

Exploring the Experiences and Coping Strategies of Divorcees and their Children in Asogli State of the Volta Region

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www.ijrah.com || Vol. 2 No. 3 (2022): May Issue

Date of Submission: 05-04-2022

Date of Acceptance: 22-04-2022

Date of Publication: 01-05-2022

ABSTRACT

The study was conducted to explore the lived experiences of divorcees, children of divorce, and the coping strategies they employed in dealing with their situations. This is a qualitative study that adopted descriptive phenomenological approach. A total of 20 respondents comprising 14 divorced women and men, 6 children of divorcee were used in the study and sampled through snowball and purposive sampling techniques. Data was gathered using semi-structured interview, and focused group discussion guides. The study revealed that the divorcees experienced physical, mental, social and financial problems. Children of the divorcee significantly experienced stress, emotional pains, sorrow, and worry about their condition. Again, the study revealed that divorcees and children of divorcee faced many consequences, they were not aware of availability of counselling services that could help them. It was recommended, among others, that divorcees who are mostly single parents must be given marital counselling and/or post-traumatic stress management. Again, the establishment of community-based counselling centres in the Asogli state for this purpose would be laudable. Finally, the District Assembly, traditional rulers in the Asogli state, Civil Society Organisations, and government agencies should offer care and support services to divorcees and their children including scholarships to children from divorced homes.

Keywords- Marriage, Divorce, Counselling, Children of divorce, Coping Strategies.

I. INTRODUCTION

Divorce is emerging as a global social phenomenon that challenges the sustainability of the family unit. Today, divorce has become a very common phenomenon all over the world, and the Asogli state of the Volta Region of Ghana is of no exception. Foote, Aiddous, Hill and Macdonald (1990) reported that more than one million marriages are terminated by divorce each year in America alone. In Ghana, a report presented by Medenu (1999), reveals that there were 6,530 divorce cases in Accra alone between 1990 and 1997. Again, the AMA (Accra metropolitan Assembly) from 2006-2013 recorded 4,049 divorce cases in Accra alone.

According to Ray, Bratton, and Brandt (2000), the accelerated increase of divorce is a major issue in our society. This situation is not different in Ghana. In the

Asogli state in particular, many young people between the ages of 18 and 30 are seen as married men and women at one time, and divorcees at another time. The fundamental reason for marriage is for better or for worse regardless of the challenges that may occur. In the same vein, it was shameful and disgraceful for an Asogli state man or woman to consider divorcing the spouse as an option. Acceptably, divorce is not an easy issue. Divorce comes with social problems and present challenges to divorcees and children of divorce.

Since individuals enter marriage with high hopes, it is expected that it is devoid of emotional and social problems. An emotional and psychological vacuum is created by the absence of mother and father as models of the feminine and masculine roles of primary source of affection to children whenever divorce occurs. From this perspective, divorce presents different problems that may

require counselling. Family roles may change, and some people would have to perform the functions previously performed by others. The combination of roles poses a management problem because it places additional responsibility on the Asogli state as third party.

In fact, available literature indicates that, divorce is not a desirable social phenomenon. Stinnett, Walters, Kaye (1984) stated that divorce was considered an unacceptable social step. Therefore, when couples get divorced, it is seen as the last option in the management of marital conflict because at the end, divorce presents significant challenges to both divorcees and children of divorce.

Elizerbeth and Clarie (2009), Kpeto (2010) and Nuebeck (2007) are some researchers who have researched into the problems created by divorce, but not much work has been done in counselling needs of divorcees and children of divorcees. Mosore (2003) noted that, the number of divorce cases increased by 16% throughout Ghana between 1997 and 2003. Considering the high divorce rate as reported by Mosore (2003), the number of divorcees who would need counselling services would increase. Yet the exact counselling needs of divorcees have not been researched into to identify the counselling needs of divorcees and children of divorce as a way to contribute to their social welfare and security.

Statement of the problem

Divorce is an issue that has attracted the attention of many researchers in various fields today because of its high prevalence rate in many countries and societies. For example, according to a 2012 estimate by the United States Bureau of Census, 52% of all first marriages end in divorce. California has even higher divorce rates, with 75% of all first marriages ending in divorce. Additionally, studies indicate that 43% of first marriages terminate within fifteen years, and 75% of divorced individuals remarry, the majority within three years. However, 65 percent of second marriages fail. Hill (2010) summarises the problem best: "It is a never-ending cycle of divorce." According to 2014 research by the Africa bureau of census, some nations, including Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zimbabwe, the high probability of divorce has remained impressively stable over the last two decades. Ghana is of no exception when it comes to high divorce rate. A report presented by Medenu (1999), reveals that, there were 6,530 divorce cases in Accra alone between 1990 and 1997. A total of 4,080 divorce cases were recorded in Accra alone over the last few years. Between January and April this year, the AMA (Accra Metropolitan Assembly) recorded 204 divorce cases. In Asogli state, the rate of divorce may not be as high as in the United States, but Asogli state has its own bleak picture. A report by Ho Municipal assembly confirmed that in 2010/2012 out of 500 people that got married, 210 of them divorced. Again in 2013-2015, 700 people got married and 315 people were divorced. The increase of divorce cases in Asogli state is cause for concern. The anguish associated with

court battles and separation, as well as the damage endured by children, demonstrate that divorce is most emphatically not something to be entertained.

Divorce affects the moral and social lives of adults and children. The sad aspect of the phenomenon the researcher has observed is that children from divorced homes are seen walking in the streets aimlessly. Most of them are school dropouts and a few only engage in menial jobs in order to make a living. Some are even homeless and throng the streets in tattered clothing. Many are also forced into prostitution, armed robbery, and child labour because there is no form of social support for them. The adult divorcees are equally affected by numerous problems of hardship, anxiety, depression, substance abuse and many more. Meanwhile many studies have shown that children of divorce have more behavioural and conduct problems when compared with children living with their two parents who are not divorced. They have more aggressive, impulsive and antisocial behaviours in their relationships with their mothers and fathers and what is more, they exhibit lower academic achievement (Madden-Derdich, Leonard & Scott, 2008). These findings are perhaps the result of widespread divorce which is plaguing the world today. The alarming rate of divorce in the Asogli State is a general concern not only to the people, but to stakeholders such as pastors, and the traditional rulers. There is not a single day that chiefs and elders do not sit on marital issues either to resolve conflict among couples or dissolve a marriage. What are the lived experiences of divorcees, and children of divorce in the Asogli state in the Volta region of Ghana.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Experiences of divorcees and children of divorce

2.1.1 Experiences of divorcees

According to Connor (2006), "divorce, regardless of the circumstances, is a painful process." It signifies the end of what has become familial and typical. I understand the anguish of divorce. I've witnessed it rear its ugly head in my mind and heart without remorse or regard for my mental well-being or happiness. I understand the anguish of loss and the subsequent low self-esteem associated with being behind. Connor (2006) continues to illustrate that divorce is never a pleasant experience for anyone. I wish you never had to go through this, but if you have, I can empathise with your sadness and pain.

2.1.2 Experiences of children of divorce

Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) studied sixty families over a five – year period in California and found out that for children, divorce consisted of initial stage, transition, and re-established stages.

Strong and DeVault (1989) observe that younger and older children respond to divorce differently, mostly in terms of how they express or do not express their emotions. To them, younger children react in a variety of ways to the initial news of parental separation. Guilt, rage,

grief, and relief are all possible emotions, and they frequently oscillate between them. Certain children may return to smaller behaviours, such as bedwetting or excessive possessiveness.

Strong and DeVault (1989) state that adolescents also find divorce traumatic but half of them in their research, felt relieved that their parent separated. Those who were glad came from homes that had considerable conflict; after the divorce, they tended to believe their parents' divorce was a good idea. Although adolescent usually experience immense turmoil within, they may appear outwardly cool and detached which for some of them was later found out to be dangerous to their health.

Kpeto (2002), revealed that 30% of divorcees' children live with either of their parents, 60% live on their own while the remaining 10% live with other people as maidservants, or house helps. He explains that divorce affects children and or fatherly love including all the psychological problems.

Consequences of divorce on divorcees

What then is the effect of divorce on divorcees in Ghana and more especially in the Asogli state, and what counselling interventions are to be put in place to overcome these devastating situations? Everett (1992), state that, the effects of divorce upon the partners are difficult to determine generally because they are influenced by factors like quality of the marriage, the degree to which the partners were emotionally involved with each other, whether the divorce was desired by one or both partners, the personality characteristics of the partners, and the couple views concerning the sacredness and permanence of marriages. The researcher, however, came out with some commonly experienced implication of divorcee by divorcees:

Rediscovering feeling of self-worth in which some married person interacts with each other in such a destructive manner that they damage each other's self-esteem. After years of destructive interaction, divorce can be an escape from the devastating interaction and can provide an opportunity to establish new relationship.

Other consequences were a sense of failure in the marriage relationship. Many divorced persons are nagged by feelings that the divorce is a result of their own failure to make the relationship better. They are condemn, more appreciative more understanding, more loving, or more determined, they could have made their marriage work and could have prevented its deterioration. Some of them have serious doubts about their ability to maintain any intimate relationship. However, others view the divorce not so much as a personal failure, but more as an unwise selection of a mate and look forward to a satisfying relationship with a compatible mate in the future (Everett, 1992).

III. METHODOLOGY

Research design

The descriptive phenomenological approach was used in this investigation. It is concerned with the study

of subjective experiences and necessitates the description or interpretation of the meanings of occurrences encountered by respondents throughout an investigation Georgios (2009).

The phenomenological approach seeks to illuminate, to find phenomena by examining how they are seen by respondents in each circumstance. In the human sciences, this typically entails acquiring 'deep' facts and perceptions via inductive, qualitative methods such as interviews and focus group discussions, and expressing them from the respondents' perspective.

Population

The population of this study comprised all divorcees and children of divorce in the Asogli state of the Volta region. The municipality had an estimated population of eight hundred divorcees and one hundred and fifteen children of divorce.

Sample size

A total fourteen (14) divorcees and six (6) children of divorce were the respondents. The divorcees and children of divorcees were selected two (2) towns in Asogli state. Out of the twenty (20) sample, thirteen (13) were female and seven (7) were male.

Sampling techniques and procedures

Purposive sampling and snowballing sampling techniques were used in selecting 20 respondents. Purposive sampling was also used in selecting two towns for the study. The breakdown is as follows: 10 divorced women, 4 divorced men and 6 children of divorce which consist of 3females and 3 males. According to Cohen, Monion and Morrison (2011), purposeful sampling is used in selecting specific target group. The purposive sampling technique was therefore used as bedrock to select divorcees and children of divorce who are specific target group and a typical sub – group among the whole population of the Asogli state.

Once one divorcee was identified he / she become the first contact or an informant. The snowball sampling technique was therefore employed to identify other respondents using the informant. The purposive sampling was used to select the two towns (Ho and Takla) because the Ho municipal assembly has a report on these towns in (2013) as having high divorce rate.

Instrumentation

Two instruments were used to gather the necessary data from respondents. These were: semi-structured interview schedule and focus group discussion (FGD). The combination of instruments used helped the researchers to collect sufficient information from both of illiterate and educated ones.

Data Analysis

The data acquired during the investigation were analysed using thematic analysis. To conduct the topic analysis for this study, the researchers listened to each cassette many times consecutively. After attentive listening, the data was translated into English from the local tongue. The translated data was then typed onto a foolscap sheet, word by word, phrase by phrase, and

sentence by sentence. Following the above initial steps, the researchers moved on to a more systematic listening and reading to capture what was represented in the transcript through thematic labels and worked through the transcript one by one and identified the themes. Some similar themes later were put together to form the patterns or categories for analysis. Also, those themes that did not fit into the patterns were reported verbatim. For easy identification, all respondents, themes and patterns or categories were coded. The divorced women were coded from ‘R1, R2..... R10’, the divorced men were coded from ‘R11, R12..... R14’ finally the children of divorced were coded from ‘R15, R16..... R20 including both female and male. The females were coded from ‘R15.... R17, while the males were coded from ‘R18.....R20 respectively.

IV. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

What are the lived experiences of divorcees, and children of divorce in the Asogli state?

It emerged from the data collected that divorce poses a lot of threat to the divorcees. These threats are mainly emotional trauma resulting from state of social isolation to physical ridicule. As one is worried about the absence of one’s spouse or “loss of love” he or she is the same time thinking about how to take up the responsibilities left for him or her. This makes divorce a double- packed agony. Below is a transcription of some of the interviews illustrating the lived experiences of some divorcees.

‘.....from my own experience, divorce is not good because it is one of the situations in life that disorganizes individuals and families, and more often renders life worthless.’ (R1, FEMALE)

The respondents view divorce as a condition that makes life meaningless. In that sense the divorcee’s whole social and economic life is jeopardized.

Another divorcee confidently supported the above notion and said that:

‘Divorce is a shameful condition that always creates a big vacuum in the family system making the family incomplete. We the custodial parents and our children are left to face all consequences divorces offer us. We become lonely and miserable and, in most cases, easily get annoyed with the least cause due to stress’. (R2, FEMALE)

The previous discussion may present divorce as problematic. However, it is not easy to conclude and say that divorce brings only negative results. In contrast, some divorcees were of the view that the divorce situation was so good for them.

‘When I was in that marriage, you could count my bones because of stress and frustration due to my husband’s behaviour. What the eye sees is what disturbs the heart. Look at me; I am now a healthy and sound woman. The beginning of this problem was hell.’ ‘vovo

le tre me’ (There is freedom in single hood). (R5, FEMALE)

Some respondents also explained that ‘vovo le tre me’ (There is freedom in single hood). This group stated that they are now free and mentally sound. Divorce liberated them from all the pains of marriage. This group of divorcees saw marriage as traumatic and undesired. Divorce was a more preferred choice. Yet they still live with the pains of the days of marital life. Many have not fully adjusted to return to normal life. Some do not want to talk about it. They were adopting the avoidance attitude to managing the conflict within themselves.

Lived experiences of children of divorce

It became evident that; children of divorce have problem with their moral training. Fostering is a major experience. This is not a comfortable experience for the victims. It affects their education and social stability. Sometimes the children are tossed from one foster parent to the other. This affects their development. The children are denied access to some necessities of life. One child said:

Divorce is not good at all especially in terms of training us the children. I was moving from one guardian to another. From one grandmother to another and from one aunty to another, changing schools and all other social environments at the same time. Meanwhile all these people I was to stay with had their different ways of training which made me to become fed up and I stopped the school and ran away to stay on my own with its consequences that are too much for me to mention now. (R20, MALE CHILD)

This brings an important observation to light. The absence of one of the parents in the family affects the proper functioning of each member of the entire family. Adjustment becomes very difficult, because individuals in divorced family are forced to go the extra mile in addition to their specific roles in order to make ends meet.

It was also revealed from the study that, divorce affects the education and entire social construction of the child as a responsible adult. It pushes the child to seek advice from wrong sources. This exposes the child to peer influences. One child narrated her experience to the researcher as follows:

With my personal experience I have noticed that divorce affects not only the education of us the children, but our moral and social lives are negatively affected. We rely mostly on the advice of our peers especially when our basic needs are not properly met and these push us into much deviant behaviour. (R16, FEMALE CHILD)

Divorce forces some children to engage in deviant behaviours. This is a sad aspect of the phenomenon. A child who became prey to deviant behaviours recounted her difficult experience during the interview session and said:

It took the grace of God for me to come out of some of the deviant behaviours especially fornication and stealing. All because after the divorce none of our parents was willing to work alone and looked after us. We were

left to paddle our own canoes. We are two and my elder brother is nowhere to be found now. Whether he is dead or not, no one knows nor cares about him. 'Hmm! Divorce has broken our family [Crying!!!] (R18, MALE CHILD)

This is a sad story of what children go through. Divorce makes adults out of children. It forces young children to assume adult roles to survive. It leaves children to fend for themselves. In this sense, divorce promote 'streetism', child prostitution, and child labour. These affect the proper development of children. It also threatens their safety. This is what counselling must focus on. The absence of counselling services in the Asogli area further compounds the problem. The children are left without any form of social support.

Research question: 2. What are the consequences of divorce on the divorcees, and children of divorce?

It was revealed from the study that the challenges associated with divorce were wide and varied. Divorcees in the Asogli state lamented and complained of many problems that they face out of their divorce. Some said life became so unbearable for them. They had to over-work themselves in order to survive with their children. Many respondents said they are currently in severe debt and do not know when they have to continue to borrow in order to send their children to school especially those whose children are in the higher level of education. One respondent said:

Even if I borrow money to trade, I am always in debt because the children have to eat, pay their school fees, buy books, and sew school uniforms. (R8, FEMALE)

Another consequence which came to light in this study was how to deal with loneliness. This problem was mostly associated with the men. They believe that for man to live alone is not good and can easily lead one to commit fornication. Fornication is regarded by many Christians in the Asogli state as a sin. How to manage this was therefore a problem to many male divorcees.

V. CONCLUSIONS

Divorce in the Asogli state is conceived as an unfortunate event. It is not considered a normal occurrence. As a result, victims are labelled as immoral people. This labelling of both the divorcee and the family as immoral, places a burden on the victims and affects their social outlook. This condition creates a social rejection environment for the divorcee. It affects what the divorcees do and how they do it. They shy away from public gatherings, and this leads to their further isolation. The divorcees also find it difficult to find friends because others perceive them as people who could corrupt the behaviour of others. This is because both family members and the community see the divorcee as one who is a source of bad luck for the family.

This presents a condition which suggests that divorcees and children of divorce must be supported with counselling to cope with the challenges they face. These

counselling services are currently not available at the Asogli state. Both counselling centres and counsellors are unavailable. As a result, traditional advisers such as parents and community leaders assume this responsibility. There cannot be any debate about how this function is performed by these non-professionals.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this research, the following recommendations are made:

- It was observed from the study that divorce creates a lot of emotional traumas resulting from the state of social isolation, physical ridicule. Emotional trauma, among others. In view of this, it is recommended that counsellors, non-governmental organizations (N.G.O), the Ministry of gender, children, and social protection (MGCSP) should come out with strategies to help these victims to cope with these situations. Counsellors should come out with interventions and therapies which will help these victims solve their problems.
- Non-governmental organizations (N.G.O) should help in providing basic needs to boost the affected children's morale in education. The ministry of gender and children affairs should develop schemes like scholarships which can help both the divorcees and children of divorce.
- It was realized in the study that divorcees and children of divorce face a lot of consequences in their lives due to divorce. Some of these consequences are severe financial debt, loneliness, psychological problems, economic challenge, among others. The government should establish a Court for Domestic Relationships or a "Family court" with "Divorce proctors" to conduct investigations and provide suggestions to the court, as well as to attempt to deter couples from divorcing. Additionally, government organisations such as the Domestic Violence and Victims Support Unit (DOVVSU) and the social welfare unit should be strengthened and empowered to deal with divorce cases effectively, particularly those involving divorcees who shirk their parental responsibilities.

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