



Original Article

## Escaping domestic violence: A qualitative study of women who left their abusive husbands



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### المخلص

**أهداف البحث:** تهدف هذه الدراسة النوعية لاكتشاف العوامل التي تؤثر على قرار السيدات اللواتي نجحن في النجاة من العنف الأسري بالحصول على الطلاق.

**طرق البحث:** أجريت مقابلة مطولة مع 17 سيدة تتراوح أعمارهن بين 21-56 من اللواتي حصلن على الطلاق أو حالياً في عملية الحصول عليه في كلنتان، ماليزيا.

**النتائج:** ظهرت عدة مواضيع تشير إلى خمسة أسباب رئيسية للطلاق؛ الوصول إلى نقطة الإنذار الأخير، ووجود دعم كاف قبل وبعد الطلاق، والقلق بشأن رعاية الأطفال، والسعي وراء الاستقلال المالي، والخوف من الأذى.

**الاستنتاجات:** إن تحديد عدد من عوامل الخطر للطلاق قد يحدث شرارة التغيير في عقلية مجتمعنا، الأمر الذي قد يساعد في تمكين المطلقات من الإناث والسماح لهن بالعيش حياة سعيدة خالية من الإساءة.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الطلاق؛ العنف الأسري؛ مقابلة مطولة؛ ماليزيا

### Abstract

**Objectives:** This qualitative study aims to discover the factors that influenced the decisions of women who successfully escaped domestic violence by attaining a divorce.

**Methods:** In-depth interviews were conducted with 17 women, ages 21-56 who were either divorced or

currently in the process of getting divorced in Kelantan, Malaysia.

**Results:** Several themes emerged, indicating the following five reasons for divorce: 1) reaching the point of ultimatum, 2) having adequate support pre- and post-divorce, 3) concern for children's welfare, 4) seeking financial independence, and 5) fear of harm.

**Conclusion:** The identification of the driving factors for divorce may spark a change in our society's mindset to empower female divorcees and allow them to lead happy, abuse-free lives.

**Keywords:** Divorce; Domestic violence; In-depth interview; Malaysia

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### Introduction

Domestic violence (DV) is a global problem of epidemic proportions.<sup>1</sup> This form of violence encompasses physical, sexual, or psychological harm between husbands and wives, parents and children, siblings, spouses, grandparents, uncles, aunts, relatives by marriage or individuals in family relationships.<sup>2</sup> The health consequences of DV can be serious, leading to physical, emotional or mental health consequences, such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, phobias, anxiety, panic and substance abuse disorders.<sup>3</sup>

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Divorce may be a successful strategy for abused women to escape from DV.<sup>4</sup> However, despite social and governmental responses that show support for battered women, many women remain in abusive relationships. When battered women attempt to escape DV, they face numerous obstacles and crises, causing many to struggle with the divorce process.<sup>5</sup> The combination of poverty and gender inequality, inequities in the legal framework, and corruption in both formal and informal local institutions discourage women who are abused and underserved from seeking divorce and reduce the likelihood of a favourable outcome when they do.<sup>6,7</sup>

In Islamic law, the husband has the exclusive right to divorce or *talaq*, i.e., the husband can simply say, 'I divorce you', and the divorce is carried out. This divorce does not require the intervention of a judge or the wife's approval.<sup>8</sup> In special circumstances, Islam makes allowances for a woman to seek divorce for one of three reasons: *khul* (divorce for monetary redemption), *ta'liq* (divorce for breach of a condition in the marriage contract), and *fasakh* (divorce by the *kadhi* [judge] for justifiable reasons proven by the wife). Regardless of which path a woman takes, more often than not, the process is time consuming and arduous. However, some women successfully escape their lives of DV and go on to lead an abuse-free existence. What motivates these women to divorce, despite everything that intends to block their path? What can we learn from them and their circumstances that can be used to assist other victims of DV? These questions, among several others, laid the groundwork for this qualitative study. Put simply, the objective of this study is to understand the motivation for women to seek a solution to their problem-laden lives and how their environments ensure their continued commitment to their decisions. As a result, researchers can comprehend how their family members, the community, social service agencies and legal statutes interlink to assist the women with their exit strategies, which in turn provides an excellent opportunity to facilitate divorce.

## Materials and Methods

The setting for the present study was Kelantan; a north-east state of Peninsular Malaysia. In-depth interviews were conducted among Malay women, ages 21 to 56, who were either divorced or currently in the divorce process. The required number of participant was not decided prior to the study. The researcher gathered data until reaching the level of 'saturation', which is when new data no longer emerges.<sup>9</sup> Considering the sensitivity of the topic and the difficulty in identifying study participants, purposive and snowball sampling methods were employed. Study participants were recruited from the health clinics and the Social and Welfare Department Unit in Kota Bharu, where advertisements were posted to request voluntary participation in the in-depth interviews. In addition, some prospective participants were approached directly and offered the opportunity to participate in the study.

Informed consent was obtained from participants prior to each interview. Participants were informed of the sensitive nature of the interview content and given the freedom to withdraw from the study at any stage of the interview. Interviews were conducted in places that could ensure maximum privacy. Confidentiality of information was strictly

maintained. Before each interview session began, adequate time was allotted to establish trust and rapport with the participants. Participants were interviewed using an interview guide that included a series of broad, open-ended questions about women's experiences of abuse. The questions focused on how the individual viewed the abuse, if she wanted the abuse to stop, steps she took to end the abuse, her decision-making processes and her support networks. All interviews were carried out in the Kelantanese dialect of the Malay language and lasted from 45 min to 90 min. Upon completion of the interview, a cash token of RM50 was presented.

The thematic analysis used in this study involves the six phases adapted from Braun and Clark.<sup>10</sup> Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and checked by NN. SS and NN read and re-read all transcripts and constructed a coding frame of themes using the method of constant comparison, in which new data was compared to previously collected data in order to refine the 'labels' given to themes in the data. Then, analytic themes were discussed and developed further by the main authors (NN and SS).

## Results

A total of 17 participants were interviewed; 12 were divorced and five were awaiting divorce proceedings. The participants' ages ranged from 21 to 56 years old. All participants were Malays of Muslim religion and lived in Kota Bharu. The backgrounds of the participants are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Sociodemographic background of study participants.**

Participant	Age	Status	Occupation	No of children
1 Mrs M	50	Divorced	Cleaner	6
2 Mrs A	27	Divorced	Cleaner	3
3 Mrs R	56	Divorced	Nurse	6
4 Mrs SR	25	Divorced	Business	1
5 Mrs NH	33	Divorced	Nurse	2
6 Mrs S	30	Awaiting divorce proceedings	Clerk	Nil
7 Mrs AZ	48	Awaiting divorce proceedings	Housewife	6
8 Mrs K	28	Divorced	Self-employed	3
9 Mrs H	36	Divorced	Self-employed	3
10 Mrs SU	33	Divorced	Clerk	1
11 Mrs NHS	30	Divorced	Tailor	4
12 Mrs Z	30	Divorced	Barber	2
13 Mrs SH	31	Divorced	Social worker	2
14 Mrs NL	29	Awaiting divorce proceedings	Research Assistant	2
15 Mrs AZR	37	Divorced	Clerk	2
16 Mrs CN	33	Awaiting divorce proceedings	Lecturer	2
17 Mrs SL	21	Awaiting divorce proceedings	Housewife	2

This study resulted in the emergence of five themes that influenced the battered women's decisions to pursue divorce. Their ability to seek divorce was reaffirmed by multiple factors, such as reaching the point of ultimatum, fear of harm and concern for their children's welfare. This motivation to divorce was further facilitated by the women's support systems and financial independence. Table 2 summarizes the themes and corresponding sub-themes.

**Table 2: Themes and sub-themes that influenced the decision to pursue divorce.**

Themes	Sub-themes
Reaching the point of ultimatum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lost hope in marriage</li> <li>• Stress overload</li> </ul>
Concern for children's welfare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poor father figure role model</li> <li>• Impact of witnessing violence on children</li> <li>• Direct abuse on children</li> </ul>
Fear of harm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fear of disease</li> <li>• Fear of death</li> </ul>
Seeking financial independence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ability to survive financially</li> <li>• Frustration with financial hardship</li> <li>• Desire to regain control over decision-making and household finances</li> <li>• Freedom to seek employment and have better lives</li> </ul>
Pre- and post-divorce support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continuous support from families and friends</li> <li>• Support from the community</li> <li>• Support from various organizations</li> </ul>

### Theme 1. Reaching the point of ultimatum

Among the reasons for divorce stated by these women is having lost all hope that things will change:

*"He will never change. He refused to work. He slapped me, kicked me. Divorce is the only solution as I don't want to live with him anymore".*

Some of these women suffered years of emotional violence, but finally reached the breaking point when they were physically abused,

*"I filed for divorce after he beat me with a chair. All these while I tolerated his verbal abuse but after he hit me, I could not bear it anymore".*

The frequent instances of abuse, in its myriad of forms, interlink and overlap with each other, leading to an overload of stress:

*"I am overly stressed. There were times when I wanted to commit suicide. I jumped into the river because I was so stressed. I asked God why did He hate me so, why was I tested to this extreme? I want to end my life!"*

### Theme 2. Concern for children's welfare

Understandably, domestic violence not only affects the women but also their children:

*"I am worried as he is a womanizer. I fear that he will harm our daughter. He was a hot-tempered man. So I decided to divorce him".*

In relationships that involve domestic violence and abuse, the children are often exposed to the abusive incidents and may be badly hit or beaten themselves.

*"He burned my child with a cigarette butt. He did it because he was angry when the child asked him to go out for a walk".*

It was observed that the decision to divorce was an emotional one, borne out of the need to protect their children from their abusive fathers:

*"I seek for a divorce for the sake of my child, the father is a drug addict".*

### Theme 3. Fear of harm

Among the women whose husbands were drug addicts, the same concern was voiced: a fear of contracting HIV from their husbands. Their primary concerns were for their health and the future of their children.

*"I think of what will happen to my children if I get HIV. Many of my husband's relatives died because of AIDS. Three of his cousins and their wives all died from AIDS. Their children are now being taken care by the relatives".*

The women in this study reported that they finally decided to divorce when they felt their lives and the lives of their children were at stake. The fear of harm and deep need to seek safety propelled these women to seek divorce:

*"I am afraid that my husband will do more violence, I'm scared, he has threatened to kill me, that's what I am afraid of".*

### Theme 4. Seeking financial independence

It was observed that all participants in this study experienced some form of financial abuse, and they believed that staying in an abusive marriage for the sake of financial security was no longer necessary. Instead, these women believed divorce would offer the freedom they needed to secure a better future for themselves and their children:

*"I decided to seek divorce, yes, my child will go to school soon. I want to find a job and a house"*

*"I do not depend on him. I can survive without him. I am self-employed".*

Most of the women in the study had to shoulder the responsibility of supporting their families financially. Not only did they have to be the sole breadwinners, they also had to allocate what little money was left for their husbands' drug addiction:

*“He is unemployed. I feel so stressed...my salary is not enough to cover all the bills, rent and besides that, he is also involved with drugs”.*

#### **Theme 5. Pre- and post-divorce support**

Getting out of an abusive marriage is complicated and difficult to pursue. Too often, the process is bureaucratic, time-consuming and challenging. Women in the study reported they benefited most from their family and friends who were willing to help and supported their decisions to stay out of the abusive situation:

*“I vowed to file for divorce. My siblings supported me and backed my decision. They agreed to help me whenever I’m in need”.*

*“The other reason why I wanted to divorce is because I know my parents can help care for my children”.*

An interim protection order from the police department also helped to ensure safety for the women during the divorce process. It prevents abusive husbands from coming to the house, threatening or hurting the victims. With this in hand, abused victims feel safe and confident to proceed with the divorce:

*“Yes, I had a protection order during divorce process...the court gave it to me. The police asked me to call them if he abused me again and they will apprehend him”.*

#### **Discussion**

Our findings showed that women in Kota Bharu had strong reasons to file for divorce. After years of abuse, these women had enough of the violence and believed divorce was the only viable solution. Unconditional support received from families and friends, together with assistance from government agencies, greatly helped these women maintain their commitment to leaving their abusive relationships. The decision to divorce was also influenced by their motherly instincts to protect their children from their abusive husbands and their desire to regain control over decision-making and household finances. Furthermore, divorce was regarded as an opportunity for financial independence and symbolized the avenue that would free them from harm.

These findings were consistent with a study in New Zealand that showed women who left violent relationships did so because they could no longer endure the violence, were badly injured, were concerned for their children, and feared being killed by their husbands.<sup>11</sup> It is also comparable with another qualitative study in Armenia, which revealed multiple factors that drive a woman’s decision to leave an abusive relationship, including nuclear family support, care for children’s well-being and women’s empowerment.<sup>12</sup>

Five themes were identified as motivations to escape an abusive marriage. By ‘reaching the point of ultimatum’, the women were observed as having developed ‘abuse-free identities’,<sup>13</sup> marking the beginning of their ideas of leaving their

relationships.<sup>14</sup> Similar to ‘turning points’<sup>15</sup> or ‘reaching the point of saturation’,<sup>16</sup> these women recognized there was no room for further improvement in their abusive relationships. Such a realization could be subtle or sudden and is associated with an unintentional exposure of the abuse, an act of abuse so extreme that it was no longer tolerable, an external intervention, or an accumulation of hurt and disillusionment that finally outweighed the hope of improvement.<sup>17</sup>

Wettersten et al. advocated that children played an integral part in the women’s decision to stay or leave a relationship.<sup>18</sup> The results of our study appear to support their assertions. Out of ‘concern for children’s welfare’, the motivation for these women’s decisions to leave highlights the common desire to provide for their children’s safety and welfare. Other authors have suggested that the decision to leave is an attempt to save children from physical and psychological threats,<sup>12</sup> fuelled by feelings of a responsibility to create a better future for their children and serving as a powerful reason to gain influence over the decision to remove themselves from the abusive environment.<sup>15</sup>

The literature has been consistent in portraying ‘fear’ as one of the main reasons for a woman to remain in an abusive relationship.<sup>19–22</sup> However, for Kelantanese women in Kota Bharu fear became the reason for them to leave the violent relationship. For these women, the danger of remaining in the abusive relationship overrode their husbands’ controlling behaviours, coercion and threats, leading to their realizations that leaving their relationships would be crucial to their survival.<sup>23</sup> Correspondingly, other authors have suggested reasons for leaving, including exacerbation of violence and fear of being killed.<sup>24,25</sup>

In ‘seeking financial independence’, the women observed divorce as an opportunity for financial freedom. This process is similar to the ‘breaking free’ stage of leaving, which occurs when a woman actively disengages from her abuser, their joint assets and lifestyle.<sup>26</sup> Studies revealed that the decision to divorce is associated with the empowerment of women and financial independence.<sup>27–29</sup> Additionally, employment plays a critically important role in the lives of DV victims by improving their finances.<sup>30</sup>

From this study, we discovered that the support women receive before and after they leave an abusive relationship is different, each serving a unique purpose, with the former helping women to exit the relationship and the latter helping women to stay out of the abusive relationship.<sup>15</sup> The commitment to leave an abusive relationship is not an easy one, and women can occasionally waver when they are faced with frightening obstacles. Some women required many attempts before their strength and resources were adequate for leaving. The greater the support they received and the more practical preparation they made for independent living, the higher the likelihood that the women would stay away permanently.<sup>31,32</sup>

It is noteworthy that although respondents in this study were all Muslims, their experiences of leaving appeared to be different from their fellow Arab Muslims. Investigations of divorce and abuse among Arab Muslim women underscore the significance of culture and social stigma on a woman’s decision to leave.<sup>16,33</sup> It was denoted that Arab women were conditioned to believe that the needs of their children and

extended family members take precedence over their own well-being and personal safety.<sup>33</sup> Future research efforts should include investigations to further explore abused women's experiences from other ethnics and religions, which would supply service providers with accurate information about domestic violence as it occurs in a variety of cultural groups.

### Limitation

Considering the sensitivity of the subject, it can be assumed that some bias may have come into play during this study. Since society has trained people not to air their dirty laundry in public, victims may have found it embarrassing to speak openly with an outsider. However, this limitation was overcome by establishing good rapport between the participants and researcher. Further, due to the sensitivity of the research topic, which may be upsetting and distressing to the respondents, member checking could not be done.

### Conclusion

It can be concluded from this qualitative inquiry that abused women in Kelantan are slowly turning to divorce to escape abusive marriages. These women cited five valid reasons for their decisions to divorce. These reasons point to the ability of these women to step away from the problem to view themselves and their abusive relationships from a different perspective. As a result, these women adopted a more empowered position and regained control of their circumstances. These findings highlight the need to support women in their efforts to escape DV and to provide assistance at opportune moments to enable them to move on with their lives successfully and leave these abusive relationships permanently.

**Abbreviations:** DV, Domestic violence

### Ethical approval

Ethical approval was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee, Universiti Sains Malaysia [USM/KK/PPP/JEPeM [246.4(1.11)]]. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents prior to data collection.

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### Authors' contribution

NN were involved in the study design, data collection and data analysis. SS co-analyzed the results and wrote the manuscript. All authors have critically reviewed and approved the final draft and are responsible for the content and similarity index of the manuscript.

### Conflicts of interest

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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