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Choosing to leave: Women's divorce decisions and the psychological consequences for family well-being in Aceh

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ABSTRACT
Background: Divorce involves complex personal and social factors, particularly when initiated by women. Divorce may protect children from prolonged marital conflict but also affect family stability and emotional security. Understanding women's psychological experiences of divorce is therefore important for promoting family well-being and supportive legal and social responses.
Purpose: This study explores women's lived experiences of divorce through religious courts (Mahkamah Syar'iyah) and its perceived psychological and relational consequences within the family.
Method: This qualitative study employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) using in-depth semi-structured interviews with five divorced women in Aceh, Indonesia, who had initiated divorce proceedings through religious courts.
Findings: Four key themes emerged in women's divorce decision-making: (1) Negotiating the decision to divorce, (2) navigating loss, pain and emotional renewal, (3) reconstructing life after divorce, and (4) family as an anchor. Participants described divorce as a prolonged decision shaped by marital distress, social expectations, and concerns about family well-being
Implication: This study recommends integrating mental health support into the divorce process to promote women's and families' well-being period. Future research could examine children's long-term psychological outcomes, the influence of legal and support systems on women's and families' mental health, and community-based interventions to reduce psychological challenges period.

KEYWORDS
Divorce; family well-being; phenomenological; psychological consequences

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Introduction

Divorce has increasingly emerged as a significant social phenomenon in Indonesia, with rates steadily rising over the past two decades (Widiantari et al., 2018). A noteworthy aspect of this trend is the growing number of divorce petitions filed by women, which reflects broader changes in gender relations, legal awareness, and women's social positioning. Research on divorced mothers in Indonesia indicates that many women are not merely passive but act as active agents who take responsibility for rebuilding family life after separation (Arsa & Lestari, 2024). This shift challenges traditional marital norms that have historically designated women as passive participants in the dissolution of marriages, highlighting their increasing agency in addressing unsatisfying or harmful relationships (Hidayati, 2019; Rinaldo et al., 2024).

From a psychological perspective, divorce is not merely a legal event; it signifies a profound life transition characterized by complex cognitive, emotional, and behavioral processes that unfold over time. Theoretical frameworks such as stress and coping theory, along with life-course perspectives, conceptualize divorce as a cumulative process influenced by ongoing evaluations of relational stressors, perceived coping resources, and anticipated outcomes for

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oneself and one's family (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Amato, 2000). Within this framework, the decision to initiate a divorce emerges from dynamic interactions among emotional exhaustion, cognitive assessments of marital viability, and social constraints.

In Indonesia, divorce among Muslims is primarily processed through religious courts, where cerai gugat (woman-initiated divorce) constitutes a significant majority of cases. National statistics indicate that approximately 74% of divorce filings in these courts are initiated by women (Wardatun & Smith, 2020). These cases are often associated with prolonged marital conflict, domestic violence, infidelity, financial neglect, and the failure to fulfill marital responsibilities (Abubakar, 2020; Daud et al., 2019; Djawas et al., 2021; Nisa & Koentjoro, 2022). Such factors act as chronic stressors that can undermine psychological well-being, diminish perceived control, and lead women to critical decision points in their lives.

Psychological models of decision-making suggest that individuals enduring prolonged relational stress continually assess whether their circumstances remain tolerable, changeable, or harmful. When coping resources are perceived as depleted and relational conditions appear unlikely to improve, divorce can be reinterpreted as a necessary and protective option rather than a personal or moral failing (Janis & Mann, 1977; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). At the same time, behavioral decision research shows that people tend to weigh potential losses more heavily than equivalent gains and to favor the status quo, which may explain why women often hesitate or postpone decisive steps toward divorce (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). For many women, initiating a divorce is a way to reclaim psychological safety, autonomy, and emotional stability.

The dynamics in Aceh are particularly complex, as strong Islamic values and collectivistic family norms play an important role in shaping marital expectations, gender roles, and perceptions of divorce. In this context, marriage is often understood as a lifelong commitment, while divorce, particularly when initiated by women, may be associated with social stigma and moral judgment (Mutiah & Syarifudin, 2024). Women's decisions to pursue divorce may therefore involve not only evaluations of marital distress and personal well-being but also concerns about family expectations, community perceptions, and the well-being of their children. Family support may become an important resource in negotiating the decision to divorce and adapting to its consequences. Thus, women in Aceh may experience a tension between protecting their own well-being and maintaining family unity, while navigating religious and social expectations surrounding marriage and divorce (Almizan & Amri, 2021; Nisa et al., 2025; Rinaldo et al., 2024; Saadah, 2018; Wardatun & Smith, 2020).

Research consistently indicates that women who experience domestic violence, emotional neglect, and chronic marital stress face a heightened risk of developing psychological issues, such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress symptoms, and diminished self-esteem (Jalili et al., 2017; Jojo & Sathiyaseelan, 2019; Waite et al., 2009). In such circumstances, divorce can represent a significant psychological turning point providing an opportunity to escape ongoing harm and initiate a journey toward recovery. However, divorce also introduces new challenges, including legal uncertainties, economic vulnerabilities, and the emotional complexities associated with redefining personal and familial identities (Lorenz et al., 2006; Wahyuni et al., 2024).

The psychological effects of divorce extend beyond the individual woman; they reverberate throughout the entire family system. According to family systems theory, divorce represents a process of reorganization that alters relational roles, emotional boundaries, and patterns of interaction within the family. Following a divorce, variations in parental functioning, emotional availability, and economic stability can significantly impact children's emotional adjustment and sense of security (Amato, 2000, 2010; Sanz-Vázquez et al., 2024). Women who

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initiate divorce often bear increased responsibility for maintaining family stability while simultaneously navigating their own psychological recovery (Cano & Gracia, 2022; Koster et al., 2021).

In Indonesia, divorced women face additional challenges due to social stigma and the realities of single parenthood. Economic hardships, limited access to social support, and persistent moral judgments can heighten stress and compromise psychological well-being (Setijaningrum et al., 2024; Wahyuni et al., 2024). Nonetheless, many women exhibit remarkable resilience and create coping strategies to protect their children's emotional welfare while striving to maintain functional family relationships.

Religious and cultural interpretations significantly shape these women's psychological experiences of divorce. While Islamic teachings permit divorce under certain justified circumstances, local interpretations often depict women who seek divorce as disobedient or morally deviant. Such narratives can intensify feelings of guilt, shame, and self-doubt, adding to the emotional burden of the decision to divorce. In response, feminist scholars and progressive Islamic thinkers have worked to reinterpret religious texts, affirming women's rights to leave harmful marriages, particularly when marital obligations are unmet (Almizan & Amri, 2021; Wardatun & Smith, 2020). These evolving interpretations may play a crucial role in alleviating internalized stigma and legitimizing women's choices.

Socioeconomic status also intersects with psychological processes, influencing divorce experiences. Women from lower-income backgrounds may feel more compelled to leave abusive relationships but often face greater financial and legal obstacles. Conversely, middle-class women might delay divorce due to social expectations, despite having better access to legal resources and support networks (Rinaldo et al., 2024). These disparities underscore the importance of structural conditions in either facilitating or constraining women's psychological agency.

Legal reforms such as the 1974 Marriage Law and the 1991 Compilation of Islamic Law aim to advance gender equity in marital dissolution and to protect women's post-divorce rights (Dahlan et al., 2023; Nafisah et al., 2024); however, women continue to encounter systemic barriers within religious courts. These barriers include procedural complexities and perceived judicial bias (Huis, 2015; Nurlaelawati, 2013; Ramadhita et al., 2023; Saraswati, 2021). From a psychological standpoint, adversarial legal processes can heighten stress, emotional exhaustion, and feelings of disempowerment, highlighting the necessity for legal practices that prioritize psychological well-being.

Although there has been substantial legal and sociological research on divorce in Indonesia, fewer studies have concentrated on women's lived psychological experiences, particularly within conservative religious contexts. It is essential to understand how women cognitively appraise marital breakdowns, navigate the emotional challenges of the divorce process, and perceive its effects on family well-being, as this represents a significant research gap.

This study investigates the lived experiences of women who initiate divorce through religious courts in Aceh, Indonesia. Utilizing a qualitative phenomenological approach and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the research examines women's cognitive processes, emotional experiences, behavioral changes, and social contexts during the decision-making process related to divorce, as well as the perceived psychological impacts on their families. By framing women's narratives within established psychological frameworks of stress, coping, and family transition, this research aims to deepen our understanding of divorce as a psychologically embedded journey and to inform the development of more supportive, mental health-oriented legal and social responses.

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Specifically, the study seeks to explore the experiences of women who initiate divorce through religious courts and to comprehend how they perceive the psychological and relational consequences of their decisions within the family context. By focusing on women with children, the research aims to shed light on how emotional, cognitive, social, and cultural factors shape the divorce decision-making process.

Method

Study Design

This study utilized a qualitative phenomenological design, guided by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), to explore how women experience and understand their decision to initiate divorce, as well as the perceived psychological and familial consequences of this choice. IPA is particularly suited for examining significant life transitions that involve intricate emotional, cognitive, and identity-related processes, as it emphasizes in-depth, idiographic analysis rather than breadth or generalizability (Smith & Nizza, 2022; Smith et al., 2022).

In line with IPA conventions, the study focused on a small, relatively homogeneous sample to facilitate a detailed exploration of individual meaning-making processes. Divorce, especially when initiated by women within a religious legal context, constitutes a psychologically significant and emotionally challenging experience, making IPA an appropriate methodological framework for this investigation.

Ethics

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. Ethical approval was granted by the Psychology Research Ethics Committee of Gadjah Mada University, Indonesia (7726/UN1/FPSi.1.3/SD/PT.01.04/2023), and informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection began. Participants received a comprehensive briefing about the research purpose, their right to withdraw at any time without consequences, and the measures in place to ensure their confidentiality. To protect anonymity, all names and identifying information have been replaced with pseudonyms.

Participants

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The study focused on five women residing in Aceh, Indonesia, who were selected based on specific inclusion criteria: (1) Women who had initiated divorce proceedings (cerai gugat) through religious courts; and (2) Women with at least one child at the time of the divorce. The decision to include women with children was both intentional and grounded in theoretical considerations. Given the study's emphasis on the psychological consequences of divorce for family well-being, particularly regarding perceived impacts on children and family dynamics participants who bore parenting responsibilities were in a unique position to offer insights into the personal and familial implications of divorce. This criterion strengthened the alignment between the research questions, theoretical framework, and participant characteristics, consistent with the purposive sampling strategies commonly employed in qualitative research. The exclusion criteria were as follows: (1) Women whose divorce was initiated by their spouses; (2) Women without children; and (3) Women currently undergoing divorce proceedings at the time of data collection. This approach ensured that participants could reflect on the decision-making process retrospectively and with a certain degree of emotional distance.

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Recruitment Procedure

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling to ensure their relevance to the research objectives. The recruitment process was carried out through informal networks and referrals provided by community contacts acquainted with women who had finalized divorce proceedings in religious courts.

The inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) women who had legally initiated divorce through a religious court, (2) those who had at least one child at the time of divorce, and (3) individuals willing to reflect on their experiences. Women without children were excluded from the study to facilitate a focused exploration of how participants perceived the relational and familial implications of divorce, particularly concerning parenting responsibilities and family well-being. This criterion was driven by analytical considerations rather than normative assumptions, as concerns related to children consistently emerged during preliminary discussions and in the relevant literature on divorce decision-making.

Sample Size Justification

The sample size of five participants aligns with established methodological guidance for Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which typically recommends small samples generally between 3 and 10 participants to facilitate detailed, idiographic analysis (Smith et al., 2022). The primary aim of IPA is not to achieve data saturation in a statistical sense but to pursue analytic depth and experiential richness both within and across individual cases.

In this study, the homogeneity of the sample, combined with a focused research objective, permitted an intensive engagement with each participant's narrative. This approach is consistent with qualitative methodological research, which suggests that smaller samples are appropriate when the phenomenon is well-defined and the goal of analysis is interpretative depth, rather than thematic prevalence (Guest et al., 2006; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022).

Data Collection

Interview Structure and Procedure

Initial contact with potential participants was established by the researcher through trusted intermediaries to minimize discomfort and ensure voluntary participation. Upon obtaining informed consent, semi-structured interviews were conducted by the first author, who possesses training in qualitative interviewing.

Interviews took place in locations selected by the participants to ensure both privacy and comfort, including their homes and neutral community settings. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' permission. Throughout the data collection process, the researcher maintained a reflexive stance, recognizing potential power dynamics and actively encouraging participants to guide the direction of the conversation.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed in accordance with the established stages of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The first author conducted initial coding through repeated close readings of each transcript, focusing on descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments. Emergent themes were developed ideographically for each case before identifying patterns of convergence and divergence across the cases.

To enhance analytic credibility and mitigate potential bias, several strategies were implemented. First, reflexive journaling was maintained throughout the analytic process to document assumptions and emotional responses, particularly given the researcher’s interest in

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women's rights. Second, preliminary themes and interpretations were discussed with a qualitative research peer experienced in IPA, thereby supporting interpretative rigor through peer debriefing.

Data organization and coding were managed manually to foster close engagement with the data, which is consistent with IPA's idiographic orientation. The analytic process was supervised through regular academic consultations to ensure coherence and methodological integrity.

Result

The demographic profiles of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1.
Participant's demographic profile

Pseudonym	Age	Years of married life	Work status	Number of Children	Place of Residence
Participant 1	50	30	Civil Servant	6	Separate house
Participant 2	30	5	Civil Servant	1	Parent's house
Participant 3	48	15	Housewife	2	Parents' house
Participant 4	48	13	Housewife	4	Separate house
Participant 5	38	10	Housewife	2	Rented house

The findings illustrate how women who initiated divorce interpreted their decision-making processes and psychological experiences throughout the divorce proceedings. Four interrelated themes emerged from the analysis illustrated in table 2. These themes reflect participants lived experiences of cognitive deliberation, emotional responses, changes in daily functioning, and the role of family and social support in navigating divorce.

Table 2.
Themes, descriptions, and illustrative participant quotes on women's divorce decision-making and its consequences

Theme	Description	Example of Participant Quote
Negotiating decision to divorce	Describes the complex process through which participants considered, negotiated, and eventually arrived at the decision to divorce. The decision was not experienced as a single moment but as a gradual process involving emotional struggles, consideration of children and family expectations, attempts to preserve the marriage, and	*"It wasn't an easy decision. I kept thinking about my children and whether I should stay or leave. I tried to make the marriage work, but eventually I realized that continuing the relationship was hurting me more."*

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Table 2.
Themes, descriptions, and illustrative participant quotes on women's divorce decision-making and its consequences

Theme	Description	Example of Participant Quote
	weighing the perceived consequences of divorce. Participants described tensions between the desire to maintain the marriage and the recognition that divorce might be necessary for their well-being and future.	
Navigating loss, pain and emotional renewal	Captures participants' emotional experiences following divorce, including grief, loneliness, disappointment, anger, and a sense of loss. Participants also described gradually navigating these painful emotions and developing new ways of understanding themselves and their experiences.	*"At first, I felt like I had lost everything. I cried a lot and didn't know what my life would look like. But slowly, I learned to accept what happened and started to feel that I could live again."*
Reconstructing life after divorce	Reflects participants' efforts to rebuild their lives and redefine their identities after divorce. Reconstruction involved adapting to new roles and responsibilities, establishing new routines, becoming more independent, developing personal goals, and creating a sense of direction for the future.	*"After the divorce, I had to learn to do many things by myself. It was difficult at first, but eventually I became more confident. I began to think about what I wanted for myself, not only what I had to do for my family."*
Family as an anchor	Highlights the role of family as an important source of emotional, practical, and social support throughout the participants' experiences of divorce. Family members provided companionship, reassurance, encouragement, and practical assistance during periods of uncertainty. The presence of family helped participants cope with emotional difficulties and regain a sense of security and belonging after the dissolution of their marriage.	*"My family was the reason I could get through that period. Whenever I felt like I couldn't handle it anymore, they were there. I knew I wasn't alone."*

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Negotiating decision to divorce

Participants described engaging in prolonged cognitive reflection before deciding to file for divorce. Divorce was not perceived as an impulsive act but rather as the outcome of repeated evaluations of marital conditions, personal endurance, and perceived consequences for themselves and their children. Across participants, the decision to divorce emerged as a deliberative, iterative, and emotionally conflicted process rather than an immediate response to marital difficulties. Although participants differed in the specific circumstances that prompted divorce, they shared a pattern of prolonged appraisal in which they weighed marital suffering against concerns about their children, social reputation, economic circumstances, and the possibility of preserving the marriage.

Similarly, participant 2 reflected on her decision to file for divorce after careful consideration of her circumstances. Her husband's prolonged absence and lack of communication meant that he was not fulfilling his responsibilities towards her and their children. Initially, participant 3 was hesitant to initiate divorce proceedings due to concerns about how society would perceive her status. However, after enduring extended periods without any communication from her husband, she ultimately resolved to move forward. She felt he had neglected his obligations to her and their child, despite her efforts to reach out to him and his family. Participant 2 summarized her feelings about this situation as follows:

> *"Hmm…. I initially did not want to file for divorce, it's okay that I don't have a husband. I was afraid of being labeled by students, because lecturers are considered role models, and students no longer believe what I say. Then I asked my family, and my sister also supported me to file for divorce"* (Participant 2, 20-24)

Several participants framed divorce as a last available option after enduring persistent conflict, neglect, or violence. For example, Participant 1 reflected on years of household tension and fear, describing how these conditions shaped her decision-making process:

> *"For years, my mother lived in suffering, I thought that period would no longer be like this, mmm.. my mother was physically and psychologically hurt, ee.. finally I dared to file for divorce. Every night, I thought about what would happen to me if this continued, my children also strengthened me."* (Participant 1, 26-31)

Participants also reported periods of hesitation and ambivalence. Participant 2 described initially withdrawing a divorce petition after receiving assurances from extended family members, only to later refile when the marital situation deteriorated further. This experience illustrates how cognitive appraisal in divorce decision-making can be iterative and reversible, rather than linear.

Concerns about children emerged as a salient cognitive consideration. Participants perceived ongoing marital conflict and paternal absence as potentially harmful to their children's emotional development. Participant 3 explained:

> *"The children can't bear to see their father's behavior, mmm ... they even said that we would be better off without a father. We can't bear to see mom being beaten like that, we'd be better off without a father, mom ... ee .. that's what Mother's children said. So because mother thought she loved the children and couldn't go on like this, she loved the development of the children, what would happen if they didn't grow up healthy, that's why mother dared to divorce"* (Participant 3, 33-40).

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Social stigma also featured prominently in participants' cognitive deliberations. Participants who worked as educators expressed particular anxiety about being labeled negatively within their professional and community environments. However, some participants later described experiencing unexpected social support following divorce, which contrasted with their initial fears:

> *"This mother is an active person in the community, she even became the one who bathed the corpse, mmmm.. so I was afraid of what the villagers would think if they found out that I was divorced. But apparently, after I was divorced, the neighbors and villagers came to support me, even saying that we love seeing you like that, but we didn't dare say anything. Hmmm... it turns out that what I thought didn't happen .." (Participant 2, 50-55).*

Participants experienced diverse pathways, including fear of divorce, endurance, maternal concerns, social anxiety, marital abandonment, and repeated reconciliation attempts. Ultimately, they collectively redefined divorce from a stigmatized option to a legitimate response to persistent marital challenges.

Navigating loss, pain and emotional renewal

Emotionally, participants described the divorce process as deeply distressing yet complex. Feelings of anxiety, fear, restlessness, and uncertainty were commonly reported during litigation, particularly in relation to court procedures and the unpredictability of legal outcomes. The participants therefore differed in the emotional meaning they attached to the divorce process. For some, the litigation itself represented a period of heightened vulnerability and uncertainty; for others, the court decision represented closure and release from a prolonged struggle. This suggests that emotional responses were closely intertwined with participants' perceptions of whether the divorce represented an additional burden or the resolution of an existing burden. Participant 4 described persistent emotional strain during the legal process:

> *"Every night I can't sleep, anxious, restless when filing a lawsuit, also afraid of what will happen in court, whether it will be granted or not" (Participant 4, 37-38)*

Alongside distress, participants also described feelings of relief and emotional release following the granting of divorce. Participant 5 reflected on the emotional impact of overcoming procedural obstacles:

> *"I am grateful to God relieved after the court decision came out, ee… ee..because I had a hard time finding witnesses, my relatives did not want to testify, even though the ones who introduced me to my husband were those relatives and knew how my husband behaved. But I am relieved and happy that the Court finally approved my lawsuit" (Participant 5)*

These emotional experiences were not described as uniform or linear; rather, participants articulated a fluctuating emotional landscape shaped by legal uncertainty, social pressures, and personal resilience.

The variation among participants is particularly significant. While one participant remained preoccupied with uncertainty about the future, another experienced the legal resolution as an emotional turning point. This difference indicates that emotional renewal was

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influenced not only by the divorce itself but also by the meanings participants attributed to the end of the marriage and their perceived capacity to move forward.

Reconstructing life after divorce

Several participants reported changes in daily functioning during the divorce process. These included reduced motivation, emotional withdrawal, and difficulties maintaining routine responsibilities. Participant 3 described diminished enthusiasm for work and parenting activities following her decision to file for divorce:

> *"I was not enthusiastic about doing daily activities… I even often got angry with the children." (Participant 3)*

These behavioral changes were described as temporary responses to psychological strain, rather than stable or long-term patterns. The theme identified in this study revolves around the various factors that influence the decision-making process regarding divorce. Both participants emphasized the significance of support from family members and colleagues who understand their domestic challenges, indicating that this backing profoundly affects their decisions. Participant 4 articulates this sentiment effectively:

> *"I actually don't want to file for divorce, because it's okay if I don't have a husband, but my status is married. However, my sister said that you are a civil servant, later if you die, your husband will take your property. Now he doesn't even take care of you and the child". ehmmm... my sister is also the only one who is the power of attorney in court period"*

However, the experience of reconstruction differed according to participants' social and material circumstances. For some, rebuilding life involves regaining emotional stability and re-establishing everyday routines. For others, reconstruction was closely connected to practical and economic concerns, including returning to the parental home and assuming responsibility for children without a partner. The accounts also demonstrate that reconstruction did not necessarily begin only after the divorce was legally finalized. For some participants, the process started during the decision-making and litigation stages as they began reorganizing their social relationships, seeking family support, preparing for independent living, and redefining their responsibilities.

Family as an anchor

Family emerged as a central relational resource that shaped both the decision to divorce and the ability to cope with its consequences. However, the function of family support varied. For some participants, family members, provided emotional reassurance and validation; for others, they actively encouraged divorce, helped navigate legal procedures, or provided practical and economic assistance.

External influences played a significant role in participants' decision-making processes. Support from family members particularly female relatives, was frequently described as instrumental in legitimizing the decision to pursue divorce. Participant 4 highlighted the role of her sister:

> *"I actually don't want to file for divorce, because it's okay if I don't have a husband, but my status is married. But my sister said that you are a civil servant, later if you die, your husband*

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will take your property. Now he doesn't even take care of you and the child". ehmmm ... my sister is also the only attorney in court". (Participant 4)

In some cases, family pressure arose due to prolonged marital ambiguity, such as abandonment or unilateral divorce declarations, prompting participants to seek legal resolution:

"After my husband issued a triple divorce, I stopped looking for him and he didn't come home for a long time. My family finally pressured me to take care of the divorce because the marital status was unclear or hanging. I also finally dared because of family considerations too" (Participant 4)

Participants who returned to their parental homes described mixed emotions, including relief and shame, particularly when economic dependence became unavoidable:

"After I left home because I wanted to file for divorce, I finally returned to my parents' house with the children. Actually, this decision was not easy, because I was actually ashamed to have to go back to my parents' house, because I also didn't work and didn't have an income, while I had to stay at my parents' house with the children." (Participant 5)

Despite these differences, family consistently functioned as an anchor across participants. Family members provided participants with a sense of belonging and security at a time when marital relationships had become unreliable or unsafe. Importantly, the role of family intersected with the other themes: family helped participants negotiate the decision to divorce, endure emotional distress, and begin reconstructing their lives afterward.

Across the four themes, participants' experiences reflected an interconnected process of negotiating, enduring, and reconstructing life following marital dissolution. The decision to divorce emerged from prolonged cognitive and emotional negotiations rather than a single decisive moment. This process was accompanied by significant emotional distress, although participants gradually experienced moments of relief and emotional renewal as the divorce progressed. Following divorce, participants faced the challenge of reconstructing everyday life while renegotiating their roles, responsibilities, and sense of independence. Throughout these processes, family functioned as an important anchor, although its role was experienced ambivalently as a source of emotional and practical support, but sometimes also as a source of pressure or a reminder of dependency. Importantly, the themes were not sequential or isolated. Family support influenced divorce decision-making, emotional support facilitated recovery, and the reconstruction of life was closely intertwined with participants' changing relationships with their families. Together, the themes illustrate divorce as a dynamic process of meaning-making, emotional transition, and reconstruction rather than a single life event.

Discussion

This study explored how women in Aceh made sense of their decision to initiate divorce, highlighting the psychological, emotional, and social processes embedded within this experience. Consistent with the idiographic focus of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the findings reflect participants' subjective interpretations rather than generalizable outcomes. These findings illustrate that women's decisions to initiate divorce cannot be understood solely from a legal perspective but must also be interpreted as complex psychological experiences shaped by emotional, social, and cultural contexts.

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Participants' narratives indicate that divorce decisions emerged from prolonged cognitive deliberation under emotionally constrained conditions. These accounts resonate with decision-making theories that emphasize appraisal, emotional conflict, and perceived lack of alternatives (Janis & Mann, 1977). The hesitation and withdrawn petitions described by several participants are also consistent with the loss-averse and status-quo-favouring tendencies described in behavioral decision research (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). Rather than framing divorce as a failure, participants often reinterpreted it as a protective response aimed at preserving personal dignity and perceived family stability.

This finding is further supported by Fajardo-Gonzalez (2021), who argued that women's decisions to leave a marriage are closely associated with unequal decision-making power within the household and experiences of domestic violence. Women with greater autonomy and economic resources tend to have a stronger capacity to leave harmful relationships, whereas limited decision-making power often prolongs their exposure to marital distress. In the present study, participants described enduring prolonged neglect, violence, and emotional suffering before ultimately deciding to pursue divorce. These findings suggest that divorce was not merely an individual choice but rather a response to persistent power imbalances within the marital relationship and an effort to protect both personal and family well-being.

These findings are also consistent with Parker et al. (2022), who suggested that women are more likely to initiate divorce when marital relationships no longer provide emotional security, mutual support, and trust. Divorce is therefore often preceded by prolonged evaluations of relationship quality and anticipated future well-being rather than representing an impulsive decision. A qualitative study of women-initiated divorce (*khula*) in Lahore likewise found that women pursued divorce as a last resort, citing chronic emotional neglect, violence, rigid gender hierarchies, and a lack of spousal accountability (Ikram et al., 2025). Similarly, participants in the present study carefully weighed the potential consequences of remaining in distressing marriages before deciding that divorce represented the most adaptive solution for themselves and their children.

These findings are further supported by Nisa and Koentjoro (2022), who found that women in Aceh commonly initiate divorce following prolonged experiences of domestic violence, economic neglect, infidelity, and persistent marital conflict. Their study also highlighted that divorce is generally perceived as a last resort after repeated attempts to maintain the marriage have failed. This pattern closely mirrors the narratives of participants in the present study, who carefully evaluated their circumstances before concluding that divorce represented the most appropriate strategy to protect their psychological well-being and family stability.

From an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) perspective, these narratives demonstrate how participants continuously interpreted and reinterpreted their experiences of prolonged marital conflict, domestic violence, neglect, and concerns for their children's well-being before ultimately constructing divorce as a meaningful and necessary life decision. Rather than responding solely to these circumstances, participants actively negotiated the personal meaning of their experiences within the sociocultural and religious context of Aceh. This interpretative process reflects the central assumption of IPA that individuals make sense of significant life events through ongoing meaning-making shaped by their lived experiences (Smith, 2019; Smith et al., 2022). Consequently, divorce emerged not merely as a legal decision but as a psychologically meaningful transition through which participants sought to regain safety, dignity, and hope for the future.

Emotionally, participants' experiences align with prior research documenting heightened distress during divorce litigation, particularly in adversarial legal contexts , where women seeking

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divorce reported fear, anxiety, guilt, and shame alongside societal, legal, and parenting pressures (Wafa et al., 2023). However, participants also described relief and emotional release following legal resolution, suggesting that divorce may function as both a stressor and a coping mechanism, depending on the stage of the process. The coexistence of psychological distress and emotional relief observed in this study also corresponds with the findings of Davarinejad et al. (2022), who reported that women experiencing divorce frequently encounter emotional maladjustment while simultaneously developing adaptive coping strategies that promote recovery. This dual emotional experience illustrates that divorce should not solely be viewed as a stressful life event but also as a potential turning point toward psychological healing. In the present study, participants similarly described relief after the legal process had concluded despite experiencing prolonged anxiety throughout the litigation process.

These findings are further supported by Khataybeh (2022), who found that women experienced substantial psychological, social, and economic challenges following divorce, including emotional distress, social isolation, and financial insecurity. Despite these difficulties, many women gradually reported increased self-reliance, emotional resilience, and improved psychological well-being as they adapted to post-divorce life. This pattern closely resembles the experiences of participants in the present study, who described divorce as emotionally painful while simultaneously perceiving it as the beginning of psychological recovery and a safer life. These findings suggest that psychological recovery following divorce is not an immediate outcome but a gradual process through which women reconstruct their identities, regain emotional stability, and develop greater confidence in managing future challenges.

Recent findings by Nisa et al. (2025) further demonstrated that the legal process of divorce itself may become a significant source of psychological distress, as women frequently experience uncertainty, repeated emotional exposure, and concerns about social judgement throughout court proceedings. However, participants in their study also described a growing sense of empowerment and emotional relief once the legal process had concluded. These findings reinforce the present study, in which participants similarly experienced divorce as both a psychologically demanding process and a meaningful transition toward emotional recovery and personal safety. Within the Indonesian legal context, Saraswati (2021) also argued that gender-sensitive judicial approaches remain essential to ensuring that women experiencing violence or marital injustice receive fair treatment throughout legal proceedings. This perspective reinforces the importance of legal institutions that not only resolve marital disputes but also support women's psychological well-being during the divorce process.

A similar pattern was reported by Malik et al. (2024) in a mixed-method study of divorced women in Palestine, who concluded that divorce from a conflicted or abusive marriage can improve women’s lives and open opportunities for well-being and personal growth, although post-divorce experiences varied with age, family support, living situation, and education. This interpretation further supports the present findings that divorce represented not only a period of distress but also an opportunity for personal growth and psychological recovery, and that family support shaped how participants adjusted.

Social stigma emerged as a psychologically salient factor shaping participants’ emotional experiences. Concerns about moral judgment and social labelling were especially pronounced among women in public-facing professions. These findings echo existing literature on gendered stigma surrounding divorce in patriarchal contexts (Rahman et al., 2013), while also illustrating variability in post-divorce social responses. Within the Indonesian context, stigma surrounding women-initiated divorce remains closely intertwined with gender norms and religious expectations, and studies of divorcees in other Indonesian communities likewise describe social

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contempt and social distancing directed at them (Mutiah & Syarifudin, 2024). Wardatun and Smith (2020) argued that women who file for divorce are frequently perceived as violating traditional marital roles despite experiencing neglect or abuse. Likewise, Ramadhita et al. (2023) emphasized that gender inequality continues to influence women's experiences within the divorce process, including legal proceedings and public perceptions. These cultural expectations help explain why several participants initially feared negative social judgment before eventually receiving support from their families and communities.

Economic considerations and caregiving responsibilities further shaped participants' experiences. While employment facilitated some women's ability to pursue divorce, financial insecurity remained a source of psychological strain. Participants perceived their mental well-being as closely intertwined with their ability to care for their children, reinforcing the emotional weight of maternal responsibility during marital dissolution. Similarly, Van Winkle and Leopold (2021) demonstrated that economic well-being following divorce varies considerably according to family size and available financial resources. Their findings support the present study by illustrating that economic stability influences women's capacity to adapt to post-divorce life and regain a sense of security. Leopold (2018) similarly reported gender differences in the consequences of divorce, including greater economic strain among women, and Harkness (2022) showed that childbirth and divorce accumulate economic disadvantage that raises the income and poverty risk of single mothers. In addition, Fan and Babiarz (2019) found that gender and marital status jointly shape subjective financial satisfaction, with divorced individuals reporting lower satisfaction than married individuals. Rubab et al. (2023) likewise reported that divorcees commonly face children-related, economic, social, and psychological problems that hinder post-divorce adjustment, and that gender significantly shapes the intensity of women's adjustment constraints. Taken together, these studies suggest that the financial insecurity and maternal responsibility described by participants are not isolated experiences, but reflect broader patterns in how divorce affects women's economic security and post-divorce adjustment.

This finding is consistent with Arsa and Lestari (2024), whose review of studies on single mothers in Indonesia noted that mothers are often positioned as active agents who take responsibility for achieving resilience within the family after marital dissolution. Treloar and Funk (2008) similarly examined how mothers' health, responsibilization, and choice are bound up with family care work after separation or divorce. Although this responsibility may increase psychological and emotional burdens, it also reinforces mothers' commitment to protecting their children and ensuring family stability. Similarly, participants in the present study consistently prioritized their children's welfare when making decisions about divorce and adapting to post-divorce life. Their narratives suggest that maternal responsibility served not only as a source of stress but also as a motivating force that strengthened their resilience throughout the divorce process.

Furthermore, Rinaldo et al. (2024) argued that divorced women's post-divorce experiences are strongly shaped by socioeconomic conditions and class inequalities, which influence their access to financial resources, legal assistance, and social support. This perspective helps explain the differences observed among participants regarding employment status, economic security, and post-divorce adjustment. Women with more stable financial conditions appeared better equipped to cope with the practical challenges associated with divorce than those who remained economically dependent. These findings indicate that economic independence does not merely facilitate legal divorce but also influences women's perceptions of self-efficacy and control over their future lives.

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Importantly, while participants frequently discussed perceived changes in family dynamics and children's emotional responses, these accounts should be understood as maternal interpretations rather than objective assessments. Nevertheless, they align with broader research suggesting that parental emotional well-being plays a critical role in family adjustment following divorce. Recent studies have likewise demonstrated that children's adjustment following divorce is strongly influenced by the psychological well-being of the custodial parent rather than divorce itself. This suggests that protecting maternal mental health may indirectly promote healthier family adjustment after marital dissolution.

These findings further suggest that supporting mothers' psychological well-being may simultaneously promote healthier adjustment among children following divorce. Rather than focusing solely on children's reactions to marital dissolution, post-divorce interventions should also consider maternal mental health as a key protective factor that shapes family adaptation and resilience. This interpretation is consistent with recent evidence indicating that the quality of the parent–child relationship and the psychological functioning of the residential parent play important roles in children's well-being following parental separation (Clark et al., 2013; Kleinschlömer & Krapf, 2023).

This interpretation is further supported by Sanz-Vázquez et al. (2024), who found that mothers' and fathers' parenting practices were related to children's psychological well-being through post-divorce family adaptation. Accordingly, interventions for divorced families should address the emotional well-being of both mothers and children to facilitate healthier family adaptation during the post-divorce transition.

The cultural context of Aceh provides an important perspective for interpreting these findings. Acehnese society is characterized by strong Islamic values and collectivistic family norms, in which marriage is viewed as a lifelong commitment and divorce often carries considerable social stigma, particularly for women. Consequently, participants experienced a complex tension between protecting themselves from harmful marital relationships and fulfilling cultural expectations to preserve family unity. Nevertheless, support from family members enabled many participants to reinterpret divorce as a legitimate strategy to safeguard both their own well-being and that of their children. These findings are consistent with Wardatun and Smith (2020) and Almizan and Amri (2021), who emphasized that women's divorce decisions in Indonesia are shaped by the interaction between religious values, gender expectations, and family support.

This cultural interpretation is also supported by Djawas et al. (2021), who reported rising divorce rates in Aceh and linked them to economic pressures, education, social media, and diminishing empathy toward spousal rights and obligations. The growing number of divorce petitions filed by women in this context reflects broader social changes in which women are increasingly willing to leave marriages characterized by prolonged conflict, neglect, or violence despite prevailing cultural expectations to preserve marital relationships. This broader regional context strengthens the interpretation that participants' experiences represent not only individual psychological processes but also ongoing sociocultural transformations within Acehnese society.

This interpretation is further supported by Nisa et al. (2025), who demonstrated that Muslim women's experiences of divorce are shaped by ongoing negotiations between religious identity, cultural expectations, and personal well-being. Rather than viewing divorce solely as the dissolution of marriage, many women reconstructed it as a pathway toward restoring dignity, safety, and psychological well-being. This perspective closely aligns with participants' narratives

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in the present study, who similarly interpreted divorce as a meaningful life transition despite the sociocultural challenges they encountered (Nisa et al., 2025).

Interestingly, these findings differ from several studies conducted in Western settings, where divorce is more commonly interpreted as an individual decision emphasizing personal autonomy. In contrast, participants in the present study described divorce as a decision negotiated within broader family, religious, and community contexts. This difference highlights the importance of considering sociocultural influences when interpreting women's divorce experiences across different cultural settings (Khataybeh, 2022; Malik et al., 2024; Rinaldo et al., 2024).

Overall, the present findings demonstrate that women-initiated divorce should be understood as a multidimensional psychological process involving cognitive deliberation, emotional regulation, social negotiation, and cultural adaptation. Rather than reflecting personal failure, participants interpreted divorce as a means of restoring psychological well-being and creating a safer family environment. The findings therefore highlight the importance of integrating psychological, cultural, and structural perspectives when understanding women's divorce experiences in Indonesia.

This broader interpretation is also consistent with Setijaningrum et al. (2024), who highlighted that resilience and empowerment among Indonesian women develop through continuous adaptation to adversity, strengthened social relationships, and increasing confidence in managing future challenges. Similarly, participants in the present study gradually reconstructed divorce as a meaningful life transition that enabled them to regain psychological well-being and a sense of personal agency.

Collectively, these findings highlight that women's divorce decisions emerge through continuous interactions between individual psychological processes and broader sociocultural structures. Emotional suffering, family responsibilities, financial considerations, and cultural expectations were not independent influences but dynamically interacted throughout participants' decision-making processes. This complexity supports the interpretative phenomenological perspective, which emphasizes that individuals actively construct meaning through their lived experiences (Smith et al., 2022). Therefore, women-initiated divorce should be understood not merely as a legal event but as a dynamic process of meaning-making shaped by personal, relational, and cultural contexts.

Implications

Theoretically, this study contributes to feminist and psychological perspectives on divorce by foregrounding women’s agency in decision-making within structurally constrained contexts. Participants’ narratives illustrate how divorce was experienced as an outcome of prolonged emotional labor, moral negotiation, and engagement with legal institutions. This finding aligns with feminist scholarship that conceptualizes divorce as a gendered process shaped by unequal power relations and social expectations (e.g., Fajardo-Gonzalez, 2021; Rinaldo et al., 2024), as well as psychological research emphasizing agency and meaning-making under stress (Janis & Mann, 1977).

Previous studies of women who left harmful marriages have likewise emphasized that women should be understood as active agents who continuously negotiate personal safety, family responsibilities, and cultural expectations throughout the divorce process rather than passive recipients of marital circumstances (Fajardo-Gonzalez, 2021; Nisa et al., 2025; Sukeri & Man, 2017). The present findings reinforce this perspective by demonstrating that participants actively

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reconstructed the meaning of divorce as a pathway toward psychological well-being, dignity, and future stability.

The findings have several implications for psychological practice, family support, and divorce-related services. First, psychological support should be integrated into the divorce process to help women manage anxiety, uncertainty, emotional distress, and changes in daily functioning. Counselling services may provide a supportive space for women to process their experiences and develop strategies for post-divorce adjustment. Second, interventions should recognize the importance of family support, particularly in contexts where divorce is influenced by strong religious and collectivistic values. Family members can play an important role in reducing stigma, validating women's experiences, and supporting their adjustment after divorce. Third, divorce-related services should adopt a family-oriented approach by considering the well-being of both mothers and children. Strengthening psychological and social support for mothers may contribute to healthier family adaptation following divorce.

These findings also have important implications for psychological interventions targeting women experiencing marital distress. Recent evidence suggests that recovery following divorce is facilitated not only by the termination of an unhealthy relationship but also by access to psychological support, family acceptance, and community resources that promote resilience and post-divorce adjustment (Arsa & Lestari, 2024; Davarinejad et al., 2022; Malik et al., 2024). Therefore, interventions should address women's emotional recovery while simultaneously strengthening social support systems and empowering women to rebuild their lives after divorce.

Methodologically, this study demonstrates the value of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis for examining women-initiated divorce in a religious court context, where legal, emotional, and familial experiences are closely intertwined. The idiographic focus on a small, homogeneous sample of mothers made it possible to trace how appraisal, emotion, and family support interacted within each account before patterns were compared across cases. Future studies could build on this approach by combining IPA with longitudinal interviews, or by adding the perspectives of children, extended family members, and legal practitioners to complement mothers' interpretations of family adjustment, which in the present study remain maternal accounts rather than objective assessments.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study involved only five women who had initiated divorce proceedings and had children, which limits the transferability of the findings to women with different family circumstances or divorce experiences. Second, all participants were residing in Aceh and had experienced divorce within the Indonesian religious court system. Therefore, the findings reflect the sociocultural and legal context of Aceh and may not be directly applicable to women in other cultural or legal settings. Third, the study relied on participants' retrospective accounts of their divorce experiences. Although this allowed participants to reflect on the meaning of their experiences, retrospective accounts may be influenced by subsequent experiences and emotional reconstruction. These limitations are consistent with the interpretative and idiographic nature of IPA, which prioritizes depth of understanding over statistical generalizability.

The findings should be interpreted within the sociocultural context of Aceh, where marriage, family relationships, and community expectations may influence women's experiences of divorce. Participants' concerns about social judgment and marital status suggest that divorce was not experienced solely as a personal decision but also as a socially situated process. At the

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same time, family and community support helped participants legitimize their decisions and adjust to post-divorce life. These findings suggest that the Acehnese context may function both as a source of social pressure and as an important source of support.

However, this study was not specifically designed as an ethnographic or culture-focused study. Therefore, the findings cannot be interpreted as representing Acehnese culture as a whole or as establishing specific cultural or religious norms regarding divorce. Rather, references to culture and religion reflect how these contexts were perceived and experienced by the participants. Moreover, the study involved only five women residing in Aceh and experiencing divorce within the Indonesian religious court system, limiting the transferability of the findings to women in other cultural, religious, or legal contexts. Future studies could specifically examine how Acehnese cultural values, religious beliefs, and community norms shape women's divorce decision-making and post-divorce adjustment.

Future qualitative studies may further explore how women's meaning-making evolves over time following divorce, particularly during the transition from legal separation to long-term psychological adjustment. Longitudinal research could also provide a deeper understanding of how family relationships, parenting responsibilities, and cultural expectations continue to shape women's post-divorce well-being.

Conclusion

This study examined the lived experiences of women in Aceh who initiated divorce through religious courts, focusing on the cognitive, emotional, and relational processes that shaped their decisions and their perceptions of the consequences for family well-being. Analysis of five participants' accounts identified four interrelated themes: negotiating the decision to divorce, navigating loss, pain and emotional renewal, reconstructing life after divorce, and family as an anchor.

The first theme showed that the decision to divorce was a prolonged and iterative process rather than a single moment. Participants weighed marital neglect, violence, and abandonment against concerns for their children, fear of social stigma, and attempts to preserve the marriage, and several reported hesitating or withdrawing petitions before proceeding. The second theme showed that emotions were neither uniform nor linear: anxiety, sleeplessness, and uncertainty were common during litigation, while the court's decision brought relief and, for some, a turning point toward emotional renewal. The third theme showed that reduced motivation and disrupted routines were temporary responses to strain, and that rebuilding life involved new roles, greater independence, and practical concerns such as returning to the parental home. The fourth theme showed that family served as an anchor, offering emotional reassurance, legal and practical help, and a sense of belonging, although it could also be experienced as pressure or a reminder of dependency.

Taken together, these findings indicate that women-initiated divorce is best understood as a dynamic process of meaning-making, emotional transition, and reconstruction rather than a single legal event. Participants reinterpreted divorce from a stigmatized option into a legitimate and protective response to persistent marital distress, undertaken to safeguard their own well-being and that of their children. Although the small, context-specific sample limits transferability, the findings underline the need for psychologically informed legal processes, for mental health support that accompanies women through litigation and its aftermath, and for family-oriented approaches that recognize the role of family support in women's recovery.

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We gratefully acknowledge our study participants.

Author Contributions

H.N.: conceptualization, methodology, investigation, formal analysis, writing original draft. K.K.: conceptualization, methodology, supervision, writing, review and editing. K.: validation, writing , review and editing. S.A.S.: writing and editing. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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