

Exploring the Experiences of Single Parents and the Impact of Divorce on Children: A Qualitative Case Study in a Selected City of the Maldives

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Abstract

This qualitative case study investigates the effects of divorce on children and single parents in a city in the Maldives. The research employed purposive sampling to gather data from divorced single parents with children under 18, analyzing the information using thematic analysis. The results indicate significant disruptions in the daily routines and responsibilities of most single parents, with many feeling overburdened and distressed. Psychological issues, such as isolation, panic attacks, and depressive symptoms, were commonly reported, often exacerbated by economic difficulties. Single parents faced challenges in balancing their personal, emotional, and financial responsibilities, which contributed to heightened stress. The study also highlighted the importance of available support systems, including resources and assistance, in alleviating the negative consequences of divorce on both parents and children. Healthy co-parenting relationships were identified as essential in reducing stress and promoting better outcomes for children post-divorce. The findings emphasize the need for comprehensive guidelines and mechanisms to support single-parent families, ensuring they receive adequate help to navigate the challenges of marital breakdowns. By addressing these needs, it is possible to mitigate the long-term impact of family dissolution on both parents and their children, enhancing their overall well-being and stability in the face of adversity.

Keywords: : Single parents; divorce; psychological distress; co-parenting; support systems; Maldives

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Introduction

The Maldives, renowned for its picturesque beaches, faces a significant social issue with persistently high divorce rates. According to the Maldives Bureau of Statistics (2024a), the divorce rate in the Maldives has remained at 9.7 per 1,000 people since 2014. However, there was a slight decline in 2017 and 2018, followed by an increase to 9.5 in 2019. In 2020, there was another decline, and since 2021, the rate has been increasing. The percentage change in marriages from the previous year has been decreasing, with a 7% decline observed in 2023, while divorces have increased by 3% across the nation (Maldives Bureau of Statistics, 2024b). In the selected city, marriages decreased by 19% in 2023, while divorces surged by an alarming 120%, according to the Statistical Yearbook 2024 (Maldives Bureau of Statistics, 2024b). Petrelli Previterra LLC (2024) reported that the Maldives continues to hold the highest global divorce rate, at approximately 5.5 per 1,000 people. In 2002, the country was listed in the Guinness World Records for having the highest divorce rate, at 10.97 divorces per 1,000 people (Petrelli Previterra LLC, 2024).

Historically, the nation has been recognized for its exceptionally high divorce rates, a trend dating back several decades (UNFPA, 2004; Nugman, 2002). Cultural norms within Maldivian society contribute to a prevalent divorce culture where remarriage is frequent and carries minimal stigma (UNFPA, 2004). This ongoing pattern raises questions about the socio-political and cultural factors underlying marital instability in the country. Divorce not only affects

the individuals directly involved but also impacts the larger family unit, particularly children. Research indicates that children from single-parent families are more vulnerable to emotional distress, behavioral problems, and academic difficulties (Amato & Keith, 1991; Hetherington, 1999; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). In the Maldivian context, single parents face challenges common in other settings, such as gender disparities, socio-economic obstacles, and limited support systems (Iba & Ashfag, 2023; Mariyam & Ashfag, 2023). Single mothers often struggle with employment and childcare, while single fathers face societal stigma and lack support (Coles, 2015; Harknett, 2006; Kendig & Bianchi, 2008).

The government has implemented policies such as the Family Act 4/2000, which sets legal standards for marriage, divorce, alimony, and child custody, in an effort to address marital instability (UNFPA, 2004). However, despite these efforts, the divorce rate remains high, reflecting the growing empowerment of women and their right to initiate divorce (Ibrahim, 2018). There remains a significant gap in research regarding the psychosocial impacts of divorce, particularly on women, children, and family dynamics in the Maldives. This study aimed to bridge this gap by examining the experiences of single parents in a selected city, focusing on psychological stress and coping strategies. The findings provide valuable insights into the unique challenges faced by single-parent households in the Maldivian cultural context and inform policies and programs to support families during these transitions, promoting both

children's well-being and societal stability.

Islamic Perspectives on Marital Harmony and Divorce

Islam emphasizes the importance of maintaining harmony and resolving conflicts in marriage through compassion, communication, and mutual respect. The Qur'an encourages spouses to live together in tranquility and to resolve disputes amicably: "And among His signs is that He created for you spouses from among yourselves, that you may find tranquility in them; and He placed between you affection and mercy" (Qur'an 30:21). Islamic teachings also recommend practical steps for addressing marital issues, such as patience, forgiveness, and seeking advice from family, community elders, or qualified scholars. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said: "The best of you are those who are best to their wives" (Tirmidhi, Hadith 1162), highlighting the significance of kindness and proactive conflict resolution in sustaining marital relationships.

When reconciliation fails, Islam permits divorce as a last resort, prioritizing justice and fairness. The Qur'an states: "Divorce is permitted for you, when you cannot maintain the ties of marriage, but it is better for you to reconcile" (Qur'an 2:227). Islamic jurisprudence outlines structured procedures to ensure fairness, including attempts at mediation, waiting periods ('iddah), and equitable treatment regarding financial rights. The aim is to minimize harm while respecting the dignity of both spouses, reflecting Islam's

balance between compassion and legal order in marital dissolution.

Problem

The Maldives has long faced a persistently high divorce rate, which continues to be a significant social issue. The nation is often ranked among the highest in the world for divorce rates, with various socio-economic, cultural, and psychological factors contributing to this trend (Petrelli Previterra LLC, 2024). Research suggests that economic instability, such as financial difficulties and unemployment, plays a major role in marital discord and divorce (Khataybeh, 2022; Yilmaz, 2022). As urbanization accelerates, lifestyles have drastically changed, further exacerbating marital breakdowns. Additionally, young marriages, often entered into without adequate psychological and financial preparation, increase the likelihood of divorce. According to Ahmed and Riyaz (2024) many young couples in the Maldives experience intense stress due to their lack of preparedness, leading to high divorce rates. Substance abuse, particularly among the youth, is another significant contributing factor to marital instability. Shita and Zeleke (2024) reported drug abuse as a pervasive problem among adolescents, which leads to strained relationships and, ultimately, divorce. Societal pressures and traditional norms also contribute to marital conflicts, as individuals often remain in unhappy marriages due to family expectations. These pressures, coupled with financial strain, contribute to the growing divorce rates.

Despite the high rates of divorce, research on its effects on families, particularly single parents and children, remains limited. Mariyam & Ashfaq (2023) note that there is a lack of comprehensive studies on how family dissolution impacts the well-being of both parents and children. This gap in knowledge hinders the development of support systems for single-parent families and their children, particularly in terms of understanding the psychological stress and coping mechanisms involved. This study seeks to fill this gap by examining the experiences of single parents in a selected city in the Maldives, with a focus on the causes and consequences of family breakdowns. The findings aim to inform future policies and interventions to support single-parent households and improve the overall well-being of children affected by divorce.

Purpose & Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of single parents during divorce and family breakups, focusing on their perceptions of the causes of these separations, the observed consequences for their children, and the strategies they believe are most effective in minimizing the negative impact of such breakups on their children's well-being. By understanding these key areas, this research aims to provide insights into the challenges single parents face and the coping mechanisms they employ, which could inform support programs and policies aimed at mitigating the effects of family breakups on both parents and children. Specifically, this

study aimed to answer the following questions:

1. How do single parents describe their experiences and emotions during divorce and family separations?
2. What do single parents identify as the main factors contributing to divorce and family breakups?
3. What effects do single parents observe in their children as a result of divorce and family separations?
4. What strategies do single parents believe are most effective in mitigating the negative impact of divorce and family breakups on their children's well-being?

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by two key theories: Emotional Security Theory and Family Systems Theory, both of which explore the impacts of family breakdowns on children's emotional and developmental well-being. By applying these theories to the Maldivian context, a Small Island Developing State (SIDS), this study contributes to broader research debates on how cultural, social, and economic factors unique to SIDS interact with family dynamics to shape children's outcomes.

Emotional Security Theory

Emotional Security Theory emphasizes the importance of emotional stability within the family and how disruptions, such as divorce, affect children's emotional security (Cummings & Davies, 2011). The theory suggests that children's emotional security is influenced by their exposure to interparental conflict and parental emotional availability. Family instability can lead to negative outcomes, including

anxiety, depression, aggression, and academic struggles. Children from single-parent families, particularly those experiencing high conflict, are more likely to face emotional and behavioral challenges due to reduced emotional support (Azuka-Obieke, 2013). This study extends the theory by examining how social norms, extended family support, and community practices in the Maldives, as a SIDS, mediate or exacerbate these outcomes, offering insights into contextual variations that are often underexplored in the literature on small island contexts.

Family Systems Theory

Family Systems Theory examines how the family composition affects children's development (Hosain, 2025). According to Malik, Mahmood, and Abbas (2022) children in intact two-parent families generally experience better psychosocial and educational outcomes. In contrast, single-parent families often face challenges such as financial strain, reduced parental supervision, and social isolation, which can hinder children's cognitive and behavioral development (Chavda & Nisarga, 2023; Karst, 2000). This theory suggests that the dissolution of the family unit leads to emotional stress and behavioral problems in children, which may persist throughout their lives (Hasbullah et al., 2024). By situating these findings within the Maldivian socio-cultural and SIDS context, this study contributes to ongoing debates about the universality of family systems outcomes and highlights the role of community and extended-family networks in buffering or amplifying the effects of single-parent households

in small island settings.

In sum, these theories highlight the critical role of emotional security and family structure in shaping children's development following family breakdowns. They provide a foundation for understanding the complex effects of single-parent households on children's well-being. The study not only confirms established theoretical expectations but also adds nuance by exploring how SIDS-specific contextual factors influence these processes, thereby contributing to broader cross-cultural and small-island research on family dynamics and child well-being.

Family Break-Ups on Children: Insights from Existing Research

Lived Experience during Family Breakups

Family dissolution is a significant social issue that impacts all members, particularly children. Divorce or separation leads to emotional and practical challenges for single parents, who must navigate personal grief while providing support for their children. Divorced mothers often experience intense loneliness, which further affects both their own well-being and that of their children (Jufri, 2022). Research highlights the importance of stable parent-child relationships and routines to maintain emotional security during family breakdowns (Nangia, 2023; Tang, Li, Ma, Zheng, & Li, 2023). However, financial stress, especially among single mothers, further complicates their ability to support and nurture their children (Dearing, McCartney, & Taylor, 2006; Munir, Yuda, Kusumah, & Suwandi, 2024).

Causes of Family Break-Ups

Several factors contribute to the rising divorce rates in the Maldives, including societal pressures, financial difficulties, breakdown in communication, and gender-based violence (Ahmed & Riyaz, 2024; Druzca & Tran, 2021). According to Ahmed and Riyaz (2024) additional causes, such as infidelity, polygamy, and career advancement contributes to divorce in the Maldives. International studies also point to similar causes of family dissolution, including abuse, cultural differences, and individualistic tendencies (Mortelmans, 2021; Thi, 2021; Shaari, Chau, Majekodunmi, & Esquivias, 2023). These findings indicate that family break-ups in the Maldives are influenced by a blend of socio-economic factors that are both locally specific and consistent with global patterns.

Consequences of Family Break-Ups on Children

Children from single-parent households often experience reduced psychological well-being compared to their peers from intact families (Yang, 2022). Research shows that these children tend to have lower self-esteem, academic performance, and exhibit behavioral issues (Aftab & Younas, 2023 ; Azuka-Obieke, 2013). The emotional strain of family separation can lead to long-term effects, such as low-quality relationships in adulthood (Shanoora, Hamsan, Abdullah, & Khir, 2021). Behavioral problems and academic struggles are prevalent, with children from divorced families more likely to engage in criminal activities due to inadequate supervision and financial

strain (Cherlin, 2005; Karst, 2000). The increase in divorce rates has been associated with a decline in academic performance and the emergence of behavioral issues among children (Iqbal, Khalid, Rehman, & Yanping, 2021).

Effective Strategies for Minimizing Negative Impact

To mitigate the adverse effects of family breakups, single parents employ several strategies. These include providing continuous emotional support, maintaining routines to create stability, and fostering open communication to help children process their emotions (Ahmed, 2020; Amato, 2010). Effective co-parenting, where divorced parents cooperate amicably, also plays a crucial role in reducing confusion and emotional stress for children (Kelly & Emery, 2003). Additionally, professional support services, such as family therapy and counseling, are essential for helping children cope with the emotional consequences of divorce (Pedro-Carroll, 2005). Parental support groups further offer a platform for parents to share experiences and strategies for effective post-divorce parenting (Braver & O'Connell, 1998).

In summary, family break-ups have profound emotional, social, and academic consequences for children, particularly in single-parent households. While challenges such as financial stress and emotional insecurity prevail, effective coping strategies such as emotional support, co-parenting, and professional counseling can significantly help minimize the negative impacts on children.

Methods

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the experiences of single parents following divorce, particularly focusing on the impact of family breakups on children. Given the limited research on divorce effects in the Maldives, qualitative methods were selected to provide an in-depth understanding of this emerging social issue, free from preconceived assumptions (Creswell & Miller, 2007). Qualitative techniques, such as in-depth interviews with open-ended questions, enable the exploration of personal narratives, providing richer insights than quantitative methods (Butina, 2015). The aim is to understand how single parents and their children experience family dissolution, including the challenges and parenting dynamics they face.

Population and Sample

The selected population for this study consists of single parents who have experienced divorce at least one year prior to the commencement of the research, with children under the age of 18. The study focused on individuals living in the selected city, ensuring the research questions about the experiences of single parents and their children following family breakups were relevant and specific. Purposive sampling was used to select participants, as it allows for the identification of individuals who possess specific characteristics and experiences that align with the study's research aims (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024). The total sample size was 7,

with participants meeting the criteria of being divorced and being a single parent with at least one child under 18. This sample size is considered sufficient for achieving theoretical saturation, where no new themes or insights emerged from additional data collection (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Research Instrument

A semi-structured interview guide was used as the primary data collection instrument. This approach was chosen for its flexibility and ability to facilitate open discussions, allowing participants to share detailed accounts of their experiences while ensuring consistency across interviews (Belina, 2023). The semi-structured nature of the interviews allows for in-depth exploration of individual perspectives while remaining focused on the core research questions. The interview guide was developed after an extensive literature review and consultations with professionals, ensuring that the questions were relevant and comprehensive for capturing the participants' experiences.

Credibility and Transferability

To ensure trustworthiness, this study focused on the key elements of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement and member checking (Ahmed, 2024). Initially, transcripts from the first two interviews were shared with participants to ensure the accuracy of the interpretation (Rowlands, 2021). Data saturation was achieved when no new themes emerged during the interviews. The study's transferability

was supported by purposive sampling, which helped gather diverse experiences from participants with relevant backgrounds. The theoretical framework used to analyze the findings also allowed for easier comparison with other studies (Goldsmith, 2021).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained prior to data collection to ensure compliance with relevant standards. All participants were informed about the nature and purpose of the research, and their informed consent was secured before participation. They were also reminded of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. As the study involved recalling unpleasant lived experiences, necessary support was made available in case of distress during or after the interview, and participants were provided with relevant information regarding these support resources. To protect privacy, all personal information was anonymized, and data was handled with care. The study adhered to ethical guidelines, ensuring the rights and well-being of participants were respected throughout the process.

Data Collection

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews, which allowed for a rich and interactive exchange of experiences. Open-ended questions encouraged participants to describe their personal experiences with family breakups, enabling the researcher to probe deeper into their emotional, social, and financial challenges. Interviews were conducted in a comfortable environment to ensure

participants felt at ease when sharing sensitive information. The data collection process continued until saturation was reached, ensuring that no new themes emerged from the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed using thematic analysis. All interview transcripts were meticulously reviewed and transcribed to capture the nuances of responses from the participants. To ensure methodological transparency, the analytic process followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Naeem, et al., 2023).

An inductive approach was employed to code the data, with initial codes derived from key ideas, emotional expressions, and significant phrases mentioned by participants (Vears & Gillam, 2022). Each transcript was coded independently by the researcher, and codes were iteratively refined through constant comparison to ensure consistency and reliability. These codes were then organized into overarching themes that provided a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of single parents and the impact of family breakups on their children. Thematic analysis facilitated the identification of patterns and trends in the data, which were essential for addressing the research questions.

Results

Demographic Characteristics of the

Participants

The participants in this study consisted of six females and one male, with ages ranging from 26 to 50 years. The female participants were aged between 26 and 35 years, while the male participant was 50 years old. The duration of single parenthood varied among the participants, with one individual having been a single parent for only 1 year, while the others had experienced single parenthood for a period ranging from 3 to 6 years. In terms of the number of children under 18 years, five participants had one child, while two participants had two children each.

Regarding employment status, three female participants were employed, while the other three were stay-at-home parents. The male participant was self-employed. This diversity in employment status and family composition allowed for a broader understanding of how different factors, such as financial stability and work-life balance, influence the experiences of single parents following family breakups. The participants' varied experiences provided valuable insights into the emotional, social, and financial challenges that single parents face in the aftermath of divorce, as well as the impact of these challenges on their children.

Lived Experiences of Single Parents

Changes in Daily Routines and Responsibilities

The participants reported variations in their daily routines and responsibilities post-separation, with

some experiencing significant changes while others noted more subtle shifts. Participants who had previously managed all responsibilities on their own reported minimal changes after the breakup. In contrast, those who had relied heavily on their spouses for everyday tasks found that their responsibilities increased substantially, particularly in balancing childcare and work. Four participants described these changes as a "significant increase in responsibilities," citing the added burdens of managing both parenting and work without the support of their former partners. In addition to these practical changes, many participants had to relocate to new homes, adapt to new living environments, and take on additional responsibilities for their children's welfare.

Emotional Distress

The emotional toll of the breakup was evident in the experiences shared by the participants. Common emotional struggles included anxiety, depression, and panic attacks. However, one participant expressed a sense of relief from escaping a toxic relationship. Many participants noted that emotional challenges were exacerbated by inadequate support from others, leading to long-lasting emotional disorders such as sleep disturbances, appetite changes, and persistent anxiety. Participants 2 and 5 particularly struggled with severe emotional distress, including panic attacks and depression. Others, such as participants 4 and 6, experienced compounded emotional issues, including anxiety, sleep deprivation, and stress linked to the toxic nature of their previous relationships. Participant 4, in particular, discussed

ongoing emotional challenges following the separation. Only participant 3 described feeling a sense of relief and personal growth after the breakup. Overall, the majority of participants indicated that they experienced significant emotional and psychological distress, including depression, anxiety, and panic attacks, as a result of the divorce.

Causes of Family Breakup

Actors Leading to Breakup

The participants highlighted several key factors that contributed to the breakdown of their marriages. Communication issues and destructive behaviors were commonly cited as underlying causes. Many mentioned substance abuse, alcoholism, physical violence, and anger issues as major challenges during their marriages. Trust and stability issues also played significant roles in the breakdown of their relationships. Additionally, poor conflict resolution skills, infidelity, and misunderstandings were frequently mentioned as contributing factors. While most of the female participants shared similar concerns, participant 7 also pointed to cultural differences, religious beliefs, and work-related challenges as factors that led to the separation.

Specific Challenges

The challenges experienced by the participants varied, with some highlighting specific difficulties during their marriages. Three participants (1, 2, and 6) did not mention particular challenges, while others shared more detailed insights. Participants 1 and 2 described difficulties in managing parenting duties alone, particularly

due to their former spouses' lack of involvement. These challenges were compounded by destructive behaviors, such as substance abuse, alcoholism, physical violence, and infidelity, which contributed to the strain on their relationships and ultimately led to divorce. Participant 3 cited lack of family support and a toxic marriage as key factors in the breakup. Participant 4 pointed to infidelity and a lack of care and attention from her partner as significant contributors. Similarly, participants 6 and 7 mentioned issues related to work values, poor communication, and lack of support as causes for their separation.

Consequences of Family Breakups on Children as Observed by Single Parents

Behavioral and Emotional Changes in Children's Reactions

Participants reported a range of behavioral and emotional reactions from their children following the breakup. Participant 1 noted that her child did not exhibit any noticeable behavioral changes. In contrast, participant 2 observed significant anger and behavioral changes in her child after the separation. Participant 4 reported that her child developed skin problems and had difficulty adjusting to new living conditions, both of which were linked to emotional and psychological stress. Participant 5 mentioned occasional feelings of disappointment due to the father's absence, but no immediate behavioral changes were noted. Participant 6 observed severe behavioral issues, including violence and emotional distress, particularly in her older child, which required

professional intervention. However, the younger child did not show any behavioral changes. Participant 7 noted acting out and a sense of loss, which was consistent with emotional struggles following the divorce. The responses to the breakup varied by age, with different age groups of children exhibiting distinct behavioral and emotional challenges.

Significant Consequences on Children

The participants acknowledged that the breakdown of the family had significant consequences for their children. Participant 1 expressed concern about potential long-term psychological issues, though no immediate impacts were observed. Participant 2 specifically mentioned the mental health challenges faced by her child, such as anger and social withdrawal. While participant 3 did not elaborate on consequences, it was clear that the participant felt relieved after the breakup. Participant 4 observed that her child struggled with adapting to a new environment and questioned the absence of the father. Participants 5 and 6 emphasized the importance of parental presence for the emotional well-being of their children, noting that the loss of love and support from both parents was a critical issue. Participant 7 highlighted the challenges of adjusting to a new lifestyle, financial changes, and emotional insecurity, which had lasting impacts on the children. Overall, the participants agreed that family breakups negatively affected children's emotional and psychological well-being, particularly due to the absence of both parents' love, care, and attention.

Long-Term Effects on Children

While some participants did not perceive any long-term effects on their children, others recognized potential long-lasting consequences. Participants 1, 2, and 3 did not report any long-term impacts, while participant 4 believed that the effects might be minimal, as her child was very young and had not fully understood the concept of the separation. Participant 5 also reported that her child adapted quickly without significant issues. However, participant 6 expressed concerns about potential lasting mental health issues, particularly regarding future relationships and trust. Participant 7 noted that long-term effects included increased anxiety around food and adjustments to new living conditions, resulting from the financial and emotional challenges following the separation. These findings suggest that while some children adapted relatively well, others faced ongoing challenges, including mental health issues and difficulty adjusting to new living arrangements.

Effective Strategies for Minimizing the Negative Impact of Family Breakups on Children

Extended Family Engagement

Many participants emphasized the importance of encouraging children to spend time with other family members to maintain a sense of support and normalcy. Some participants also highlighted the significance of engaging with children through activities like reading mental health books together, fostering resilience. A few participants particularly emphasized the role of extended family in providing

emotional support and stability. For example, participants 1, 4, and 5 stressed the importance of maintaining close relationships with their children through regular communication and involving extended family members in the children's lives, ensuring that the children felt secure and loved.

Co-Parenting

All participants underscored the importance of co-parenting in promoting the well-being of their children. They agreed that maintaining a cooperative relationship with their ex-spouse and encouraging regular contact between the child and both parents was essential for minimizing the negative effects of separation. Participants 4 and 7 emphasized that effective co-parenting fosters stability and emotional support for the children. They noted that when both parents work together, it creates a sense of consistency, which is crucial for the child's mental health. However, some participants highlighted the challenges associated with co-parenting. For instance, participant 6 described how the lack of cooperation from her ex-husband created additional stress and complications, further impacting the children's well-being.

Stable Environment and Avoiding Negative Discussions

Participants who faced challenges with co-parenting noted the need to create a stable and supportive environment for their children. This included limiting children's exposure to inter-parental conflict and making an effort not to speak negatively about the ex-spouse in front of the children.

Some participants, such as 1 and 4, emphasized the importance of maintaining a positive image of the ex-spouse to help the children adjust. Participant 5 stressed the need for mutual respect between parents and no conflicts in front of the child. These strategies were seen as crucial in protecting children's emotional well-being and minimizing the negative impact of the divorce. Additionally, participant 6 emphasized the importance of providing a stable home environment, where the children could receive consistent support.

Establishing Support Systems

Support systems were crucial in helping participants cope with the challenges of post-separation life. While some participants had strong support networks, others felt isolated and lacked sufficient assistance. Participants 1, 4, and 6 leaned on close friends, family members, and personal faith practices to manage their emotional stress. However, participants 3 and 5 expressed feelings of loneliness and a lack of support during the separation process. Despite this, some participants found strength in their small but supportive social networks or religious practices. The presence of robust support systems was shown to significantly affect how participants navigated the challenges of single parenthood post-breakup.

Discussion

This study examined the experiences of single parents and the consequences of family breakups on children in a selected city, with a particular focus on the emotional and psychological well-being of both parents and children. The findings of

this research can be effectively interpreted through the lens of Emotional Security Theory (EST) which posits that children's emotional security within their family structure plays a pivotal role in their emotional and behavioral development. In the context of family breakups, disruptions to family stability can significantly affect children's emotional security, potentially leading to anxiety, depression, behavioral problems, and difficulties in socialization (Oluseye & Mvula, 2022).

The relevance of EST is particularly evident within the Maldivian context, where high divorce rates and family disruptions are common. As highlighted in this study, children from single-parent households often experience heightened levels of emotional insecurity, which can manifest in various emotional and behavioral challenges. This aligns with previous studies indicating that children from families with unstable or conflict-ridden environments are more likely to experience symptoms such as anxiety, depression, and behavioral issues, including aggression or defiance (Huang, Chazan-Cohen, & Carlson, 2024; Raslan, Hamlet, & Kumari, 2021). Therefore, the findings from this research provide empirical evidence confirming that family breakups in the Maldives have significant emotional and psychological consequences for children, corroborating the predictions made by Emotional Security Theory.

Furthermore, this study underscores the impact of parenting quality during and after a breakup, which Emotional Security Theory suggests is crucial in

determining children's sense of safety. In the case of Maldivian single parents, many face considerable economic and social pressures, which can hinder their ability to provide a stable and supportive environment for their children. These challenges often lead to parents being emotionally unavailable, which compromises the emotional security of their children. As such, this study advocates for interventions that not only address financial or logistical concerns but also prioritize emotional support for both parents and children. Counseling services, family therapy, and parenting programs could play a significant role in enhancing emotional well-being during and after family disruptions.

From an Islamic perspective, the well-being of children and the preservation of family harmony are of utmost importance. The Quran emphasizes kindness and justice in family relationships, and when divorce becomes necessary, it provides guidelines to ensure the dignity and responsibility of both parties. Surah At-Talaq (65:2) encourages parents to "consult together in kindness" for the well-being of the children, particularly in matters of custody and support. This aligns with the importance of maintaining emotional stability for children post-divorce, as emphasized in this study. Moreover, Islamic teachings stress the concept of 'maslahah' (public interest), which in this case supports prioritizing the emotional and psychological welfare of children during family breakdowns.

In addition to EST, the research findings can also be interpreted through Family Systems Theory which

suggests that changes in family structure, such as divorce or separation, require a reorganization of roles and responsibilities within the household. This theory is particularly relevant when analyzing the effects of single-parent households, where one parent often bears the brunt of the responsibilities. As revealed in this study, single mothers in the Maldives often assume multiple roles including balancing childcare, work, and maintaining a semblance of emotional stability in the family. This role reorganization can create additional stress and strain, further compounding the challenges faced by both parents and children. The emotional and social consequences of these disruptions are consistent with findings from other studies, such as Martucci (2023), who identified increased emotional problems among children in single-parent households.

This study also highlights the cultural context of the Maldives, where societal expectations and family norms play a significant role in shaping the experiences of single parents and their children. The absence of one parent often necessitates a shift in emotional connections and family dynamics, as outlined by Family Systems Theory. The research further reveals that societal norms may influence the level of support available to single parents, which can either mitigate or exacerbate the emotional and psychological impact on children. For example, while some participants had access to strong social support networks, others faced isolation and lack of assistance, which made it more difficult for them to cope with the challenges of single parenthood.

The study also identified several factors that contributed to marital dissolution, including communication breakdowns, destructive behaviors, and unmet expectations. These findings align with previous research, which indicates that poor communication and negative behaviors, such as substance abuse, infidelity, and emotional neglect, often lead to relationship breakdowns (Eshun, 2023; Ramadhanty, 2024). In line with prior studies, this research emphasizes the importance of addressing these issues before and during the divorce process to minimize the negative impact on both parents and children.

Islamic teachings discourage divorce unless absolutely necessary, but they also recognize it as a lawful option when reconciliation becomes impossible. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) stated that among lawful things, divorce is the most disliked by Allah (Abu Dawood, Hadith 2178), highlighting the seriousness with which marital dissolution is viewed in Islam. However, when divorce does occur, Islam places strong emphasis on fairness, child support, and continuing parental responsibility. Fathers are obligated to provide for their children financially (Surah Al-Baqarah 2:233), and mothers are encouraged to continue nurturing roles where possible, in the child's best interest. This corresponds with the need for positive parenting and emotional availability, even after separation, as found in this study.

Children's reactions to divorce were also found to vary, as indicated in this study, with some children displaying

behavioral and emotional changes, while others seemed to adapt more easily. This variation is consistent with literature on the topic, which suggests that children's responses to divorce are influenced by pre-existing relationships with their parents and the nature of the breakup itself (Cao, Fine, & Zhou, 2022; Chethik, Dolin, Davies, Lohr, & Darrow, 2021; Lan, 2021). The importance of maintaining positive relationships and emotional support from both parents post-separation is emphasized in the findings, as it has been shown to play a crucial role in facilitating children's adjustment (Kelly & Emery, 2003). This research further supports the idea that co-parenting and creating stable environments for children are essential strategies for mitigating the negative effects of divorce, as outlined by Okorn and Ojong (2024).

The study also revealed that co-parenting agreements were critical in ensuring that both parents remained involved in the children's lives, which in turn helped mitigate emotional distress. Participants who experienced positive co-parenting relationships reported better outcomes for their children, including improved emotional stability and a greater sense of security. These findings resonate with existing research, which highlights the significance of cooperative parenting in reducing the impact of divorce on children's well-being (Narbona, Mínguez, & Gaspar, 2021; Turnip, Harahap, Talli, Arminsyah, & Sebyar, 2024).

In Islamic law, mutual consultation ('shura') and peaceful co-parenting are encouraged even after separation.

Parents are advised to avoid actions that harm their children emotionally or physically. Islamic courts in many Muslim countries give precedence to the best interests of the child when determining custody arrangements, aligning with the findings in this study that emphasize cooperative parenting and emotional stability. These principles advocate for continued emotional and financial involvement of both parents to fulfill their shared amanah (trust) in raising their children with compassion, stability, and faith.

This study provides valuable insights into the experiences of single parents and the consequences of family breakups on children. The findings emphasize the importance of fostering individual resilience, building support networks, ensuring effective communication, and promoting collaborative co-parenting to achieve positive outcomes for children following family disruptions. By applying Emotional Security Theory and Family Systems Theory, alongside Islamic teachings on family responsibility and child welfare, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how family breakdowns impact children's emotional security and social development. The study also calls for targeted interventions aimed at supporting single-parent families, ensuring that both parents and children have access to the resources and emotional support they need to navigate the challenges of family separation and promote long-term well-being.

Limitations of the Study

This study, while offering valuable insights into single parenting and its consequences on children, has several limitations that must be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the small and homogenous sample size limits the generalizability of the results, as it primarily represents participants from similar socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, which may not reflect the broader population of the selected city or account for those most affected by family breakups. Additionally, participant hesitancy in self-reporting could have affected the accuracy of the data, as emotions may have influenced responses, and some interviewees might have been reluctant to disclose certain personal details due to shame or fear. Furthermore, the absence of longitudinal data means that this study lacks a temporal dimension, which would have allowed for an understanding of how the experiences of single parents and their children evolve over time. As a result, the study only provides a snapshot of the situation without capturing the long-term psychological, social, emotional, and developmental effects of family dissolution. These limitations highlight the need for future research involving more diverse samples, longitudinal designs, and more comprehensive methodologies to better understand these experiences.

Conclusion

This exploratory study examines the experiences of single parents and the consequences of family separations on children in a selected city of the Maldives. It highlights the emotional, social, and economic challenges faced

by single parents and the resulting impacts on their children.

Children from separated families frequently experience emotional distress, behavioral issues, and academic difficulties due to diminished emotional security and family stability. The study underscores the importance of these findings for developing targeted interventions and support systems tailored to the needs of single-parent households in the Maldives. It emphasizes the necessity of comprehensive policies that address both child well-being and parental support.

On a broader scale, the findings contribute to understanding how family structures, particularly in societies with rising divorce rates like the Maldives, shape children's developmental outcomes. The research advocates implementing supportive mechanisms to help parents and children navigate the challenges of single-parenthood more effectively.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, policy-makers and social service providers should focus on enhancing both official and unofficial social support systems, such as family, friends, and community resources, to reduce distress among single parents and their children post-divorce. This can involve establishing community-based programs offering therapy, self-help groups, and various forms of assistance. Strengthening social networks can provide emotional and physical support to individuals experiencing the stress of family

breakdowns, helping them cope better with their new circumstances.

Preventive measures should be implemented to provide couples with information and skills such as financial literacy, self-care, and conflict resolution before marriage or during its difficulties. Marital counseling and public education programs can be used to help couples develop healthier relationships and cope better with family challenges. By equipping couples with the tools to manage their relationships effectively, the likelihood of divorce may be reduced, and those who do experience separation may be better prepared to handle the emotional and logistical aspects of single parenthood.

Targeted interventions should focus on improving marital communication, addressing destructive behaviors, and providing counseling for issues such as substance abuse or infidelity, which are significant predictors of marital instability (Ejeh, 2024). Encouraging better communication and offering support for couples in crisis can help reduce the number of family breakups and ease the transition for children when separations do occur. By addressing these issues early, the overall well-being of both parents and children can be better supported.

Family courts, social workers, and counselors should emphasize the importance of maintaining consistent, nurturing relationships between children and both parents post-separation. Schools and child welfare organizations should also be trained to identify and support children struggling with the emotional impacts of parental divorce. Ensuring that

children receive emotional support and that both parents remain involved in their lives can help mitigate the negative emotional and behavioral consequences of divorce.

Parents and support organizations should prioritize creating stable and positive environments for children following a breakup. This includes stable living arrangements, consistent schooling, and maintaining routines that promote emotional well-being. By providing a sense of stability and continuity, children can better cope with the changes that come with family separation, leading to better long-term emotional and social outcomes.

Given the observed consequences of family breakups, such as poor academic performance and increased involvement in juvenile crime, schools and community organizations should develop specific programs to address the needs of children from separated families. Collaboration between law enforcement and social service providers is also crucial in addressing misbehavior in children from divorced homes. By creating a support system that addresses these challenges, communities can help prevent the negative social outcomes associated with family breakups.

Finally, further research should evaluate the effectiveness of different support programs and interventions, such as counseling services and parenting workshops, to determine which strategies work best in helping single-parent families. By systematically assessing the impact of these programs, more effective and tailored interventions can be

developed to support single parents and their children during and after family separations. These evaluations can lead to evidence-based policies that help families navigate the challenges of divorce more effectively.

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