

A Resilience Perspective on Post-Divorce Lived Experiences of Single Women with Sole Custody in Ethiopia

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Abstract

Divorce remains a frequent outcome of violent marriage leaving women and children in risk. Hence, promoting strategies for positive adaptation is imperative. Thus, the current study investigated the resilience of divorced women in Adama, Ethiopia. Using a phenomenological qualitative approach, it explored the post-divorce lived experiences of 15 purposefully selected divorced, custodial, single mothers via semi-structured in-depth interviews. The participants' perceptions of their divorce, its risk and protective factors, and their resilience were primarily addressed. Analysis of the data revealed that the participants remained emotionally and socially resilient despite economic struggles post-divorce. A lack of personal income, limited support network, conflict with the ex-spouse, a lengthy court process, and social stigma were among the risk factors. Conversely, spirituality, increased self-awareness, a commitment to sole custody, seeking support, family provisions, indigenous social institutions, and formal support systems were protective factors. While sharing findings with some previous studies, the results of the current research highlight four unique aspects: sole custody as a protective factor, positive adaptation despite a precarious economic situation, the contribution of traditional social institutions to the resilience of divorced women, and an attitudinal shift within the community toward divorced women, with the latter two warranting further study. The findings lay a foundation for developing culturally relevant interventions.

Keywords: Post-divorce lived experiences, resilience perspective, single mothers, sole custody

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Introduction

Divorce has become a common social phenomenon contributing to societal instability by disrupting the composition, roles, and socioeconomic circumstances of established family systems. Despite many studies addressing its prevalence, causes, and costs, the increasing rate of divorce shows that it remains a frequent outcome of violent relationships (Amato, 2010). Thus, promoting positive adaptation strategies is imperative. To this end, the present study set out to investigate resilience of divorced women in Adama, Ethiopia by exploring their post-divorce lived experiences through in-depth interviews using a phenomenological approach.

Divorced Women were the focus due to the longstanding socio-economic disadvantages that exacerbate their vulnerability to multifaceted risk factors in traditional societies (Parkes et al., 2017). Many married women have low educational status and no paid work, which exposes them to decreased income and the risk of poverty upon divorce (Rathi & Pachauri, 2018). Furthermore, divorcing mothers are often awarded primary custody in the best interests of the children (Bannister, 2007). Hence, they need to be involved in securing income to sustain their single-parent family, in addition to their usual domestic roles.

In Ethiopia, divorce has been practiced for centuries (Tilson & Larsen, 2000). Particularly, it has trended upward since the beginning of the rapid expansion of urbanization. A study conducted by Yeshiwork et al.(2019) in Bahir Dar City, northern Ethiopia, shows that the divorce rate rose to 49.72% from 24% in only three years. Similarly, research done by Mulugeta et al., (2020) in Robe City, south-east Ethiopia, revealed a high prevalence of divorce. Preliminary data collected from the Adama City Court for the current study also highlighted the increasing rate of divorce. While the divorce cases resolved by the court in 2017 were 573, they increased to 1,628 in 2018 and 2,312 in 2021 (Key Informant). Overall, about 8,030 divorce cases were registered over five years where 85% involved children in the sole custody of mothers.

While most divorce studies in Ethiopia and elsewhere focused on investigating its prevalence, causes, and negative consequences, inquiry into strategies for positive adaptation has lacked attention. Some global studies that explored positive outcomes in the face of divorce exclusively focused on the resilience of children and adolescents from divorced families (Masten, 2018; Henry et al., 2015). The majority of these resilience studies also employed cross-sectional surveys, which could overlook the subjective meanings of participants. Meanwhile, the few global qualitative studies on the resilience of divorced parents

are limited in scope and context (e.g. Ko & Kim, 2015; Natarajan, 2014), while resilience studies on divorced families are rare in Ethiopia.

The present study attempted to bridge these gaps by investigating the resilience of divorced women in Adama, Ethiopia, by exploring in depth their lived experiences using a phenomenological approach. Unlike many deficit-based studies that emphasized the negative consequences of divorce, the current study employed a strength-based model to explore individual, familial, and environmental protective factors that enhance the positive adaptation of the participants from their own perspectives. This is based on the belief that resilience is a highly contextualized construct depending on the subjective meanings of the people involved and their ecological factors. Hence, studying it in Ethiopia – a new context adds knowledge to the existing literature.

This study addressed three questions: “How do you perceive divorce and its risks?”; “What protective resources helped you to mitigate the risks?” and “How do you perceive your resilience in the face of the divorce?” Applying the thematic analysis of the phenomenological approach, the study has unraveled the resilience strategies of divorced women to contributing to the existing knowledge.

Methods and materials

Study design

A qualitative research design guided by the phenomenological approach was employed to explore the lived experiences of the participants. This approach stresses the “insider” outlook – allowing for the consideration of multiple realities experienced by the participants (Flick, 2013, p. 344).

Study area

The study was conducted in Adama City located 99 km to the east of Addis Ababa, the capital city of Ethiopia. It is a rapidly growing metropolitan area surrounded by manufacturing industries, which attract job seekers from across the country. This migration has contributed to prevailing gender-based socioeconomic disparities exacerbating the vulnerability of women abandoned by men who keep them as wives in the city while they work in factories, or along the Ethio-Djibouti route (Girma, 2017).

Samples and sampling techniques

Fifteen divorced women were recruited from the Adama City Court’s list to participate in the study. A purposive sampling technique was employed to recruit women who: (a) were divorced for three to six years, (b) had children from the

divorced marriage, (c) were awarded child custody, (d) remained single since the divorce, and (e) were willing to share their post-divorce lived experiences. The three-year minimum duration post-divorce was utilized to give participants time to make sense of the divorce and reflect on their personal experiences (Bannister, 2007). The maximum range was set to minimize data variations in terms of time. From divorce cases registered between 2014 and 2019, an attempt was made to select every 100th individual fulfilling the criteria, moving back and forth with some degree of flexibility since some could not be located and others declined participation after being given an appointment. Owing to these challenges, the last five interviewees were selected through snowball sampling, which might have affected the representation of participants from diversified socioeconomic backgrounds.

Ethical considerations

The proposal went through the ethical review process at the College of Social Sciences, Addis Ababa University. A formal letter from the department was submitted to the Adama City Court to obtain permission to access divorce case files and contact selected participants via a court social worker. Participants were also oriented about the objectives of the study, their right to withdraw at any point, and how to determine how they wished to be represented in the research. Oral consent was obtained for participation, and data recording before starting each interview. They all opted for anonymized representation. Hence, they are referred to as P1, etc.

Data collection and analysis

This study employed semi-structured open-ended in-depth interviews to elicit the lived experiences of the participants. The first in-depth interview included relevant demographic questions and three open-ended items set to answer the research questions. The items were then expanded to address the emerging themes following the analysis of each interview transcript. An audiotape recorder and field notes were used to collect and save the data. The interviews were conducted in the languages of the participants in home settings for their safety and security. The length of the interviews ranged between 90 and 150 minutes ($M = 120'$). Data collection lasted for one year.

Data analysis took place parallel to data collection. Each recorded interview was checked for completion, transcribed verbatim, tested for accuracy, translated into English, and coded. Thematic analysis was applied to identify themes and patterns revealing the views of the participants. Each transcript was read line by line, and

coded highlighting key segments, and writing memos in the margins. The coding began with descriptive coding – highlighting common phrases from the text and identifying initial patterns – followed by more analytic codes. Next, related code segments were pulled together to identify the frequently emerging themes and patterns.

Subsequent interviews were guided by themes emerging from the analysis of previous data until meaning saturation was reached. In phenomenological research relying on lived experiences, raw data may vary based on participants' personal backgrounds, and what saturates are the themes derived from the data. Focus is also given to meaning saturation – a comprehensive understanding of both descriptive and underlying concepts within the data (Constantinou, et al., 2017). Meaning is saturated when the data are rich enough to adequately explain participants' perspectives with little new information emerging, ensuring the study's objectives are fully addressed (Guest, et al., 2020). The current study tried to achieve both thematic and meaning saturation, aligning with its objective of gaining in-depth knowledge on the resilience of divorced women. New themes noticeably declined after the 11th interview, and by the 15th, the researchers could see that additional data were not significantly affecting their understanding in addressing the research questions.

Finally, the themes that emerged from the storylines were summarized in a table to identify the most recurring headings and patterns. Accordingly, 16 frequent emergent themes were identified and described in line with the major research questions as presented in the results section.

Trustworthiness

The study adhered to the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability principles of qualitative research. Transcript accuracy was ensured through member checking while analytical consistency was verified using inter-coding and debriefing.

The coding process of the in-depth interview transcripts began by preparing an initial codebook based on the objectives and research questions, leaving space for other emerging themes. Then, the first two scripts were independently coded and categorized by the main researcher and two colleagues recruited for the task. Eventually, the coders compared their coding, debriefed differences, and reached consensus on the common themes and patterns identified. The coding of the subsequent interview scripts was done by the main researcher accordingly.

With regard to member checking, the researcher showed a summary of the codes to the first two interviewees who confirmed that the emergent categories

represented what they meant in the interviews. Prolonged stay in the field, and being a cultural insider helped the principal researcher to effectively communicate with the participants and understand the emerging themes. Effort was also made to reduce researcher bias via reflective commentaries and triangulating the interview data with field notes.

Results

This section presents the major findings of the thematic analysis of the data on the perceptions of the study participants towards divorce and its risk factors, protective factors, and personal resilience. As this study focuses on promoting positive adaptation to divorce, the demographic information, and perceptions on divorce and its risk factors are briefly presented as background, while protective factors, and beliefs about personal resilience are described fully.

Demographic data

Resilience has multidimensional predictors. Thus, relevant demographic data including age, education, year of divorce, number of custodial children, and income dynamics were gathered to see their effects on the participants' resilience. As depicted in table 1, which presents the summary of the data, the majority of the participants were poorly educated and financially dependent on their ex-husbands before the divorce, which exposed them to unreliable income post-divorce. On the other hand, all were divorced at a young age ($M = 26$), with a small number of children.

Table 1 Demographic information of the study participants

P	Post-divorce duration	Age	Level of education	No of custodial children	Source of income before divorce	Source of income after divorce
1	3+	25-30	1 st degree	2	Trade, Ex-spouse	Personal shop alimony +
2	5	36	Grade 8	2	Ex-spouse	Parent alimony +
3	3	26-30	Diploma+3	1	Personal salary	Personal salary
4	4	29	10+3 (TVET)	1	Ex-spouse	Alimony
5	3	26-30	6	1	Ex-spouse	Petty Trade + alimony
6	4	26-30	12	2	Ex-spouse	Alimony

7	3	26-30	10	2	Ex-spouse	Parent alimony +
8	3	29	10+3 (TVET)	2	Ex-spouse	Day labor + broker
9	5	30	7	2	Ex-spouse	Parental support
10	3	30	10	1	Ex-spouse	Social support
11	3	25	8	1	Ex-Spouse	Daily labor
12	4	28	8	1	Ex-spouse	Housemaid
13	3	25-30	8	2	Ex-spouse	Housemaid
14	6	35	8	2	Ex-spouse	Selling local drink
15	3	25-30	10	2	Ex-spouse	Street side fast-food

Source: Researchers

Main data

Applying the inductive process of thematic analysis, 16 recurring themes were identified from the storyline. Through interpretation and reassignment, these findings are presented under three preliminary themes of the research questions. Each theme is presented supported by direct quotations from the interview transcripts allowing the data to “speak for themselves” (Flick, 2013).

Divorce as ‘adverse transition’

In response to a question on how they perceived their divorce, the participants consistently described it as an ‘adverse transition’ with various risks. One of the participants shared:

I was in bed just having this baby when his father left me. I did not have personal income. I did not know what to do to feed ourselves or pay house rent. I was absolutely helpless. It was a very adversarial moment (P4).

Another mother suddenly abandoned by her ex-husband while she was about to give birth to her second child shared: “I missed my husband, the sole breadwinner of the household. I suffered a lot” (P8). Though the transition was still difficult, participants who initiated the divorce felt relief, and a nonviolent life post-divorce. One participant stated: “Despite its complications, divorcing has brought me a freedom and peaceful living environment to focus on my work and education” (P3).

Complex risk factors

With regard to risk factors, the participants mentioned multiple post-divorce problems. Some of the recurring sub-themes that emerged from the storyline include: “lack of regular personal income”, “remaining dependent on external support”, “lengthy court process”, “extended conflict with ex-spouse”, “lack of parental support”, and “some social stigma”. The divorce posed a serious threat, particularly, to women abandoned by ex-husbands and those with a poor support network. For example, P4 shared: “I have been living on a small amount of child maintenance. I have a retired poor mother. I have to try day labor job as I have to look after this baby”.

On the contrary, those who initiated the divorce due to frequent violence described it as a turning point. For example, P1 stated: “Now, I am rearing my children in a peaceful environment. I am free to restart the trade business I stopped due to conflict in marriage”.

Multilevel protective factors

Despite the above risk factors, the lived experiences of the participants revealed multiple protective factors that shielded them from the negative effects. The major themes that emerged in this regard are reassigned under personal, familial, and environmental protective factors.

Personal level protective factors

The recurring personal protective factors include: spirituality, ambition to raise custodial children, patience, increasing self-awareness and confidence, and seeking support.

Spirituality

One of the prominent personal strengths revealed was reliance on the Creator. “I cast my anxieties on God through faith to guide me during the divorce process and beyond” (P9). Prayer and attending spiritual programs were among the strategies they employed to gain strength: “I go to Salat to seek help and comfort from Allah” (P4). Spirituality also made some participants optimistic about themselves and their children. “Thanks to Allah, I am at least healthy; I have hands and legs. I can work and change with a little support” (P2).

Ambition to raise custodial children

The ambition to raise their children in a better way was another major source of the participants' strength. They explained that their children are the main purpose they live for. "More than anything else, I wish to improve the livelihood of my child" (P5). Some paid the ultimate sacrifice for their children.

Following the divorce, I could not afford the education fee of my children. I did not want to change the school as it was of better quality. So, I joined a nightclub to pay their school fee. It was the most difficult experience in my life (P9).

The determination of this mother to take on hardship shows the prioritizing of her children's education. Some participants said, they could have given up if not for their children (P4, P8).

Patience, increasing self-awareness and confidence

Tolerance, and increased self-awareness and confidence were also among the individual-level protective factors. For some, their patient nature helped them remain functional in the face of the divorce. One of the participants shared: "I was able to bear the pain of the demanding court process for four years to share common properties and obtain maintenance" (P2). Patience also assisted some participants in looking inward and exploiting personal strengths. "The challenges awakened me to realize personal assets I didn't know. I feel more confident than before" (P3).

Seeking support

Finally, the participants emphasized their boldness in seeking support as a personal strength. They explained asking family, friends, and various organizations for support to enhance their positive adaption. "Upon divorce, I went straight to my parents along with my two children. I also asked them for financial support to restart my business. They were willing to help me" (P1). Similarly, P8 reported her divorce to the Women and Children Affairs Office (WCAO), and obtained shelter at Association for Women Sanctuary and Development (AWSAD) for eight months. Yet, she was afraid to tell her parents about it for reasons of cultural pride. "I do not want them to hear about my struggles."

Family level protective factors

The participants emphasized obtaining emotional, financial, and material support from their parents, grandparents, siblings, custodial children, and close relatives.

Emotional support

Some participants acknowledged the emotional support of their children, parents and relatives. “My children are confident in me. Particularly, my elder daughter understands me well” (P1). Another participant commended the support of her mother and other relatives. “My mother helped me a lot. She always encourages me to think forward. Many of my relatives appreciate my post-divorce progress, which strengthens me” (P14). These quotations show how the support and encouragement of their families and the approval of relatives boosted their strength in facing the divorce.

Financial and material support

The participants also credited the financial and material support of their family members. “I have a sister who often checks my refrigerator and purchases missing items” (P6). “My brothers often cloth my children; my parents covered house rent and food expenses until I secured child maintenance” (P2). Some parents offered them a living room (e.g. P1, P14, P15).

Conversely, participants who had not good communication with their parents due to marrying without their consent remained disconnected post-divorce (e.g. P3, P11, P12, P13).

Environmental level protective factors

Beyond their families, the participants recognized the support of friends, neighbors, social institutions, public services, and some NGOs in Adama City. The most recurring themes in this regard are the following.

Understanding, comforting and collaborating friends

The participants described their friends as sympathetic, soothing, and cooperative. They reported them to comfort and guide them to positively face the post-divorce challenges. For example, P7 shared: “My divorced friend in the neighborhood encouraged me by sharing her life experience, which made me feel that I was not alone”.

However, some participants explained being abandoned by friends following the divorce. Some friends left them due to the negative attitudes of their husbands towards women, while others failed them of their own accord. For example, P8 shared: “We often used to hang out together and celebrate holidays as a family with some of my neighbors. Yet, they immediately ignored me after my divorce”.

A supportive, encouraging and inclusive community

Despite some social stigma, the participants described their community as sympathetic, complimentary, and nondiscriminatory. P9 stated: “Divorced women do not lose that much social value in our community. For example, I participate in all social activities as married women. My neighbors sympathize even more after the divorce”. This shows an attitudinal shift within the community from discriminating to understanding and supporting divorced women.

Yet, some explained losing the social esteem they had in marriage. “My own family members do not have equal respect for me and my married sisters – they are given more attention” (P7). Others faced difficulty getting loans due to a lack of trust in divorced women to be profitable (P5, P14, P15).

Inclusive social institutions

The participants acknowledged benefiting from actively participating in traditional social and financial institutions, such as “eder”, “baltina”, and “equb”. “I am still actively involved in my “eder” as before” (P12). “Eder” and “baltina” are community-based organizations serving both financial and social purposes. “Eder” often encompasses male and single-family head women as members, while “baltina” is exclusively a women’s institution. On the other hand, “equb” is a customary financial institution where people in a neighborhood or workplace collect money and take turns in receiving the sum to help them afford goods or services they may not manage individually. For example, P14 stated: “I could renovate a room for trade by collecting “equb” from my neighbors”.

Another social institution observed by the participants as a shielding factor was “Shimlenna”—elderly mediation. Although some accused it of gender bias (e.g. P14, P15), other participants described it as a protective agent. “Elders in my residence convinced my ex-husband to share some common properties with me” (P1).

Apart from the socioeconomic benefits, involvement in social institutions gave the divorced women a sense of belonging.

Government institutions and NGOs

Despite some limitations, government service institutions such as the court, police, and WCAO were appreciated by the participants. “When I went to the WCAO, I was served well. At the police station, a gender affairs officer helped me. Everywhere, there are very good supporting systems” (P14).

Yet, only two NGOs: the AWSAD, providing shelter, food, counseling, skills training, and seed money to women survivors of gender-based violence, and

the Ethiopian Women Lawyers' Association (EWLA), giving free legal service to needy women, were repeatedly acknowledged by some participants as protective resources. Some participants did not possess information about these services (P4, P5, P10). "I did not know even the existence of these NGOs" (P10). After the interview, they pledged to reach out to these support systems.

Perception about personal resilience

Despite socioeconomic challenges, some participants emphasized getting relief from conflict, having freedom to manage their lives, and remaining functional mothers post-divorce. In response to the question: "How do you perceive your personal resilience in the face and/or wake of the divorce?" three major themes emerged: struggling, positively adapting, and resilient.

Struggling

Some participants explained that they were still struggling with economic hurdles. Yet, they felt that they were moving forward. One of the participants remarked: "Thus far, I'm struggling with subsistence income. At least, I've been accustomed to living with constraints" (P4). She believed that it was possible to cope by getting along with patience. Similarly, P8 stated: "I've been trying many income-generating businesses alongside. Sometimes I get good income, and at other times I become idle until I consume all I had saved. Affording house rent is particularly a significant struggle" (P8). Yet, she was among the custodial single mothers rearing two children without any maintenance.

Despite the economic struggle, the perseverance and aspiration of the divorced women to remain functional mothers show their emotional and social resilience.

Positively adapting

Some study participants explained that they were positively adapting post-divorce despite the odds. "The post-divorce living situation is difficult, but I am positively adapting to it" (P11). Similarly, P9 stated: "Despite many challenges, I am certainly reducing threats".

These responses demonstrate the participants' capacity to move forward, making the best out of challenging experiences. Their persistence in reducing the negative impacts shows trajectory beyond survival.

Resilient

Some of the study participants asserted that they were resilient. “Definitely, I’m resilient! My current living standard is not below the pre-divorce one, at least economically” (P1). This participant shared a radical success in the trade business she restarted post-divorce. She was planning to buy a car.

Even some custodial single mothers who were not yet involved in a noteworthy income-generating business identified themselves as resilient. For example, a mother of two who was still living on a small amount of monthly maintenance and some family support shared:

Inability to share common properties misplaced by my ex-husband, unfair treatment by justice bodies, and a four-year laborious court process that yielded no fruit were among the problems I encountered. Yet, I am able to rear and educate my two children on small maintenance and family support. Compared to the challenges I’m withstanding, the word resilience is not strong enough to describe me (P2).

This account illustrates the participant’s strength amidst the immense struggles in the face of the divorce. Particularly, acknowledging personal resilience, in spite of these bitter struggles, shows her inner strength and courage to continue moving forward in the face of adversity – divorce in this context. For her, resilience is beyond economic success, positively enduring challenges.

Overall, regardless of their declining economic circumstances, the participants perceived themselves to be on a resilience trajectory comprising ongoing struggles, positive adaptation, and efforts to thrive. The participants mainly demonstrated emotional and social resilience by remaining functional parents, working with greater determination, and seeking parental and community support.

Discussion

This study investigated divorce aftermath from resilience perspective as perceived by divorced women. The participants demonstrated a dynamic journey in positively adapting post-divorce. At the beginning, they appraised divorce as a traumatic event becoming confused about how to continue life without a husband, the only source of income for their household. However, they gradually managed their emotions and strived to exist at least for the sake of their children. Some learnt to tolerate subsistence life by depending on child maintenance and/or family support until they could get time for work sending their children to school (e.g. P2, P4, P7,

P10), while others had to start day labor jobs to generate income (P5, P8, P11, P12). A few managed to start petty trade with the help of family or community support (e.g. P1, P14, P15). Some strived for better lives through learning from experiences and further exploiting personal, familial and ecological resources (e.g. P1, P3, P15). They used the challenges as opportunities to develop their capacities, and build resources to continue moving forward. This section discusses the key findings in relation to the existing literature.

Resilience is studied in the context of adversity, mainly depending on protective resources that deter the negative effects of risk factors (Henderson, 2003; Luthar et al., 2015). To establish this context, the present study identified how the participants perceived their divorce. As identified in the results section, they assessed divorce as adversity with multiple risk factors. This aligns with the study by Sbarra (2015), which identified divorce as one of the most stressful events with its psychosocial and economic implications. Perceiving divorce as adversity is often rooted in cultural context limiting access to social support and reinforcing feelings of isolation (Walsh, 2012). Almost all the participants were economically dependent on their ex-husbands in marriage. According to Amato (2010) such pre-divorce history exacerbates vulnerability in adjusting to post-divorce life. This was revealed in the lived experiences of the participants.

Despite challenges, the participants who initiated the divorce, and those who had good social support shared experiencing relatively better life post-divorce (e.g., P1, P3). This finding is consistent with the study by George, and Mamedova (2024), who argue that resources determine the response to divorce. They explain that divorcees with better coping strategies and access to support systems may reframe divorce as a turning point for personal growth and transformation.

With regard to protective factors, the current study identified patience, spirituality, commitment to sole custody, self-awareness, confidence, and boldness to seek support as personal strengths; familial networks, and social support systems as resources. These align with broader resilience frameworks (King et al., 2020; Metais, et al., 2022). Such protective factors are also widely identified by Ungar (2013 and Walsh (2012), key contributors to the resilience literature. Coutu (2002) recognizes positive emotions, mindfulness, and a sense of purpose as qualities of resilient individuals. Regarding this, the current participants emphasized having custodial children as a major source of motivation to try hard to remain functional mothers. The roles of spirituality, discovering new personal strengths, and support networks are also emphasized in the resilience literature (Ko & Kim, 2015; Patterson, 2002). The social supports revealed in the current study also correspond with ecological system theory, which explains that the at-risk individuals'

immediate environment significantly influences their capacity to adapt (Ungar, 2013).

However, the contribution of the neighborhood community via its traditional social institutions such as elderly mediation, “edir”, and “equb” is unique to the current study. The study also highlighted an attitudinal shift in the community from discriminating to understanding and supporting divorced women, which is a new insight.

Finally, the present study revealed that divorced women are economically struggling over three years of post-divorce. This is partially consistent with the finding by Bronselaer et al. (2008), which explains that adults living in divorced and other lone families tend to have lower levels of socioeconomic well-being and poor physical and psychological health. On the other hand, the present participants revealed emotional and social resilience despite economic hurdles. They perceived themselves as positively adapting, with some of them speaking of thriving towards their pre-divorce living status.

According to the literature, at-risk individuals are considered resilient when they remain persistent with almost the pre-adversity functional capacity, mental health and social competence, or are able to bounce back to this baseline in the face of adversity (Gartland et al., 2019; van Breda, 2018). If they advance in some area beyond pre-adversity baseline functioning, they are said to be thriving (Dursun, & Soylemez, 2020). The current participants were able to experience freedom to work, and social interaction that helped them to learn new wisdom, life skills, personal strengths, and how to exploit ecological resources. They were emotionally positive, socially competent, and committed to raising their children, despite economic constraints. Hence, interventions with divorced women can be built on such strengths.

Conclusion and implications

Divorce has been a common outcome of violent marital relationships; yet adaptation to post-divorce life remains stressful as it carries potential threats. Hence, it is imperative to promote strategies whereby at-risk individuals remain healthy and productive. The current research, thus, set to look into the resilience of divorced women with child custody in Adama, Ethiopia. The study explored the post-divorce lived experiences of the participants to investigate their emotional and socioeconomic resilience in the face of divorce. The results revealed that the participants perceived the divorce as a stressful transition being exposed to multiple socioeconomic risk factors.

Notwithstanding these odds, the study participants could maintain healthy thinking patterns and remain functional in raising and educating custodial children. Despite some common social stigma against divorce and divorced women, they sustained strong family cohesion, and positive interaction with their social institutions in the neighborhood. They were mindful of enduring economic problems; yet, they positively faced them by exploiting their personal strengths, familial supports and environmental resources as protective factors. In general, single, custodial divorced women in the study area were emotionally, and socially resilient, yet economically struggling.

Despite sharing the results of some previous divorce studies with regard to risk factors, such as economic hurdles, the present study is exceptional in identifying multilevel protective factors that divorced women can exploit to positively adapt post-divorce. The role of traditional social institutions in offering divorced women a financial alternative (e.g. “*equb*”), is unique to the Ethiopian context. The study also highlighted an attitudinal shift of the community from discriminating to understanding and supporting divorced women. The major takeaway of this study is that there is still hope for single, custodial divorced women to positively adapt and grow post-divorce.

Though the study involved only 15 participants, it explored their lived experiences with prolonged in-depth interviews, and phenomenological data analysis. An attempt was made to ensure data validity by reducing researcher bias using bracketing, inter-coding, and member checking. Hence, the findings have implications for policy development and social work practice. The risk factors revealed demand the attention of policymakers and social work practitioners working with divorced women. On the other hand, the multilevel protective factors identified by the study can lay a foundation for building their resilience.

More specifically, divorced women should identify and take advantage of their personal strengths, social networks, and service systems in their area to positively adapt post-divorce; social work policies and practices should focus on building on their strengths, and the community-based support systems that enhance their resilience in the face of divorce; public support systems such as justice bodies should give swift responses to the needs of divorced women for social security, and child maintenance during the divorce process. The insights gained on the contribution of traditional social institutions as protective factors deserve further studies to inform the development of culturally relevant social work interventions. Researchers interested in the area can also look into the implications of the shift in the community attitudes towards divorced women.

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Declaration of conflicts of interest

The authors declare there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and publication of this article. We also confirm that this submission is unpublished and not under review elsewhere.

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