

Abstract

In the Indian society marriage is considered one of the most important stages of the family life cycle. That marriage is widely accepted and glorified renders divorce largely unacceptable and stigmatized. Using a qualitative approach the study aimed to present an insiders' understanding on how women's lives change after divorce and separation, coping and adjusting over time, needs of these women, their significant relationships, and their perceptions of happiness and success. Six theoretical perspectives guided the study, the symbolic interaction theory, social exchange theory, feminist theory, stress and coping, self-construal in the Indian context, and adaptation and the set point model of happiness. In-depth interviews were conducted with 30 Indian-Hindu women in the age range of 25 to 70 years from middle and upper socio-economic classes in Vadodara city. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data. Life after divorce or separation for most women involved losses and gains in materialistic and psychological spheres. Majority of the women experienced downward economic mobility after their divorce or separation. Gradually however, women turned their situations upwards in terms of financial and professional stability. Divorce and separation brought with it the need for urgent single-handed management of domains such as emotions, parenting, reworking the living arrangements and the associated dynamics, generating income, managing work and home life, the uncertainties and legalities of the ongoing court case, and dealing with diminishing support. Overall, the experience of divorce or separation resulted in a stronger sense of self for the women in comparison to the time when they were married or single. Most women articulated their conditional willingness to be remarried, thereby reiterating the significance of the institution of marriage. Overall, the glorification and normalization of marriage, subordinate position of women and gendered discrimination, and the strong stigma attached to divorce shape the entire experience of divorce and separation in the Indian society.