love initiated) between two families bearing different values might jeopardize the marital harmony of the couples, as the cultural values and background of one's family have significant influence on individual's perception. This is exactly what many of the informants experienced, particularly in love matches. I discuss this in next chapter.

# **Chapter-6: Marital Problems Leading to Divorce**

## **6. Introduction:**

As discussed in the previous chapter, there was a mixture of traditional and modern values persistent in the lives of the informants and their families about how they aspire for their marital lives to be. As it was argued, contradictory values persistent within individuals among couples, and in families cause clashes in the daily marital life that may become serious and cause divorce in the long run. Reasons for and natures of divorce are varied among people, but lack of satisfaction in marriage often ends in divorce. This chapter focuses on the informants' narratives of their marital lives. It presents empirical data related to marital problems leading to marital disruptions and divorce, ways of dealing with those problems and an analysis of the narratives.

## **6.1. Problems Related to Sexuality and Reproduction:**

### **6.1.1. Maladjustment in Sexual Relations:**

The sexual relationship is important for a happy marital life, because it is not only individual's biological need; it is closely related with the emotional bonding between husband and wife (Pothen, 1986). Therefore, the sexual relationship with its emotional strength plays a vital role in making a happy married life. Maladjustment of sexual relations often causes emotional damage and vice versa. In exploring the marital problems of the informants, maladjustment in the sexual relationship was identified as one of the significant problems for many of the informants. Six informants reported that they had troubled sexual relations with their husbands. One informant, Seheli, said that she discovered her husband's impotency at the beginning of her marital life. She tried to help her husband by consulting with doctors and seek medical treatments, but she did not find her husband serious about the matter. Moreover, she felt herself cheated that her husband hid this before marriage. She had complaints against her husband that *"since we knew each other and had a good relation before marriage, he could easily have shared with me but he did not. Thus he deceived me."*



Another informant, Niva, shared that *“I was uncomfortable and kind of fearful in sexual activities in my marital life. But, at the same time it was also the other way around. I did not have a good mental understanding with my husband, which made me more reluctant in sexual relations”*.

Like Niva, for more than half of the informants, their sexual life was not good because of the absence of good understandings. Another informant, Tania, experienced,

*“My husband was not happy in the sexual relationship with me. But I did not find any problem with me. Everything was okay from my side. But he had complaints against me that he does not get sexual satisfaction from me. But he never explained what kind of problem he felt so that I could solve it.”*

What is found from the narratives of these informants is that the sexual maladjustment was not the unique cause of the divorce of the informants; lack of emotional attachment also influenced their sexual maladjustment. The remaining five informants thought that their marital lives were not significantly negatively affected by their sexual relations.

### **6.1.2. Infertility:**

Infertility is widely known as a reason of marital disruption and divorce in Bangladesh. The infertility of women sometimes leads husbands to lose interests in their marriage relations with their wives. Monami’s marital experience was no exception to this, as she described,

*“My conjugal life was going well after my marriage. After three years, we planned for a baby but came to know about my difficulty to conceive from medical tests. I was very depressed then. Instead of giving me mental support, my husband was dissatisfied with me; he reacted as if I was guilty. I was loosing my voice in that house. I did not dare to protest against people blaming me. I just prayed to Allah and tolerated everything. Gradually, my husband became very short-tempered with me. He misbehaved with me even for silly matters. Apparently, no one realized the problems in our relationship, but the gap was increasing. My mother-in-law had an implicit manipulative role in this regard. She never said directly that they need a grandchild but always in front of my husband she showed a mad affection for children. Lastly, I conceived but I had a miscarriage. I was very sick and I needed immediate surgery at that moment. He was crazy about a baby. For him, the baby was preferable to me. After my surgery, when I got my consciousness back, he didn’t even bother to support me mentally. I saw him standing outside my cabin in the hospital. I realized that he had no more affection for me. This was the beginning of my marital break-up with him. By this time my mother-in-law established that I would never conceive again. Gradually my husband started misbehaving with me extremely. It did not make any difference to him whether I stay with him or not. He started thinking about a second marriage. I had a love marriage with him. I was wondering about the value of love between husband and wife. Anyway, my in-laws also wanted their son to marry again, for a baby. I had very bad times with my in-laws but still I was there. When I*

*found that they would not change their mind, I experienced very bad relations with my husband. My parents also wanted me to go back to their house. I went back to my parents' house for a break. Since my husband did not change his mind. I had no other option except to divorce him."*

Infertility is considered as a common reason of polygamy and divorce in many traditional societies like Bangladesh (Alam, et al., 2000). Among the informants, there was only one who faced this problem.

### **6.1.3. Extra-Marital Affairs:**

Some of the informants reported the involvement of their husbands in extra marital affairs. This made them to feel betrayed, which adversely affected their marital life. As Mumu said,

*"From the beginning of my marriage, I had misunderstandings with my husband surrounding many issues. I was upset and angry. But by this time I was pregnant. I went to my mother's house for a few days to get a break from those problems and also for my pregnancy. I needed my mother's support. Anyway, I discovered that my husband was involved in an extra marital affair. Many of my friends saw my husband with another woman in a weird situation. Even one of my husband's friends also shared this fact with me. There was no option for me but to think of divorce. My husband's fault was no longer negotiable to me. My parents also left me free with my decision of divorce at this point."*

Like Mumu, three other informants reported the involvement of their husbands in extra marital affairs, which was unacceptable to them. This made them think of divorce.

## **6.2. Problems Related to Economy and Finances:**

### **6.2.1. Economic Deficiency of Husbands:**

Economic deficiency of husbands was reported as a significant problem by many of the informants in relations to their bad relation with their husband. Iva said,

*"Since my husband did not earn, the whole family was sustained by his brother's income from the beginning. There was one person to earn, but many people to eat. Therefore, there was always financial crisis. It was really unimaginable for me to live under such situations. He even disappeared at the time when I gave birth to my daughter. Instead of him, my mother and brother-in-law had to pay my hospital bills. Three days after, he came back and said that he could not arrange money for the hospital bills. It was unacceptable to me. He could not even provide fifteen taka (Bangladeshi currency) to buy milk for my children. I started working outside to bear my children's costs. He sometimes snatched my money for his own purpose. My brother gave him money several times to start a business. But he could not even make proper use of that money. He did not have any role towards my children and me. I gave him many chances to change and do something better in life. Because I was also concerned about my children's future without their father. But he did not use the opportunity. Finally I had to think of divorce."*

Three other informants experienced similar problems with their husbands. They had complaints about their husbands' earning capacity, which created bitterness in their marital life. As Tania stated,

*“My husband was unstable in his job and therefore he was not able to provide for me properly. He used to leave every job after a few days. Sometimes he wanted to do business and sometimes a job. But he was not stable in any job. Therefore, there was always a financial crisis in my family. I was frustrated about his indifference towards his job. On the other hand, his unstable mentality to settle in a job was criticized by many of my relatives, friends, and colleagues. It was embarrassing for me. Thus his instability to earn affected me both economically and socially. I did not feel good with him because of this.”*

Thus, marital stability of many of the informants was negatively affected by their husbands' failure in provider roles.

### **6.2.2. Dowry:**

Many of the informants of this study experienced the pressure of dowry following their marriage. Dina said,

*“My mother sent almost all the furniture for my in-laws' house the night before my marriage, but they were not satisfied. They expected more than that. It was not a good signal for my later marital life. But it was too late for my family to refuse the relation, because in our society refusal of marriage after engagement is a social insult for a woman. And it had a negative impact on the rest of my marital life.”*

Two other informants reported that they were blackmailed by their husbands to bring dowry from their parent's house following their marriage. It was okay until they refused to continue to bring money. When they resisted it, problems arose in their family. Their husbands exposed them mental torture and very often physical torture. Mumu said,

*“My in-laws started to ask for money from my father using various excuses after my marriage. Sometimes my father-in-law came suddenly to my parent's house to ask for money, claiming loss in his business. He asked for it as a loan, but it is very unusual to give money as loan to one's daughter's in-laws. Another thing is that my ex-husband never asked money from my father directly. He tried to make me ask for money for him. It was a good trick for him. He was less interested in his own business as he was in my father's property. My husband and his parents continuously influenced me to bring money from my father. I realized that I was in a trap. I told my father to be strict and not to give them money anymore. My husband and in-laws increased their torture on me because of my father's refusal to give them money. My relation with my husband was as if based on the dowry from my father.”*

Dowry is now regarded as a big traditional problem in marriages in Bangladesh (R. Ahmed, 1987). Three of the informants also reported dowry as one of the main reasons of their marital problems.

## **6.3. Problems Related to Violence and Abuse:**

### **6.3.1. Lack of Decision-making Power:**

Many of the informants identified the dominance of their husbands as one of the problems of their marital understandings. Rupa said,

*“After my marriage I had no freedom to decide to buy anything for my house. My husband did not leave any money at home so that I could not buy anything according to my choice. He rather left money to his younger brother who lived in my house. It was a great insult for me. I had to ask his permission always for everything. I was wondering what my role was. As if I was there just to cook and do the entire household works. It was my husband who always decided what to do for the house.”*

Like Rupa, five more informants thought that they faced challenges in exercising their decisions in their conjugal life. This made them frustrated and unhappy, which adversely affected their marital lives. Some of the informants reported that their husband’s wish to restrict their opportunity to work had been a central factor behind the deterioration of their conjugal harmony. Niva shared,

*“As a student, I was involved in cultural activities and I also got my first income from such activities. But my husband did not want me to participate in cultural activities. For the sake of marital peace, I left all cultural activities and started looking for a formal job. But I could not be stable in any job, because my husband had always problems with my jobs. He enforced me to leave my jobs several times. It was a great shock for me. I was brought up with lots of dreams, and then I was watching my life destroyed in that way. He set limitations to my work. For example, I was just allowed to work in schools and of course it had to be a girls’ school. Even if sometimes he allowed me to work, he created unexpected scenes at my job. If I was late any day to get back home, he used to fight against me using abusive language. I had the dream that after finishing my education I will make my own social identity. But my husband left no option for me. We had always a value clash. There was no peace in my marital life because of those issues. He wanted me just as a doll for his showcase.”*

Many of the informants reported problems related to their husbands’ dominance and restrictions, which heightened tensions in their marital lives.

### **6.3.2. Imposition on Education:**

Three of the informants got married in the middle of their studies. All of them faced obstacles from the side of their husbands and in-laws in relation to continuing their education after marriage. This affected their marital understanding detrimentally. Dina said,

*“My husband was a highly educated person and therefore I believed him to be progressive minded. But after my engagement, my husband questioned whether it was necessary for me to study further. He did not want me to study; but I fought against this and continued my study against his wish.”*

Mumu had a similar experience,

*“I got married during my higher secondary education. A great shock for me was to meet obstacles in my further education from my husband and mother-in-law. I left college one year after my marriage to adjust to my new life. Then I passed HSC<sup>16</sup> in 2001. My mother-in-law did not like it when I started my education again. To her, I did not need to study further since already I was married. I was completely helpless at that moment. I was trying to start my higher education but I could not. My father even proposed to my father-in-law to bear my educational expenses. Still they did not agree. My husband did not cooperate with me in this regard. How is it possible to accept such narrow mentality from a person of this generation?”*

Thus for Dina’s husband and in-laws, Dina’s initiative for further studies was a dishonour to them and a disrespect for their preference, which was not expected from a good bride. As a result they had tensions in their every day life, which was accelerated by her decision to continue her studies. Mumu also reported that her mother-in-law was very unhappy with her decision to continue her studies. As a result, her mother-in-law always criticised her and motivated her son (Mumu’s husband) to go against her study. But all the three informants reported that they did not stop their education in the face of these obstacles. They considered their education so important that they accepted to live with family crisis to get it.

### **6.3.3. Alcohol and Drug Addiction:**

Alcoholism and drug addiction was identified by some of the informants as one of the problems as what led to their marital disruptions and finally divorce. Tania said,

*“My husband was alcoholic. All the problems in my conjugal life arose because of his alcoholism. People lose their mental balance when they are alcoholic and so did my husband. Gradually he became very critical. Conjugal life requires both partners’ respect for each other. But I saw him changing every day. Because of his alcoholism, he was not stable in any job. He lost his mind. I came to know that he got involved in extra marital affairs. He didn’t have any realization about his activities. Although I accepted all his disordered activities personally, I was being humiliated socially. At the beginning of our marriage, our sexual relationship was ok, but he claimed sexual dissatisfaction. This may be an effect of his heavy alcoholic addiction. In such situations, it is very natural that romance disappears from conjugal life. I thought that to conceive a baby could be a solution. Very often, older people say that a baby can repair the life of parents. I discussed this with him but he did not cooperate. Gradually I was infected with germs and skin diseases by him because of his*

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<sup>16</sup> HSC- Higher Secondary Certificate (twelve grade).

*alcohol addiction and extra marital affairs. My physical condition was deteriorating. I was risking my life just being with him. I tried to make him understand that he needed treatment. But he stopped allowing any kind of physical relations between us and gradually isolated himself from me. And finally, I had to take the control here. I took my decision. I was ready to accept all those problems if I could only have a baby from him. He did not cooperate with me, so there were no more reasons to be with him.”*

Two other informants reported having experienced similar problems. Seheli said,

*“My husband was a highly educated person He was drug addicted for many years. But he pretended that he stopped, while he had not. Many times at night, I found that he was crazy for drugs and searching everywhere in our bedroom. He behaved strangely. He never shared anything good or bad with me. I guess all drug abusers behave strangely and so did my husband. I could not connect with him mentally.”*

Another informant, Shila, reported,

*“The day after my marriage, I discovered my husband behaved strangely. My family arranged my marriage and I did not even see him before marriage. Since I was a new bride, I did not show much curiosity to explore the matter. But within few days he started behaving madly. Later I came to know that he was physically and mentally normal but very often he used to lose his mental balance because of drug addiction and did not recognize any one. I let my family know the fact. They suggested me to keep a distance from him so that I did not become pregnant. After a few days, my husband’s condition deteriorated. He was taken to a rehabilitation centre for immediate treatment. I was confused what to do. I was thinking how I would continue my life with him. My sister-in-law suggested me to leave him. But I wanted to wait to see what happened. I was worried about my future. If by remaining in this marriage, I gave birth children, what would happen to me? Who would bear the responsibility of my children? Normally it is the father who bears all these responsibility of bringing them up. In relation to my in-laws, every thing was good. But my husband’s physical and mental condition was not okay. I was worried more about my future children than for me. I could not even think about divorce at that time because of the fear of my destiny after divorce. I knew that in case of my second marriage it would be difficult to get a good husband with my divorced status. Life might be even worse after divorce. I thought it was better to get a job and keep continuing the treatment of my husband. I consulted with my husband’s doctor about the prospect of his complete cure. The doctor was not optimistic and told me that my husband would never cure completely. I was very confused what to do. But it was impossible to live with a mentally ill person.”*

Five of the informants reported their husbands’ alcohol and drug addiction as factors, which made it difficult to continue their marital lives.

#### **6.3.4. Domestic Abuse:**

Domestic abuse can be defined as mental, verbal and physical, and often lead to the deterioration of marital harmony. As long as the informants did not express their grievances against their husbands, they were able to avoid physical abuse. When they voiced the

complaints against their husbands, almost all the informants experienced physical abuse. Many of them reported that they were scared of their husband's physical aggression. Iva said, *"If I ever complained about his lack of responsibility, he started beating me. He neither considered nor tolerated my complaints against him. He was so unpredictable. He hit me anywhere on my body out of anger."*

Nisha said,

*"My husband was very short tempered and stubborn. If I had any disagreement with his decision, he did not leave me without a beating. One day I hid myself in the bathroom to escape from his beating and came out after fifteen minutes. Still he was outside the door to beat me. Gradually, I became scared that he could even kill me any time."*

Another informant, Tania, reported,

*"During arguments, very often my husband became violent. It was such a shame and insult for me to be beaten by my husband. Once after having been badly beaten by him, I went back to my parents' house and decided to divorce him. I even sent him the legal notice of divorce. But two months later, he apologized to me. My family also wanted me to give him a second chance. I considered what my parents wanted and withdrew my legal notice of divorce and went back to my husband's house. But within a few days I found that he did not change, rather he became more violent. This time, I did not listen to anyone. I fixed my mind to divorce him."*

At the same time, about half of the informants considered their husbands' verbal and mental abuse worse than the physical abuse to them. The informants reported that they were more traumatised by their husband's humiliation, accusation, mocking, and criticisms in their every day life. To them, physical abuse was occasional while verbal and mental abuse was their every day experience, which made it impossible to continue their marriage. Niva said,

*"My husband always questioned my qualifications. He always underestimated me. I felt myself so worthless. On the other hand, I have never seen him economically well established. He blamed me for that. He always blamed me for our marital tensions. He never appreciated me for anything. He considered me as his bad luck. It was big an insult for me. I just lost my hope, confidence and inspiration of living my life. I was always under mental pressure because of my husband's humiliations and criticism while I have always received love and respect from others. Thus I was living in two contradictory worlds. This situation hammered in my brain a lot. One day while arguing with him over some issues, he hit me. I was not ready to tolerate him anymore. I warned him and went back to my mother's house. I thought that he would realize his misdeeds and apologize. But it did not happen. Rather he justified what he did. Where there was no love and respect, there was no reason to continue marital life. I had to escape out of this relation to survive. I decided to leave him."*

Domestic abuse is a wide spread practice in Bangladesh (Ameen, 2005). This was also revealed by all of the informants.

## 6.4. Problems Related to Emotional Attachment:

Lack of emotional attachment was identified by almost all of the informants. Rupa said,

*“My husband was not emotionally attached with me. We did not have a fun time ever. He never bothered to take me shopping or to visit somewhere for fun. He just fulfilled his economic responsibilities. But he was not emotionally expressive to me. He did not make his leisure with me. He did not bother to share his feelings for me.”*

Another informant, Niva, had similar experiences,

*“My husband was always aware of his dominance but not about his responsibility. Giving me happiness was part of his responsibility. But he did not bother about this. He abused me verbally while I never found him feel sorry for that later. Why he would be sorry, he was never repentant for his misdeeds? If he loved me, he could not misbehave like this. I don't have any funny memory with him. In the lack of his commitment towards our relation, I just felt his humiliation at me. Our relation became so bitter in later days that there was no space for love.”*

Iva said,

*“My husband had many lacks. I might accept all these if he was emotionally attached to me. But my suffering did not touch him. If he loved me, he could not overlook this. I have lots of memories of being beaten by him but no memories of being taken care of by him. Love is the basis of a marriage. But he had no commitment to make me happy or to save the marriage. If he does not love me, what is the reason to tolerate all his misdeeds? Therefore, I had no emotional attraction to him so that I would forgive all his guilt.”*

Likewise, most of the informants thought that there was a lack of mental connection between themselves and their husband. They lost their emotional attachment to their husbands significantly in later days because of their husbands' violence against them.

Many of these problems were overlapping for the informants. For example, six informants faced maladjustment in sexual relations, while husbands' involvement in extra marital affairs, economic deficiency, pressure of dowry, husbands' alcohol and drug addiction and lack of decision-making power was experienced by respectively six, four, three, five and six informants. Domestic abuse and lack of love were identified by almost all the informants as the significant reasons to leave the marriage. In relation to many of these problems, unequal socio-economic background of the husbands compared to their own was regarded as a significant factor by many of the informants. They thought that backward family and social background and lower educational background of their husbands caused their husbands to feel inferior and created problems in marital lives. Thus, to the informants, dissatisfaction with the



unequal background of their husbands merged with their real problems and strengthened their frustrations in their marriage, which led them to think of leaving their marriages.

## **6.5. Discussion:**

The narratives of the informants indicate that their marital disruptions were compelled by various problems, many of which became serious in the later days at their marriage and made them leave their husbands. In relation to the marital disruptions, many of the informants revealed problems related to expressive and emotional attachment and challenges in their (the informants) self-identity which are associated with modernising process such as value clashes, lack of decision-making power, verbal abuse, husbands' lack of love and commitment to the marriage, obstacles in self-development through education, husbands' involvement in extra marital affairs (Amato & Previti, 2003; Burns, 1984; Wolcott & Hughes, 1999). While others reported concrete problems which are associated with traditional societies such as pressure of dowry, husbands' economic deficiency, alcohol and drug addiction, infertility, sexual incompatibility and physical violence as the reasons of marital disruptions (Bhuiya, et al., 2005 ; Pothen, 1986). Among the problems, domestic abuse was most frequently identified by the informants. This study's findings support the study of Ameen (2005), who found domestic abuse as a common phenomenon in marriage of Bangladesh (Ameen, 2005). However, the informants' emphasis on domestic abuse by their husbands was a significant reason for leaving the marriage, does not fully support the study of Ameen (2005), where she found that urban middle class women are more tolerant to domestic abuse because of the social pressure to keep the marriage going and the shame of acknowledging them that they are victims which is perceived as a "lower class" phenomenon (Ameen, 2005, pp. 79-80). Thus, the study suggests that women's increasing resistance in the face of violence against them might be one reason of the increased marital instability in Bangladesh, which also contributes to the increase in women-initiated divorce.

Kandiyoti (1988) argues that the patrilineal and patrilocal complex controls and subordinates women living under classic patriarchy (Kandiyoti, 1988, p. 278). Therefore, they also deal with the patriarchy through various strategies, what she calls *patriarchal bargaining*, in order to maximize their situation with whatever resources they have (Kandiyoti, 1988, p. 275). We find many traces of such *patriarchal bargaining* in the narratives of these women. Mumu's effort to involve her parents into negotiating with her in-laws in the face of the obstacles, her

in-laws and husband put up for her to continue her education; bringing the dowry in order to develop relation with her husband and his family can be defined as such strategies employed by her to deal with her problems. Here we see manipulation, acceptance and resistance used by her to negotiate her marriage. However, like her, other informants who faced impositions to continue their education from their husbands and in-laws in the end rejected the wish of their husbands and in-laws. Education was the symbol of self-development and individual status for these informants. This study finds that even though marriage is perceived as the signifier of women's social status in Bangladesh; education is increasingly becoming another signifier of social status in terms of qualifying for a good marriage and also on the individual level. The informants' emphasis on education indicates their concern to develop their individual success and achievements.

The narratives of the other informants also confirm many instances of *patriarchal bargaining* to mediate the marital problems in favour of their own interests. For example, Tania's attempts to send legal notice to her husband in the face of his violence. But she withdrew the legal notice to save her marriage and also to save the support of her family. Likewise, the informants' experience of various problems made them to seek solutions to develop their marital relations and save the marriage. But in the face of abuse and lack of love, most of the informants lost the motivation to stay in their marriage. Niva's narrative is a good example of this. Despite of her upbringing with dreams of a good career, she stopped working in the face of her husband's resistance. But her marital relation did not improve even after she sacrificed her dreams of a career. Even though she negotiated first in a very traditional way in her marriage, she moved back to resistance and rejection in the face of extreme mental and physical abuse. She prioritised her own self-respect and honour as an individual. Being married became less valuable to her than avoiding her abusive husband in the end. Therefore, she stopped sacrificing and in stead met her own modern expectations of individual respect and self-fulfilment, and decided to leave her husband.

Concerning the idea of *classic patriarchy* that men should fulfil their provider roles, Kandiyoti (1988) argues that many women in *classic patriarchy* are likely to keep stressing on their husbands' obligation to live up to their responsibilities (Kandiyoti, 1988, pp. 282-283). The women sometimes prefer to secure their economic protection by husbands in exchange of submissiveness and propriety (ibid). This study finds similar values remaining in many of the informants when they expressed their dissatisfactions because of their husbands'

economic underachievement. It is evident in Iva's narrative that she experienced tremendous mental and physical abuse by her husband and his economic failure. Nevertheless, she remained in her marriage at the beginning, with the hope that her husband's economic development might improve in the future. The study also shows that despite many problems in their marriage life, marriage remained significant for the informants up to a certain stage because of its social and cultural importance. Therefore, they tried to continue their marriage in order to keep the badge of their husbands' name. Most of the informants did not think of leaving their marriage until the domestic abuse against them exceeded acceptable limits. Their realization of the emotional detachment of their husbands was another significant reason for them to leave the marriage. Thus, a psychology of "cost-benefit" analysis operated in the actions of the informants. As we can see from Iva's narrative, she accepted all the problems as long as she lived with the hope of changing her husband. But when she realized that there was no future for her and her children in the marriage, she decided to leave her husband.

According to Giddens, modern relationships (*pure relations* or *confluent love*) are, "a situation where a social relation is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only insofar as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it" (Giddens, 1992, p. 58). Thus to Giddens, modern relationships as well as marriages have become relationship-oriented (Giddens, 1991, p. 89). Emotional dissatisfaction resulting from the judgement that the marriage relation is no longer benefiting them was evident in the narratives of the informants, and this challenged the continuation of marriage. For example, many of the informants felt themselves betrayed by the involvement of their husbands in extra marital affairs. This was perceived by them as a symbol of their husbands' lack of love and commitment, and they saw no more potential for the marriage and no possibility to develop emotional bonds.

Thus, this study suggests that there is a transition in the perceptions and behaviours of the informants, where both modern and traditional values are ambivalently present in them. The study suggests that the socio-economic development of women's position caused by the ongoing modernization of Bangladeshi society might be related to this transition. For example, many of them had modern expectations such as to be respected and be allowed individual freedom by the husbands. At the same time, they were unhappy with their husbands' economic deficiency. But the modern values prevalent in the informants are not

completely identical to Giddens' characteristics of the *pure love relationship*. As he argues, the *pure love relationship* is based on the values of autonomy and equality (Giddens, 1992, p. 149). These women were aware about their self-autonomy as many of them shared their dissatisfaction with their lack of decision-making power and emotional support by their husbands, but they had not desire for the equalization of their conjugal relation. Niva's narrative is a good example of this.

Giddens (1991) describes the value of *confluent love* or *pure relation*, as based on intimacy and commitment towards intimate relations. This is required to make such relationships to stand a chance of lasting (Giddens, 1991, pp. 92-94). The narratives of the informants show that the lack of attention of their husbands towards their complaints escalated their dissatisfactions and increased their stress. They accepted and compromised with many of the problems to keep the marriage going; nevertheless, their dissatisfactions increased later in the face of the lack of their husbands' willingness to change. This also indicates their desire for a romantic relation with their husbands, too. Thus, the gap between their expectations and their achievements in reality made them upset, frustrated, angry and conflicting with their husbands, which burdened them with psychological exhaustion and stress.

At the one hand, the study shows the presence of tolerance, acceptance and subservience in the informants' initial way of dealing with their marriage problems. These are very traditional ways of dealing with marriage problems in a patriarchal society. On the other hand, it shows the presence of modern expectations such as a desire for individual development and self-respect as human beings, decision-making power, and emotional reciprocity in these women. Their manner of bargaining with patriarchy reflects a mix of modern and traditional ideas and expectations. They wished to see themselves as a modern individual; at the same time they desired to fulfil their traditional role as an obliged wife, and expected their husbands to fulfil their traditional role as provider, too. This added complexity to the challenges they already had in their marital understanding.

# Chapter-7: Process of Divorce

## 7. Introduction:

As it is found in the previous chapter, both traditional and modern problems and values led to the marital disruptions of the informants and also characterized their negotiations with their abusive marriage situations. The previous chapter dealt primarily with the informants' perception of their marital problems. The present chapter deals with their practical way of dealing with the process of divorce. This chapter focuses on, the separation of the informants from their husbands, the initiation of their divorce, the formal process of divorce, the possibilities of dower and maintenance costs, the custody of the children, and the overall considerations of deciding to divorce.

### 7.1. Separating from the Husbands:

The informants were asked about when they finally decided to divorce their husbands. They shared that they separated from their husbands when their marriage reached extreme situations. By extreme situations, they meant the level of their husbands' violent acts towards them. Most of the informants left their husbands' houses after they had been badly beaten and went back to their parents' houses. The duration of separation for most of them was from three months to one year or more. More than half of the informants left their husbands' houses with the intention to separate from their husbands without thinking about divorce. As Niva said,

*"I left my husband's house after I was beaten up by him. At the beginning, I did not decide to divorce. The presence of my son was one reason for that. My plan was that I would separate from my husband. But my husband preferred me to go for divorce instead of separation. Therefore, I initiated divorce."*

Thus, for the majority of the informants, separation was preferred to divorce in the first place. Mumu reported,

*"I left my husband's house after a big fight with him. I did not think about divorce then because I was five months pregnant. I thought he would be sorry, at least thinking about our upcoming baby. But I was wrong. By this time, I gave birth to my daughter. He even did not come to see his daughter. My cousin tried to negotiate with him and proposed to him to live in a separate house with me, since I had problems with my in-laws. I was not ready to live with them anymore. But my husband did not agree to live separately without his parents and used*

*the excuse of his economic incapacity. My father was ready to provide him with financial supports to start his own business. But he was stubborn in his decision. I realized that it was time to make decisions. In this period, I went through so much mental exhaustion and also physical pain because of my pregnancy that it helped me to be strong. I made up my mind and sent him the divorce letter via the Kazi office<sup>17</sup>.”*

On the other hand, three of the informants shared that they left their husbands' houses with the mental preparation for divorce. Dina reported,

*“I tolerated my husband for a long time. I was confused and was not mentally strong enough to take extreme decisions like divorce. Moreover, I was in the middle of my study. And by this time, my daughter was born. But my husband did not change. I was exhausted mentally and physically by tolerating him. But, by this time I finished my education and started thinking about getting a job first. Still he used to beat me. Then I made up my mind that it is enough, I would not live an animal's life being with him any more. After thinking a lot, I decided to divorce him and left his house. Within a few months, I sent him divorce letter.”*

## **7.2. Initiation of Divorce:**

As mentioned, the scope of the study is women-initiated divorce; all the divorces were initiated by the informants. At the same time, most of the informants shared that their husbands made no effort to save their marriages after they separated from them or initiated divorce. In three cases, the husbands of the informants or their family tried to negotiate with the decision of their divorce. As Tania stated,

*“It was several months after I left my husband's house. Neither my husband nor his family members showed any headache over my separation. When I decided to divorce and sent the divorce letter to my ex-husband to sign, suddenly they became very busy to reconcile the problems. I gave him a second chance by withdrawing the divorce letter in the face of my parent's expectations. But within a few days I found that he did not change. Rather, the situation had worsened. Therefore I left the house. Finally I divorced him.”*

In a few cases, the informants decided to divorce in mutual agreement with their husbands. As Monami shared,

*“I preferred remaining separated from my husband because of the social stigma of divorce. But he was interested in a second marriage. At the same time, he wanted me to remain as his wife. He wanted to have two wives at the same time. That was very insulting for me. But legally he needed my permission before the second marriage unless we were divorced. I did not permit him to engage in a second marriage while remaining his wife. Rather, divorce was preferable for me at this point. Since he was interested in a second marriage, he also agreed to go for divorce. Thus we took the decision of divorce mutually.”*

Like Monami, two other informants decided divorce mutually with their husbands.

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<sup>17</sup> Marriage and divorce registration office is called as Kazi Office in Bangladesh.

### **7.3. The Process of Divorce:**

According to the Muslim marriage law implemented in Bangladesh, women have the right to divorce only if they have the delegated right to divorce from their husbands. But, as a result of legal reforms (see context chapter), the delegated right to divorce is by default given now in the marriage contracts of Bangladesh. Therefore, all the informants had the possibility to divorce their husbands. Many studies suggest that women are in unfavourable condition when it comes to exercising the right to divorce in Bangladesh (Ambrus, Field, & Torero, 2010). But the informants reported that the process of divorce was not difficult for them. The majority of the informants went to the Kazi office and filled out the divorce form. The divorce forms filled out by the informants were sent to their husbands through the Kazi Office. They did not need to go for any other formalities. As mentioned earlier, according to the Muslim marriage law of Bangladesh, after three months, if no party initiates negotiations to resolve the problems, divorce activates automatically. Therefore, the informants just sent legal notice to their husbands' address and did not go for any more negotiation. Two informants reported that they did not go to the kazi office; instead they managed the Kazi<sup>18</sup> to come to their house to do the formalities of divorce covertly. Monami said, *"I was very upset. Therefore, my father requested the Kazi to come to our house to finish the formalities of my divorce. I did not need to go anywhere for that."*

One informant took the help of a legal organization to negotiate the dower and maintenance costs. Only one informant went through the judiciary process to divorce, as she (Dina) said, *"my husband was very stubborn. I knew that he would not give me dower and maintenance costs. That's why I went through the legal process. I wanted to teach him a lesson. Therefore, I got my dower."*

### **7.4. Dower and Maintenance at the Time of Divorce:**

According to the Muslim marriage law in Bangladesh, women have the right to receive their dower and maintenance costs after divorce. But most of the informants said that they did not receive any dower or maintenance costs from their husbands. Interestingly, they reported that they did not claim their dower and maintenance costs at the time of divorce. Mumu said,

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<sup>18</sup> Kazi is the marriage and divorce registrar.

*“When I decided to divorce, my husband refused to give my dower and maintenance costs for my daughter and me. I even did not claim those things in order to get rid of him. To leave him was my main priority at that moment. If I claimed dower and maintenance costs, my husband or his family might complicate the process of divorce. Therefore I just wanted to divorce him; nothing else.”*

None of the husbands of the informants, as the informants reported, willingly agreed to provide dower and maintenance costs to the informants at the time of divorce. Many of them reported that if they claimed it, they needed to go through the judicial process by filing a case against their husbands. Going through the judicial process was complicated and shameful for them. Mumu reported, *“my parent were already ashamed of my marital problems. They did not want me to go through the legal process because they feared that by this, every one would come to know about my divorce. Therefore I divorced secretly, through the Kazi Office.”* Thus, many of them avoided the judicial process necessary to get dower and maintenance costs at the time of divorce. Some of the informants did not claim dower or maintenance costs from an emotional point of view. Tania said,

*“I did not claim dower or maintenance costs from my ex-husband. If I claimed dower and maintenance costs, legally he was bound to give me. I hated him so much that I could not think of it. He broke my heart and spoiled my life. I trusted him and married him with lots of dreams. But he broke all those. What else should I expect from him? Later I realised that I had to claim my maintenance costs. At least it could be a punishment for him.”*

A few other informants stated that they did not claim dower and maintenance costs from their husbands because this would lower their status.

Only two of the informants received their dower after their divorce. As Monami said,

*“My husband was bound to give my dower back at the time of divorce. I preferred separation instead of divorce. But he needed my consent or divorce for a second marriage. He knew that I would not sign the divorce paper unless he gave my dower. On the other hand, it was not possible for him to go for a second marriage without my signature. Therefore, he agreed to give me my dower at the time of divorce.”*

## **7.5. Child Custody at the Time of Divorce:**

More than half of the informants had children at the time of divorce. All informants except one got the custody of their children at the time of divorce because their husbands did not claim the children. The informants also wanted their children with them. As Nisha said,

*“My ex-husband did not claim his son because he did not want to carry the extra burden of his son. In fact I did not expect him to do this. I gave birth to my son being prepared to take care of him. From the period of my son’s birth, I did bear all his expenses. My husband created*



*such an environment that my divorce was as similar to conquering a war. It was a big relief for my family also. Moreover, I did not even bother for any dower or maintenance costs from him.”*

Obtaining the custody of children was easy for the informants because most of the informants' husbands did not claim the custody of their children. Some of the informants reported that the reason for not claiming the children was to avoid the economic responsibility of the children. Moreover, the presence of children might create problems in their second marriage. By contrast, most of the informants thought that the children were their only possessions after divorce. But both Niva and her husband claimed for their son's custody at the time of divorce. Niva lost her child's custody in the legal negotiation. At the same time she received her dower by several instalments according to the negotiation.

## **7.6. The Decision-making of divorce:**

The majority of the informants thought that they decided their divorce by themselves. Most of them took from three months to one year after separation to decide their divorce. On the other hand, three of them took a long time to decide to divorce. The role of their families was varied in their decisions of divorce. According to some informants, their family played silent or passive roles. As Tania said,

*“My family neither promoted nor imposed on me to divorce. In later days, they realized that my marriage was not working. I was suffering badly in my conjugal life. Therefore, they did not even oppose my decision to divorce. Thus, they were supportive to my decision of divorce at the end.”*

In a few other cases, the informants' families influenced their decisions to divorce. For Monami and Rupa, their family motivated and supported them to divorce because of the suffering in their conjugal lives. As Rupa said,

*“My conjugal situation was deteriorating. My husband was continuously pressurizing me to bring money from my family; otherwise he will not come back home any more. I was mentally very upset. I did not know what to do. Moreover, I was concerned about my two children because they needed their father. When my family members came to know this, they realized that my husband would never change. Rather, he would increase his torture regarding this. He might blackmail me and press me for money again and again. And if my family did not fulfil his needs, gradually I would be disturbed in my relation with my family. My family had a fear that if I continue my marital life with him, he could even kill me some time. So my family members wanted me to divorce. Finally I divorced my husband.”*

Another informant, Shila reported,

*“After consulting with the doctor, I came to know that there was little possibility of my husband’s mental illness to be cured completely. But I was confused what to do. My family helped me in deciding to divorce. They told me to come back. My brother-in-law gave me hope that nothing worse would happen than that. They would get me married to a good family again. They convinced me that it was better to seek divorce. It took me almost one year to decide to divorce. My husband was in hospital for six months during this time. But he did not cure completely. I decided to divorce him finally by the help of my family. I came back to my mother’s house. After I came back there, it took me six months more to initiate divorce. I sent the divorce letter to my husband. He signed the divorce letter.”*

On the other hand, three of the informants experienced the opposite in relation to their families’ roles in their decisions of divorce. Their families were concerned about the damage of their social prestige in case of their daughter’s divorce. Therefore, the families of the informants wanted them to take more time to decide to divorce. As Nisha said, *“I did not accept my husband’s alcoholism but my family always wanted me to ignore it. I was unhappy with my husband’s dominance over me but my mother wanted me to accept all of my husband’s wishes in order to continue our relation.”*

Another informant, Dina, shared that

*“My husband was violent and used to beat me while arguing on any matter and my mother used to take me back home after that. But after a few days, my mother wanted me to go back to my husband’s house and wanted me to have patience and see whether my husband changed or not. Finally, I fixed up my mind that I would go for divorce. Thus it took me a long time to decide to divorce, only because of my mother’s resistance to my decision of divorce.”*

Thus the informants had different experiences in terms of the support from their families concerning their decisions to divorce. But all of them reported that in the end, they got the consents of their families to divorce.

The informants were asked about the main considerations that helped them to decide to divorce their husbands. The informants mentioned their educational assets, the prospect of economic independence, the presence of children and the suffering of their marital lives as the main considerations in their decisions of divorce.

## **7.7. Considerations of Divorce:**

### **7.7.1. Education and Economic Independence:**

Education makes an individual aware of his or her well-being. As Tania said, *“ I think it’s my education that made me realize that I have the right to live a better life. If I was illiterate I might not have the sense of honour and prestige in life as I have now. In our society, women are abused in every class. But the illiterate women even take it as destiny or normal life.”*

Most of the informants related their education with their economic independence. According to them, the main role of education for them was that they were able to earn and therefore took the decision of divorce without depending on others. Iva said, *“when I found my husband irresponsible towards my children and me, I realized I am an educated mother and I would not let my children starve anyway. Then I applied for a job and I got it. That’s how I tried to change my life.”*

Another informant, Nisha, reported,

*“Women initiate divorce to save themselves from abusive lives. Women need both mental power and economic power to initiate divorce. Education may be important for the mental power but economic independence is most important. If I did not have a job, I could not take the decision of divorce however I was abused in my conjugal life. Mental strength does not help if you don’t have the main power to survive, that is, your economic capability. I earned for myself. Therefore I did not worry about how I will survive after the divorce. If I did not earn, I might not get my family’s support since I would have been considered as an extra financial burden for them”.*

Like Nisha, some other informants thought that economic independence was the most important consideration regarding their decisions of divorce. Thus, most of the informants thought that their education and economic independence helped them significantly in deciding to divorce.

### **7.7.2. Presence of Children:**

The informants with children thought that the presence of their children prolonged their decisions of divorce up to a certain level. After that, the presence of children accelerated their decisions of divorce. They prioritised a good environment for their children’s upbringing. Most of them believed that a father is important for children but children also need a good environment for their upbringing. Their incapacity to provide a good familial environment for their children was one of the considerations to decide their divorce. As Iva said,

*“My marital life was very instable. My husband used to beat me and abuse me verbally. He had no role in my children’s lives. Moreover, I found that my children became victims of our everyday fighting. I had to bear all my children’s expenses even before my divorce. Therefore, I was not worried how I will bear the responsibility after divorce; I had my job. To provide them with a good environment was more important to me.”*

Like Iva, two other informants reported similar views. Rupa said,

*“I was worried more about my children’s future than me. In one sense, I divorced my husband not for the sake of my happiness but for the sake of my children’ future. I mean my conjugal life was not pleasant. We used to fight every day. My husband lied to me always to hide his activities. My children were growing up watching their father lying and fighting everyday with their mother. As a whole, they did not get a good environment. It was a bad indication for my children future. Therefore, I decided to divorce. My children were a greater consideration for me to decide to divorce.”*

Thus, four of the informants thought that the presence of their children played significant role for them to seek divorce.

## **7.8. Discussion:**

*Agency* is one of Kabeer’s dimensions of *empowerment*, by which she defines “the ability to define one's goals and act upon them”(Kabeer, 1999b, p. 438). To Kabeer, agency not simply implies observable action; “it also encompasses the meaning, motivation and purpose which individuals bring to their activity, their sense of agency, or ‘the power within’” (ibid). She further broadens the meaning of agency that agency can be played out in many forms including “bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance as well as more intangible, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis, which can be exercised by individuals as well as by collectivities” (ibid).

The narratives of the informants indicate the presence and exercise of agency at their decisions of divorce. The narratives show how they made sense of their marital problems and justified their decision to break away their marriage. The informants’ decision to separate instead of divorce indicates their efforts to obtain the most compatible solution to their problems. When they found themselves stricken by domestic abuse by their husbands, they sought separation to save their lives. This suggests that the informants possessed the ability to make choices in regard to their decision to divorce. Niva’s story is a good example of this. She went back to her mother’s house to save her life after being beaten up badly by her husband, while some other informants left their husbands’ house with the decisions to divorce

because they realized that their relations would not work any more. They acted on their decisions, which followed from their situations, which reflects the presence of agency- “the ability to define one's goals and act upon them” (Kabeer, 1999b, p. 438).

Furthermore, the informants’ initiation of divorce reflects their motivations and purpose, which they brought into their actions what Kabeer calls “the power within”. The majority of the informants’ decisions to go for the easy process of divorce at the expense of their rights of dower and maintenance costs, indicates their prioritization of their needs and interests. On the other hand, Monami’s denial to sign the divorce letter without obtaining the dower at the time of divorce indicates that she maximized her interest in the face of her husband’s weakness (his desire for a second marriage). Regarding the custody of the children, most of the informants claimed the custody of the children as they considered as their main assets and the inspiration in their lives. This shows the informants’ own way of maximizing the outcome of the situation in favour of themselves. This reflects the presence of “the power within” them, which allowed them to raise their voice against their abusive marriage and sacrifice their right of dower and maintenance at the same time, as a result of their individual understanding of the situation. This indicates that the claim of dower and maintenances was less valuable to the women compared to their decision of divorce.

Kabeer makes distinction between “passive forms of agency”, which is actions taken when there is little choice, and “active agency”, which is purposeful behaviour to maximize life choices (Kabeer, 2005, p. 15). We can see the presence of different levels of agency in the strategies and decisions of these women. Tania’s decision to divorce without any influence from her family after analyzing all the pros and cons of her marriage reflects the presence of active agency in her decision-making. On the other hand, Shila’s difficulty to decide what to do and the active role of her family and relatives in her decision-making made her delay the break away from marriage, which can be considered as a presence of passive agency.

Kabeer makes a further distinction of agency, between “effective agency and transformative agency” (Kabeer, 2005, p. 15). According to Kabeer, effective agency implies “greater efficiency in carrying out one’s given roles and responsibilities”, and transformative agency implies “the ability to act on the restrictive aspects of these roles and responsibilities in order to challenges them” (ibid). The narratives of the informants shows that even though many of them were able to seek divorce in order to escape the marital oppression, and tried to obtain

significant changes in their lives, their personal problems and solutions do not redress any change at the wider level. Their divorces remain on a personal level, which indicates that the informants had agency in an effective level but not at the transformative level.

Kabeer presents another dimension of empowerment, *resources*, which not only encompasses economic resources, but also “human and social resources which serve to enhance the ability to exercise choice” (Kabeer, 1999b, p. 437). The presence of education, the prospect of economic independence, and the children of the informants can be defined as such resources that influenced them to leave their marriage. As many of the informants reported, they already had jobs before their divorce. Therefore they did not need to worry about how they would meet their material needs. Those who did not have a job shared that since they were educated they were confident that they could get a job and survive on their own. Thus the study suggests that due to the development of socio-economic status of women, and more specially their ability to get an education and have a career and the legal possibility for women to seek divorce (see chapter 2), women are no more obliged to continue life in abusive marriages but can escape by initiating divorce. Furthermore, the presence of children was a big consideration for the informants to decide to divorce, as many of them shared that they could not provide their children a good environment because of the everyday conflict with their husbands. Thus, they did not want to lose the prospect of their children’s future by remaining in their abusive marriage. The study of Alam, Saha, & Ginneken (2000) on rural divorce in Bangladesh found that the birth of children keeps couples together, at least until the children are older (Alam, et al., 2000). But this study suggests that even though children prolonged the decision of divorce of their parents, they offer a point played as a driving role in the divorce of their parents. This indicates that both “push and pull” dynamics are present in the informants’ decision to divorce. The attempts to keep the divorce a secret by many of the informants indicate their concern for their social position. Nevertheless, the study suggests that in an urban context, anonymity, disintegration from relatives and increased mobility may make the informants less inclined to continue abusive marriages, and thereby increase the tendency to divorce.

## **Chapter-8: Post Divorce Life**

### **8. Introduction:**

Individuals enter into marriage with many dreams and expectations of making their own world. The collapse of these dreams by the termination of marriage may lead them into serious psychological crisis. Divorce may provide individuals with many positive changes; nevertheless the negative consequences of divorce may be severe for them. In Bangladesh, divorce exposes both men and women to distress and stigma in their post divorce lives. But the consequences of divorce are more severe for women, across class, location, and socio-economic conditions in the post-divorce period. This chapter presents the post divorce experiences of the informants. It includes data related to support from the families of the informants after divorce, social impacts of divorce, psychological and physiological impacts of divorce, economic impacts of divorce, and impacts of divorce on their children.

### **8.1. Social Impacts:**

The informants were asked about the social impacts of their divorce in their post-divorce lives. All the informants shared that the social impacts were the most severe consequences of their divorce. The social reactions and attitudes to their divorce intensified their personal distress to a great extent. They were faced by social stigma because of their divorce.

#### **8.1.1. Blame:**

Most of the informants shared that they were blamed for their divorce, especially by their relatives. As Tania reported,

*“Many of my relatives blamed me for my incapacity to continue my conjugal life. I started avoiding them. Still I avoid them. I don’t go to any party. I see their attempts to underestimate me. They always try to talk to me about my divorce. I see the difference in their attitudes. They don’t accuse me directly but they show me by their looks or attitudes, as if it was a question of my womanhood that I could not continue my marriage. I have isolated myself from them in every possible way to avoid these humiliations. I use to go to my office at early in the morning and came back home in the evening. I keep company only with a few of my closest friends.”*

Like Tania, almost all the informants faced challenges from their relatives and their social circles. But they had a few close friends from whom they received good mental support in the post divorce period.

### **8.1.2. Challenges Related to Getting a Separate House:**

Many of the informants reported that they faced challenges in accessing many facilities like getting a separate house. The informants reported that their relation with their family was deteriorating after they moved back to their family after their divorce. They tried to find a separate house for themselves but being a divorced and single woman, they were refused to get a separate house. Therefore, many of them tried to find alternatives to maintain good relations with their family members by staying away from their family. Niva said,

*“A few days after my divorce, I started living in one of my aunt’s house, mainly to keep good relations with my siblings and mother. A few days after my divorce, I noticed that if any crisis occurred in my family, somehow it came on me. It was difficult for me to accept those attitudes of my own siblings. My mother was also silent on those situations. There emerged many conflicts between us. Since it was not possible to find a separate house for me, I started living with one of my aunts, in another floor of the same house.”*

Another informant, Seheli reported that she rented a separate house in the name of her sister who was married, and that her sister’s family lives with her. Other informants reported that they felt unsecured if they were to live in a separate house alone or with their children.

### **8.1.3. Harassments in Working Place:**

Reactions at the working place to their divorce were not uniform for all informants. Some of them reported that their divorce status did not impact on their career because of the anonymity of their divorce, while some other informants had the opposite experience. Many of the informants reported that they hid their divorced status in social spheres as much as possible in order to avoid harassment. As Tania shared,

*“In our society men look at a divorced woman in a more dirty ways than an unmarried woman. They treat a divorced woman as if she is physically and financially needy. Therefore, they try to establish sort of unfair relationships with divorced women. Since a divorced woman is guardian less (in the absence of the husbands), it is easy to harass them in many ways. After my divorce, I was disturbed by many guys who were my office clients. They used to call me at weird times and offered me to go out with them. I refused but I had to suffer mentally.”*



Like Tania, some other informants reported that they had similar experiences. Therefore, they were careful in communicating, specially with male colleagues. Mumu reported,

*“I have to communicate with many people due to my profession. And I always pretend to wear an engagement ring to hide my status. I even try to maintain a luxurious lifestyle more than the average standard of middle class women to make a certain distance from many people, just to avoid any kind of unpleasant situations.”*

At the same time, some other informants thought that they received sympathy and support from their colleagues. As Tania said,

*“I did not share with all of my colleagues because my boss suggested me to hide it as much as possible to avoid the risk of harassment. He supported me like a father. Since most of my colleagues did not know about my divorce, my working environment was not that much challenging for me.”*

Five other informants reported that they did not face significant challenges in their working place after the divorce, but they had to hide their divorced status as much as possible.

## **8.2. Family Support:**

All the informants reported that they lived in their parents' house at the beginning of their divorce. Most of them received support from their parents in their decisions of divorce, but they did not necessarily have good experiences in their parental house after the divorce. Some of the informants received mental support form their family, while others did not. As Rupa said,

*“My mother and brother wanted me to divorce my husband more than me, but now I feel that sometimes my mother is disturbed with me. She worried about my children and me. Since my children are small, they always need someone to take care of them. Since I was working, my mother had to take care of my children. My mother felt herself overburdened with the responsibility. So I had to leave my job to take care of my children. Whenever my mother goes to visit my brother or somewhere else, we are an extra tension for her. I have nothing to do but accept all this.”*

For many of the informants, even though their mothers did not say anything directly because of their affection, their siblings were annoyed at them after their divorce. Most of the informants shared that they did not have the same relation with their siblings as it was before divorce. Many of them identified the reasons for the bad relation with the siblings to be that their siblings were socially damaged because of their divorce. The divorce of the informants was a shame for their siblings. As Mumu said,

*“After my divorce the environment in my parents house was unknown to me. I discovered a change in my parents and sisters’ attitudes towards me. They made me understand that I am a stranger in that house. So I should stay out of many of their family matters. I did not react against this, since my daughter was very small and I had to stay with my parents. So I needed their support however it was. After divorce, the list of blame against me was increasing in my parents’ house. My mother blamed me for her sickness. On the other hand, they did not try to understand what psychological pressure I was passing through. I accepted all this because of my daughter.”*

Like Mumu, many other informants were frustrated by the reactions of the family after their divorce. At the same time, the informants reported that the problem was not one sided. Many informants thought that their divorce created a serious problem for their family too. As Sifat shared, *“my family faced challenges to find a bride from a good family for my brother because of my divorce. Many proposals for him were rejected because of my divorce. Because my divorce indicated that my family is a defect family.”*

Most of the informants thought that their father’s social position was damaged because of their divorce. Some of the informants said that their divorce caused damage to the personal relations of the family members. As Mumu said, *“after my divorce, the relation between my father and mother deteriorated because they were blaming each other for my immature decision of marriage and divorce as well. Moreover, my father was ashamed socially because of my divorce.”*

This is how the informants related the impact of their divorce on their family and social life. The informants thought that their relations with their family deteriorated because of the social stigma of their divorce. The more their families were ridiculed by others, the more the informants faced challenges in the relationships with their families.

### **8.3. Psychological and Physiological Impacts:**

The informants reported significant psychological stress in relation to their family support and the social view of their divorce. When the informants were asked about the psychological impacts of their divorce, most of them reported that the divorce left them with pain, anxiety, and uncertainty and with the feeling of failure because they had not been able to continue their marriage for the rest of their life. Moreover, the social attitudes towards them and their family, and the unpleasant relations within the family as a consequence of the social stigma of

their divorce, made them exhausted in their post divorce life. Thus for them, the main challenges after divorce came from the social sphere. They were much more upset and ashamed about their divorce because of the social reactions. Many of the informants reported that others did not blame them directly; nevertheless people always showed curiosity to discuss their divorce, which was embarrassing to them. Many of them reported that they wanted to forget the chapter of divorce in their life. To the informants, the more their divorce was discussed by others, the more they were distressed and the less they could forget their marital disruption. As Rupa said,

*“Wherever I went, the incident of my divorce became a topic for discussion for all. They might be sympathetic for me, but I felt that they tried to disclose my failure to continue my married life. I found that I had few things in common to discuss with them. Their discussion shamed me more than my personal feeling regarding my divorce.”*

Thus, most of the informants thought that they were treated as belonging to a different group because of their divorce. They found that divorced women are socially excluded from their married friends in many extents. Several of them reported that they lost many of their friends because of their divorce. Many of them were also unwilling to stay in contact with their friends. Therefore, they pulled away from their friends and social circle. As Nisha said,

*“I could not maintain relations with many of my married friends because there was little in common between us. Moreover, the family of many of them did not want them to pass time with me. The family members of many of my friends feared that they might be influenced by me in a negative way and they might lose the peace of their conjugal lives.”*

Like Nisha, many other informants had similar experiences from their friends' circle, which made them lonely, ashamed and unconfident.

Many of the informants thought that they had to change their life style because of the social views towards them after their divorce. They reported that they even changed their get-up and make-up for appearances in the social sphere, because of a feeling that a stylish lifestyle was not expected from them any more. As Tania said,

*“After marriage, women get good feelings by shopping, decorating themselves and attending social gatherings. So did I. But after divorce I avoid all those social gatherings and activities. Even if I have to attend some parties, I neither wear expensive or stylish garments nor use jewelleryes. I find these things unsuitable for me. It may look weird to others if I decorate myself. This is my personal feeling. But I believe that our society also expects in a way.”*

Many of the informants mentioned increased health disturbances because of their stressful mental conditions after divorce. As Seheli said,

*“Even though I don’t care what others think about my divorce, I could not overlook all reactions. Moreover, I was burdened with debt since I had to bear my own marriage expenses by taking loans from others. After the divorce, I was very helpless concerning how to handle all those things together. I was sick because of my mental stress.”*

Monami also had a similar experience, *“within very few days after my divorce my physical condition deteriorated very badly. I lost my weight and beauty because of mental pressure. At the beginning after my divorce I could not even accept being divorced myself.”*

The informants were asked about their plans for a second marriage. Some of them expressed their interest in a second marriage, whereas other informants did not because of their unpleasant experiences in the first marriage. Those who were interested in remarriage reported that they faced with challenges in getting a suitable partner for a second marriage because of their divorce. As Seheli shared, *“sometimes my relatives bring marriage proposals for me but according them, now I am acceptable to only divorced men or too elderly men who are widowers.”*

Many informants were uncertain whether they would gain the trust of their new partners in case of remarriage due to their divorce. They thought that they might face challenges in achieving trust for their new partners. Others were interested in a second marriage if they got a suitable and reliable partner.

#### **8.4. Economic Impacts:**

Most of the informants were involved in jobs before their divorce. Therefore they did not face financial crisis significantly after their divorce. Many of them reported that even though they did not get a very good salary, they were capable of maintaining their life at an average standard. Few of the informants were not involved in a job before divorce, but they took jobs after their divorce to adjust to their economic expenses. The informants reported that they started to work so that they did not become burdens to their families. Moreover, some informants shared that they also involved themselves in a job in order to get rid of the mental anxiety. Five informants had one or two children at the time of divorce. Therefore, they had no other options but to get a job in order to bear their children’s expenses. A few of them got

a little financial support from their parents' house. A few informants reported that despite their involvement in jobs, they faced challenges to maintain a good standard of living because of their attempts to provide better<sup>19</sup> education for their children. As Mumu said,

*“I send my daughter to a English medium school, which is one of the most expensive schools in Dhaka. Whatever happens, I cannot stop working. Since I work in a private company, I get a good salary but my job is not stable. I am worried that in case I loss my job, how I will finance my daughter's education. Now I am looking for a secure and stable job.”*

The extent to which a divorced woman can face problems in case of lack of a job is evident from Rupa's experience,

*“I had a job before my divorce and I was continuing in it after my divorce, since I have two children. Moreover, my brother ensured me that he will bear some of my expenses. But suddenly I had to leave my job to begin my son's schooling. I have to take him to school and bring him back home and also help him in his homework. Therefore, I had no choice but leave my job, at least for a while. But I am worried how I will manage all these expenses without my job. My son goes to an English medium school. I have to pay a big amount of tuition fees for my son every four months. Now I am fully dependent on my brothers for my children's expenses. I am shy to ask money for my children but I also need money for them. Therefore, I am worried and uncertain how to manage all those economic expenses.”*

On the other hand, the informants who divorced more than ten years ago seemed to be very happy with their financial achievements. With time, they had been able to improve their situation and make a good career. They thought they are better off now. As Iva shared, *“my husband did not earn well. In my marital life, I had to earn to fulfil my children's demands. Before, I faced challenges in continuing my job, but now I am doing well. I am better off without my husband. I am earning good money and fulfilling my children' demands.”*

## **8.5. Impacts on Children:**

As mentioned earlier, almost half of the informants had either one or two children at the time of their divorce. In terms of the effect of the informants' divorce on their children, they thought that their divorce did not have any effect on their children immediately because most of the children were too small to realize their parents' divorce. They mentioned the effect of their divorce on their children from two perspectives, one was the personal understanding with them, and the other was the social effect of their divorce on the children.

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<sup>19</sup> By better education informants meant English medium education, which is private and more expensive than the Bengali medium of education in Bangladesh.

### **8.5.1. Personal Understanding:**

The informants shared that they did not have any problem of personal understanding with their children because of their divorce. As Iva said,

*“I did not face any problem with my children because of my divorce, since I disclosed everything to them when they were curious about their father’s absence. Since their father was absent, I tried to spend more time with my children than other married working mothers. I tried to establish an open and friendly relation with my children. I tried to fulfil all their demands. Now they are mature enough to realize everything. I don’t need to justify my divorce to them.”*

Other informants had similar experiences. At the same time, they were uncertain about the future understanding with their children, as Iva further said, *“now, sometimes, I face tensionfull relations with my eldest daughter. She is grown up and understands everything. She has a friend circle. She might be uncomfortable with her friends about my divorce.”*

Like Iva, a few other informants also feared that in the future, their children might blame them for their divorce. But most of the informants let their children meet their fathers occasionally.

### **8.5.2. Social Adjustment:**

Many of the informants shared that even though they were able to minimize the effects of their divorce on their children in their personal relation, the children faced problems in their social lives. Some of them faced problems getting their children admitted to good schools. According to them, many schools give importance to parents’ marital status when they admit children, because the children of divorced parents might be mentally disturbed and inattentive. Therefore, many schools do not want them. As Nisha reported,

*“My son was rejected from admission in a school despite his qualifying in the admission test, just because of my divorced status. My son only got the admission after my personal request to the principal of that school. And the principal made me provide a written agreement for the admission of my son in his school. That was so frustrating and insulting for my son and me. But I could do nothing about it.”*

All the informants had their children admitted to English medium schools. According to them, English medium schools are more modern minded and liberal concerning issues related to divorce. Thus, the informants tried to seek a liberal environment for their children so that others would not embarrass them because of their mother’s divorce. They shared that even

though English medium schools are more expensive, they found no other suitable options. Nevertheless, the children were faced by a variety of questions from their schoolmates about their fathers. As Rupa said, *“several days my son was asked by his school friends why his father did not come to take him from school, but my son could not answer to his friends’ questions. After coming back home, he asked me the same question but it was difficult for me to make him understand in the beginning, since he was very small.”*

Like Rupa, many informants had the fear that their children might be discriminated by their friends in the future.

The informants shared their concern that when their children will be adult, the absence of their fathers might affect them badly, especially in the case of daughters. As Iva reported,

*“My daughter is an adult now. Many of her friends are getting married. She obviously thinks about her marriage. Even though my daughter doesn’t tell anything to me directly, I can see that sometimes she is disturbed because of her father’s absence. My daughter fears that she might face difficulties in getting married because of my divorce.”*

Despite many challenges encountered after the divorce, all the informants thought that their decision to get divorced was right. Nisha said,

*“I was ready to face social problems after the divorce, because I knew our society. But it does not matter to me what others say about my divorce. When I was in trouble in my marriage, they were not helping for me. It was me who suffered and only I could feel my situation. I could not risk my life living with my abusive husband. In late period before my separation, he was very aggressive; he might have killed me. Others did not help me in those situations. Why should I care about them?”*

Another informant, Iva said, *“when my husband did not care to bear his responsibility, no one came to give meals to my children, no one came to pay my hospital bills except my family. Why should I care what they say now of my decision of divorce? I may not protest against their criticisms, but I do not care really.”*

Thus the informants rationalized their decision of divorce. This reflects their emphasis on their individual needs rather than on the social perception of their divorce. Moreover, they mentioned many positive changes in their lives following the divorce.

## **8.6. Positive Impacts of Divorce on Children:**

Many of the informants reported that the divorce had negative consequences for their children. Nevertheless, they found that their decision to divorce was the right decision. The informants thought that it was more important for them to provide their children with a harmonious and secure environment for their good upbringing. The informants used to experience conflicts with their ex-husbands on a daily basis. To them, that was even worse for their children's development. As Iva said,

*“Very often my ex-husband battered me in case of any kind of argument with him. My children were caught in the middle of our conflicts. They were emotionally very insecure watching all that. They screamed and cried. They feared their father a lot at that time. By divorcing him, I have been able to provide them with a secure life, which is more important for them.”*

Other informants had similar viewpoints. They prioritised their children's development in a good environment. They thought that their children are living better lives now, also because many of the fathers had no economic role in relation to their children's well being. They are involved in jobs and fulfil their children's needs in a better way.

## **8.7. Positive Impacts of Divorce on the Informants:**

Although divorce increases the risk of negative outcomes for women, it also brings possibilities. My study also shows this. Many of the informants thought that even though the divorce was very distressful for them, it has given them have their decision-making power in their own lives. As Niva shared, *“before I could not take any decision in my life. Now I am free. There is no one to dictate me. I faced problems in my mother's house with the adjustment to my siblings. Now I live separately. I don't need to be accountable for anything. I take all my decision myself. This gives me a good feeling.”*

Moreover, almost all the informants reported that they were happy with their career. They believed that they were doing better in their career after the divorce. Iva said, *“I don't think I could do anything better than I am doing now. I am running my own business very well.”* Another informant, Dina, said, *“Look at my position. Whereas my husband was not ready to let me continue my education, there was no possibility to work outside and make my own career. After divorcing him, I have utilized all my strength to work hard and now I have reached such a high position.”*



Other informants reported that even though they had to struggle a lot to confront many social challenges after the divorce, now they are more self-confident than they were during their married life. Over time, most of them have become mentally stronger to deal with the negative effects of their divorce. Iva reported another view in relation to her children, *“I feel very good that now I can fulfil my children’s demands. For them I work hard but I am very happy. I am the father and the mother of my children.”*

Thus, the informants, who had children, considered themselves as a more successful mother in taking the responsibilities for their children than other, married mothers.

## **8.8. Discussion:**

The study finds both positive and negative consequences of divorce for the informants. Negative post-divorce consequences were severe for the informants, such as blame, social rejection, challenges related to remarriage and getting separate housing, harassment in the work place, and loss of family support. This echoes the findings of Ahmed’s study (N. Ahmed, 2007). However, Ahmed’s study only focused on the negative consequences of divorce on women in Bangladesh. My study is comprehensive in this regard, as it extends the focus also to the positive consequences of divorce for the informants. When it comes to positive changes, the informants appear to have achieved decision-making power, increased economic success, and ability to provide secure environment to their children.

Kabeer develops the notion of “empowerment” that “refers to the processes by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability” (Kabeer, 2005, p. 13). Kabeer focuses on strategic life choices, which are crucial in shaping one’s life. Thus she considers *empowerment* as a process of change, which is played out by three interrelated dimensions: *resource*, *agency* and *achievements*. To Kabeer, the two dimensions *resources* and *agency* together constitute the third dimension of empowerment *achievements/outcomes*—“the potential that people have for living the lives they want” (Kabeer, 1999b, p. 438).

The narratives of the informants show that they had education (human resources), economic sufficiency (material resources) and the support of their family (social resources) at the time of their decision to divorce. When they were stricken by problems in their marriage, they

employed their agency, and tried to negotiate the problems in many ways. When they found, it was not working they gave up hope. Finally they decided to divorce to escape from their abusive marriage. To these women, marriage was a practical and emotional burden. Their ability to seek divorce can be considered as an ability to make (strategic) life choices, which is Kabeer's (2005) definition of *empowerment*. As the narratives of the informants indicate, the choice to divorce was crucial for them in order to get rid of abuse and get a better life. The narratives of the post divorce lives of the informants indicate that after divorce they achieved freedom and ability of decision-making, which they did not have while they were married. Niva's narrative is a good example of this, as she said that after the divorce she was able to decide how to live her life, she was not accountable to any one. Similarly, all the informants reported that they were better off without their husbands. Many of their husbands had not been good earners, rather they created obstacles for their wives to work outside and contribute to a better living standard by their earnings. Dina thought that her present social position would not have been possible to achieve if she had remained in her marriage. She was never allowed to work outside by her husband, now she was doing very well in her career. The informants who had children also thought that they were more successful in fulfilling their children's demands than their fathers had been before the divorce. Therefore, from the viewpoint of individual and material achievements, the informants appear to have been able to empower themselves through the decision to leave their marriage.

Kabeer further argues that empowerment includes not only economic gaining but also women's sense of their own value is linked to their achievements (Kabeer, 1999a, p. 35). The narratives of the informants indicate that psychologically, they were now confident and certain that they were good mothers as well as successful individuals with a good career, which indicates an increase of their self-esteem. For instance, the informants, Iva mentioned confidently that she was the mother and the father of her children, and several of the informants reported that they were happy that they were able to provide their children with a good and mentally secured life after the divorce. This clearly indicates the attainment of an increased sense of self-worth and personal courage, which is integral of achieving psychological empowerment.

However, Kabeer argues that institutional arrangements can constrain people's ability to make strategic life choices (Kabeer, 2005, p. 16). The narratives of these women show that making strategic life choices against the institutional arrangements may cost heavily for individuals.

Their quest for a better life through divorce at the same time exposed them to serious social stigma. They were blamed and socially excluded; as a result, they also lost the mental support from their family. This resulted in tremendous psychological and physiological damage to them after divorce. Many of them reported that in social gatherings, they were reminded directly or indirectly by others about their divorce. Their decision to divorce raised a question concerning their “female virtue”. The social attitudes towards divorce made them feel embarrassed, even though they thought that they had taken the right decision. The stigma did not only affect the informants, their divorce also brought shame on their families. They were defined as defect families by others. Sifat’s narrative of facing challenges in getting a good bride for her brother is a good example of this. Many of them faced challenges at their work places, and also in getting a separate house for themselves because of their divorced status. They also saw no hope for a possibility to remarry. Since the label of divorce was attached to them, some of them felt that they had to change their life style. They felt that they were undesirable to others. It is notable that they were not able to ignore all these negative social consequences of being divorced, and tended to isolate themselves from social gatherings in order to avoid exposure to these consequences. The social attitudes towards their divorce in a sense expelled them from social participation. This shows a significant subordination of these women to social and cultural norms, despite their newly gained self-confidence and decision-making power. This subordination constrained their empowerment. Even though they thought that they took the right decision by divorcing their husband, they considered these social costs as unmanageable, although they tried to balance them with what they had achieved personally by divorcing their husbands. Moreover, despite their ability to provide good environments for and fulfil the needs of the children, they (the children) also faced challenges socially because of their mothers’ divorce. Nisha’s experience regarding her son’s school admission is a good example of this. Despite the mothers’ good attempts to cover the responsibilities of a father in the lives of their children, the divorce created problems in the children’s social lives that the mothers were unable to solve.

Thus on the one hand, the informants’ sense of having taken the right decision by divorcing their husbands shows their increased agency and empowerment within themselves. On the other hand, they have failed to achieve a good social life for their children and themselves because of the social and cultural stigmatisation of divorce. Their incapacity to resist or negotiate the social sanctions indicates that they have failed to achieve empowerment on a transformative level. In fact, the social and cultural stigmatisation of divorcees seems to have

turned them into a distinct social group, defined by social exclusion. Their increased individual agency becomes detrimental to them in some sense. Although they have gained power at the individual level, they have lost their social existence. Thus the study shows both increased levels of self-worth and loss of social status and influence in these women's post-divorce lives. Therefore, their decision to divorce appears to have both empowered and disempowered the informants.

## **Chapter-9: Concluding Remarks**

### **9. Conclusion:**

This study has attempted to explore how divorce initiated by middle class women is perceived by themselves and their social surroundings in Dhaka, Bangladesh. In the attempt to explore this general objective, the specific objectives of the study were to explore the reasons behind divorce initiated by middle class women in Dhaka, Bangladesh; to explore how women's changing gender roles influence them in their own divorce; to explore the post divorce situations of divorced women; and to explore the negotiations between women's agency and existing patriarchal marital structures in the light of social change or modernity. The study was formulated around the question of whether, by initiating divorce, middle class women in Dhaka are losing or gaining power. In the following, I present a summary of the main findings of the study.

The study has shown that different values and aspirations related to marriage exist in these women. There are traditional and modern values and perceptions and also expectations of romantic love present in the lives and reasoning of these women. Thus, the study indicates a transition in practices and expectations of marriage going on among the women. This mix of different values and aspirations lead them to face many problems in their marital lives. Many reasons for divorce prevalent in modern societies such as emotional abuse, lack of individual freedom, and lack of understanding appear in the narratives of the informants as well as many traditional problems and reasons for divorce such as infertility, physical abuse, alcohol and drug abuse, and the husband's failure as provider. At the same time, a desire and expectation of a romantic married life is also reflected in these women's reasoning around marital disruption.

The study further discloses the functioning of a range of patriarchal negotiations in the lives of the women. Some times they dealt with their abusive marriage in traditional ways such as by involving parents, or by trying to adjust to the marital problems, and some times they resisted the terms of abusive marriages for the sake of their individual well-being. They employ acceptance, tolerance, manipulation, resistance and subservience as tools of their negotiations of their coarse marriage terms. Thereby, the study elucidates a variety of

*patriarchal bargaining*, as suggested by Deniz Kandiyoti (1988), in these women's married life to maximize their situations. They show both active and passive agency in their dealings with their abusive marriages. Their socio-economic position, particularly, their economic independence, appears to be a significant factor of influence in relation to these women's decision to divorce.

It is important to note that as long as they were at the marital relation, they were able to employ techniques and strategies of negotiation to maximize their own interests. However, once they left out of the marriage, the post-divorce consequences were no longer manageable by them. They in a way became sidelined by the society. The study affirms that in their post-divorce life, they are personally happy as single women and as mothers. They feel that they have gotten back their freedom, liberty and decision making power, and they are able to bear the responsibility of their children alone. The majority of these women is more confident in their present life and believes that they could not have been as successful in their career and also as mothers, had they remained in their marriage. This asserts the personal achievements and the power within these women. On the other hand, their decisions to divorce have proved detrimental to their social life. They are blamed and excluded by their social networks, and even sometimes by their family, because of the social stigma of divorce. Their decision to divorce makes society question their womanhood. They are treated as a different class (a defect class) by their relatives and social circle. Thereby, the women and their children are deprived of familial and social contact and belonging. To them, social life becomes embarrassing in many regards, despite their personal achievements. Thus, the social stigma of divorce imposes immense psychological costs on these women. They cannot resist the social sanctions imposed on them due to their divorce but have to accept them. This indicates that although the women are able to exercise effective agency, they, to a large extent, fail to exercise transformative agency. The study shows a win-loose situation in these women's lives.

It can be argued that the modern values that have intervened in the marriage expectations of these women who live in a traditional society that remains heavily influenced by traditional values have made their lives more complicated. Breaking the silence and raising their voices against the submissiveness by breaking away from the marriage, has made them stronger as individuals but socially more vulnerable. They are rejected by their families, relatives and the society. They are made to feel guilty for breaking the chain of patriarchy by their stands

against their husbands and challenging their abusive marriages. Hence, by seeking divorce they have not been able to break the chain of patriarchy. Therefore, the extent to which leaving their abusive marriages, has lead to the empowerment of these middle class women is arguable.

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## Appendix-1

### List of the Key Informants:

Name	Age	Education	Background	Profession
Tania	38	Masters	Middle	Working
Dina	42	Masters	Higher-middle	Working
Shila	30	Masters	Middle	Working
Iva	45	Masters	Middle	Working
Mumu	29	Graduation	Higher-middle	Working
Sifat	31	Masters	Middle	Working
Monami	32	Graduation	Higher-middle	Working
Nisha	38	Masters	Middle	Working
Seheli	30	Masters	Middle	Working
Niva	31	Masters	Middle	Working
Rupa	38	Masters	Middle	Housewife

## **Appendix-2**

### **Interview questions (divorced women)**

#### **Part 1: History of marriage and divorce.**

##### **Marriage:**

*Question 1.* Why don't we start from the beginning.... Tell me how the two of you met and got together?

a. Did u have arranged marriage or love marriage? Tell me more about it.

*Question 2.* How long did u take time to decide, before you got married?

a. How long did you know each other before you got married?

*Question 3.* How did you decide to marry him?

a. Was it an easy decision for u?

b. Was it a difficult decision for u?

*Question 4.* How was the understanding and adjustments between you at the beginning of your married life?

##### **Divorce:**

*Question 5.* What type of problems did you face in marital understanding?

a. How and when did u come to realize the tension in your marital life?

b. How did you start negotiating with the problems?

*Question 6.* Did you have the delegated right to divorce?

a. Have you been aware of your right to divorce?

*Question 7.* When did u start thinking that it is not possible to continue your marriage?

a. How long did u take in deciding to divorce or separation?

b. What are the causes that led you to initiate divorce?

c. How did you get divorce finally?

- d. Did you face any challenges in deciding divorce?
- e. How was this?

*Question 8.* How was the legal process of your divorce?

- a. Do you think you faced challenges through the legal process in a discriminated way?
- b. How was it?

*Question 9.* Did you have children?

- a. Who owns the children now?
- b. How did you negotiate with the custody of your children?

**Post divorce:**

*Question 10.* How did your family members react at your decision of divorce?

- a. How did your relative/ other well-wishers (friends) react at your decision of divorce?
- b. Did you find any difference in them I mean treating u in the same way or differently?
- c. How was it before and is it now?

*Question 11.* Whom do you live with now?

- a. With parents or alone?
- b. If alone, do you face any challenge in living alone in a society like Bangladesh?
- c. How do you manage your economic life-all the expenses in daily life?
- d. Do you think your decision of divorce had or has any impact in your economic life?
- e. How is it?
- f. What is the difference now and then?
- g. How is your social life and networking?

*Question 12.* How do you evaluate the combination social, economic and psychological factors and your divorce?

- a. Do you regret for your decision of divorce?

*Question 13.* How do you evaluate your undesirable marital life and life now after divorce?

- a. How do you compare the positive and negative aspects of your divorce?

## **Part 2: The Philosophy of divorce**

*Question 14.* Can you tell something in generally what are the things that lead a woman to decide divorce despite lots of challenges?

a. What do you think from your personal life?

*Question 15.* How do you consider or perceive divorce generally in contrast of marital disruption in present society?

a. Can you tell me from your personal feeling and experience?

*Question 16.* Do you think the social perception of marriage and divorce is changing? How is it?

a. Can you tell me about your parents' marriage?

b. What was (is) their marriage like?

c. Would you say it's very similar or different from your own marriage?

*Question 17.* Do you think divorce carries kind of social stigma in the context of Bangladesh? How is this?

a. How do women in our society cope up or should cope with this?

b. You just share your general ideas about this.

## **Focus Group Discussions**

**(Themes and concepts).**

1. Impact of socio-economic development of women on divorce initiation.
2. Factors and reasons of divorce.
3. Impact of divorce (also marriage) on social prestige.
4. Positive and negative aspects of divorce.
5. Relation between social change and divorce.