

## **Divorce Revisited: Explaining the Change in Family through the Act of Divorce in Turkey**

Serap Kavas, PhD Candidate, Middle East Technical University (METU)

Fulbright Fellow & Visiting Researcher

Population Studies Center, University of Michigan

Supervisor: Prof. Arland Thornton

[serapkavas@gmail.com](mailto:serapkavas@gmail.com)

Ayşe Gunduz-Hosgor, PhD, Middle East Technical University (METU)

[hosgor@metu.edu.tr](mailto:hosgor@metu.edu.tr)

Turkish society being characterized by traditionalism versus modernity, religiousness versus secularism and eastern versus western values has always been subject to social change since late Ottoman period. Industrialization, urbanization, and modernization reinforced by the official state policy since the inception of the Turkish Republic are the dynamics paving the way for continuing social change. Currently attempts to join the European Union (EU) have become another strong contrivance toward modernization and change, and since the decisions and regulations of EU bodies are held obligatory for the Turkish legal system, the immediate implications of the steps taken are immense. All of these changes have had their repercussions on family life. Given the increasing rate of marriage and divorce accompanied by a decrease in fertility rate and the changing structure in the face of modernity and globalization, the Turkish family can be considered to be in transition. In this study we try to shed light on the changing family structure through the act of divorce, for divorce reveals much about the nature of family life, specifically the challenges and stresses families face in view of the above mentioned prevailing changes.

The increasing rate of divorce for the last decade is a sign of the stress families are going through. One of the driving mechanisms behind increasing divorce rate is liberalization of

divorce laws; the leading among them being enactment of no-fault divorce in 1988. With this legal change a notable increase in the application for divorce was observed. Moreover, reforms on New Civil Code have brought some new set of laws, to name but a few examples: new regulations with regard to the causes of divorce, enactment of shared property regime through which couples can share the properties acquired during marriage, establishment of family courts in local regions and legal directives regarding child custody and alimony. These legal reforms facilitated legal procedures of divorce and made it more attainable to the populace.

Changing motivation for grounds for divorce is another element that gives us insight into the better understanding of the role of the changes in individuals' perceptions. Economic development, more access to higher education, and participation in social and economic life frees women of the burden of large families and exposes them to global values that are disseminated through strong mechanisms like media, communication technologies, international companies and travelling across countries which have tremendous implications for family values and behaviors. Moreover, women recently have changing values and norms with respect to a desirable marriage and family, which poses more conflict within the families. We cannot say, though, that equality between sexes is increasing, yet women's demands for equality are growing. One example is employed women's emphasis on the control over their own money. While a shared account between couples was an unquestionable norm, and it was the husband who made monetary decisions even though both couples worked, recently, more and more women are tending to have their own bank accounts and managing their money cards themselves.

Another challenge against existing family structure manifests itself in the wake of divorce. Upon divorce alternative family forms such as single parent families- families headed by mothers or grandmothers in particular- and pattern of remarriages and step families pose a challenge to the monolithic family structure. Therefore, understanding these diverse patterns and especially their social recognition which is where the core of controversies takes place is crucial in evaluating the change in family structure in Turkey.

Family change in the face of modernization and more exposure to western values is prevalent in almost all the developing countries with varying degrees. Decline in fertility, more accepting attitudes toward divorce, cohabitation before marriage, abortion and despising

traditional family values are some repercussions of this. In this juncture, Turkey differs and is worthy of interest, in that the contradictions and challenges do not necessarily result in traditional, local values to be rejected or effaced. Instead strategies and meanings are created to tackle the ensuing crises and paradoxes. To name a couple of examples that came out from the interviews; while many women believe that attitudes toward sex before marriage is acceptable and it is even a sign of how more modern one is, few women have sex before marriage because they think this is a risk in case of a break up given the societal expectation of chastity before marriage.

Another example that illustrates strategies in order to bridge existing and changing norms is divorced women's management of disapproving social attitudes toward a divorced woman. Divorced women encounter social repercussions of their divorce more in a negative way and face disapproving societal attitudes. Even if people become more familiar and more tolerant toward the concept of divorce, it is still deemed as an unpleasant event that implied a deviation from what is socially approved form of unity. Several women interviewed expressed disinterest in traditional views and negative attitudes towards divorced women, but paradoxically altered their behavior in accordance with societies' expectations like dressing more conservatively or limiting their contact with male colleagues. Therefore, Just like in other spheres of life, a hybrid structure manifests itself in the family life. In this paper we will investigate the strategies women devise before and after divorce.

The study conducted is part of a larger dissertation work where 32 highly educated and professional women were interviewed through life story interviews over a two-year period, between June 2007 and July 2009. The predilection to examine divorce through the experience of women emanates from our assumption that in most cases the agent of changes to question extant sex roles in private and public sphere is women in Turkey; women's shifting perceptions and related demands have a transforming impact on social change in general.

In this study we employed life story narrative interviews as the principal data source; due to collection of first hand information about people's lives and due to the unstructured nature of the interview, the life story interview helped us unearth hidden realities, complexities and meanings made during the interview. We do not consider divorce as an isolated event, in and

of itself, but rather deem it as associated with other events in women's lives. By employing life story interviews we aim to explore divorce experience in a context. The unstructured and narrative form of life story interviews allowing for conversational flow rendered a friendly atmosphere that enabled us to elicit more data. Because women's speech is considered to be rich, relational (Riessman, 1987) and "cannot be shaped into answer size pieces" (Graham, 1984: 114) it is more convenient for a woman to express herself in an unstructured interview setting.

All in all, the purpose of the current study is to increase our knowledge of the current condition of family in Turkey. Through a qualitative study of one landmark society we hope that some new light will be shed on the current condition and future of families in developing countries. Our findings must be evaluated in the light of the study's restrictions such as our specific sample of middle class professional women. Subsequent research should investigate the divorce experience of the different socioeconomic strata and the experiences for both genders.

**Key words: Change in family structure, divorce, strategies, Legal changes, European Union (EU).**