

CHANGING GENDER ROLES, MARITAL INSTABILITY AND RISING DIVORCE RATES IN ILEMELA DISTRICT, TANZANIA

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ABSTRACT

The increasing divorce rate in Ilemela District, Tanzania, reflects major transformations in gender roles and marital expectations. This study investigates how changing gender dynamics influence marital instability by examining the experiences of divorced couples, married partners, and key informants such as social welfare officers, court officials, and religious leaders. Using a qualitative, cross-sectional design, data were collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Participants were purposively selected for their lived experiences or professional expertise in marital issues. Thematic analysis, facilitated by NVivo software, revealed that women's growing participation in both income-generating and domestic responsibilities has redefined traditional household roles. These shifts often generate conflict, particularly when men find it difficult to adjust to new gender expectations. Furthermore, the increasing awareness of gender equality and women's rights has transformed patterns of decision-making and authority within marriages, leading to disputes and unmet expectations between spouses. The findings suggest that the clash between traditional cultural norms and modern gender relations is a key factor driving divorce in the district. The study concludes that promoting marital stability requires culturally sensitive approaches that recognize evolving gender roles. Interventions such as premarital and marital counseling, gender dialogue programs, and improved spousal communication can help couples navigate these transitions more effectively. Overall, the study underscores the need for community-based strategies that balance gender empowerment with mutual understanding and cooperation in marriage, thereby fostering more resilient and harmonious marital relationships.

Keywords: Divorce, Gender Roles, Marital Instability, Women Empowerment, Household Dynamics

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Tanzania has experienced a noticeable rise in divorce cases, signaling shifting social and cultural dynamics that are redefining the institution of marriage. Traditionally, marriage in Tanzanian society was viewed as a lifelong commitment upheld by strong cultural and family ties. However, contemporary developments such as urbanization, women's empowerment, and changing economic conditions have begun to challenge these long-standing norms. Data from the

Tanzania National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2022) indicate a 23% increase in divorce petitions between 2015 and 2022. Within Mwanza Region, Ilemela District has recorded one of the highest divorce rates, with 21 divorces per 1,000 marriages (RAS, 2025). This pattern suggests that rapid urban growth, cultural transformation, and evolving gender expectations are key factors contributing to marital instability in the district.

Historically, customary marriages within Tanzania operated within clearly defined gender roles, where men were viewed as providers and decision-makers, and women as caregivers and homemakers. However, increasing access to education, formal employment, and financial independence among women has significantly reshaped these expectations. While such changes have advanced gender equality, they have also created tensions within households where traditional patriarchal values persist. Conflicts often arise when partners hold differing perceptions of authority, household responsibility, and marital obligations dynamics that frequently contribute to relationship breakdowns.

The situation in Ilemela District mirrors a broader national and regional trend of rising divorce rates in rapidly urbanizing areas. Social welfare offices and court records show that, despite interventions such as family counseling, religious mediation, and gender sensitization programs, marriage dissolution continues to increase. Yet, few studies in Tanzania have examined how the redefinition of gender roles and expectations specifically contributes to this pattern. Most research has focused on economic or behavioral causes, overlooking the subtle but powerful influence of cultural change on marital stability.

These dynamics in Tanzania reflect a wider global phenomenon. Across many societies, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), modernization and globalization are transforming traditional family systems. As women attain greater autonomy and men navigate evolving expectations of masculinity, new forms of marital negotiation and conflict emerge. Studies from countries such as Kenya, Nigeria, and India show that as gender roles become more fluid, divorce rates tend to increase, particularly where traditional norms remain influential. Similarly, in high-income contexts, research has linked the redefinition of gender roles to a revaluation of marital satisfaction and a greater willingness to leave unfulfilling unions (Amato, 2000; Mahmoodzadeh et al., 2021).

Therefore, while the rise in divorce rates in Ilemela District is a local manifestation, it aligns with broader global trends shaped by shifting gender norms. Understanding how these changing expectations influence marital stability in the Tanzanian context is essential for developing culturally sensitive strategies that promote sustainable family relationships. This study thus seeks to examine how changes in traditional gender roles and expectations contribute to the rising divorce rates in Ilemela District, Mwanza Region, Tanzania, within the broader framework of global social transformation.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research approach to explore the social and cultural factors influencing the rising divorce rate in Ilemela District, with particular focus on changing gender roles and marital expectations (Creswell, 2018). A cross-sectional design was used to collect data at a single point in time from divorced men and women, community married couples, social welfare officers, court officials, and religious leaders, allowing for diverse perspectives on marital dynamics (Flick, 2014). Purposive sampling ensured the selection of participants with relevant experiences and professional insights. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs), capturing personal narratives and interactive reflections on household

roles, societal norms, and factors contributing to divorce. In-depth interviews were conducted with divorced individuals and key informants to gain nuanced understanding, while FGDs provided collective insights and social context, enhancing triangulation. All interviews and discussions were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis with NVivo software, following Braun and Clarke's (2016) six-step framework of coding, categorization, and theme development, to identify patterns related to gender role changes and their impact on marital stability.

FINDINGS

Women Involvement in both Productive and Reproductive Activities

Commonly, spouses have roles to perform in their families that require them to engage themselves in productive and reproductive activities. Husbands are normally expected to provide for needs at home such as food, shelter, school fees, and other essential household needs. Wives, on the other hand, assume roles related to care of the children, cooking, washing and other household chores.

This study sought to capture insights from key stakeholders on how evolving gender norms may be influencing marital relationships and, ultimately, contributing to high incidence of divorce in Ilemela District. Through focus group discussions conducted in Buswelu and Sangabuye wards, participants reported changes in responsibilities. Five (5) divorced female participants out of six (6) at Buswelu revealed that nowadays do not honor their family responsibilities as they are supposed to. Many of them play tricks, and avoid providing for the family, leaving everything to the shoulders of their wives. Hence, wives forces to perform both productive and reproductive roles. This duo-responsibility is overwhelming many wives. One (1) female participant from Sangabuye ward aged 48 years old, with primary level education, said that,

Nowadays, some men expect their wives to take on the greater responsibility of caring for the family, doing hard work, enduring hardships, and providing income while they remain on the sidelines. As a result, some men have developed the behavior of seeking seek relationships with well-to-do women with apparently good. This situation places a heavy burden on the wives, leading to feelings of unfair treatment, and marital conflict, often contributing leading to separation.

Another participant added that,

Yes, I have observed significant changes in the execution of household responsibilities in recent years. In the past, family roles were clearly divided, with the man being the main breadwinner while the woman stayed at home to care for the family. However, nowadays many women also engage in economic activities and contribute to running the household, a shift that has brought a certain level of equality but sometimes leading to role conflicts. There are men who struggle to accept these changes, and women who demand equal participation in family decision-making, which at times results in disputes and even the breakdown of marriages.

Change of traditional gender roles in marriage affect men as well. Four (4) male out of six (6) male participants in focused group discussion, argued that, in both cultural and biblical traditions man is the head of the family, has the mandate, and legitimate authority over the family. This is his main role, regardless of his educational or economic status; a husband should rule, lead, and decide in the household. Unfortunately, this traditional marriage male role expectation is changing in favor of women. Wives now feel powerful, they want to rule in marriage, and they are no longer submissive to their husbands. One (1) male participant from Buswelu ward aged 39 years, with university education, said that

Traditionally it is said that a wife should obey her husband. Tradition is very clear on this: the wife is the wife, and the husband is the husband, each with their specific responsibilities. But nowadays a wife has her own arguments, and even small issues turn into cases. If you follow traditions, marriage has no problem, but once you move away from the traditions and embrace globalization, marriage is disrupted.

Another key finding in this study is how increased awareness through gender empowerment affects decision-making and authority management within marriages.

Men have been exercising dominance in almost everything. Traditional norms reinforced this practice, limiting women's roles primarily to domestic spheres, with limited access to education and formal employment. **Four** (4) male participants aged 46 in Sangabuye ward, said that in the past divorce rarely occurred. Wives were patient to their husbands, acting accordingly and observing their roles. But recently women do not fulfill their responsibilities in the household, they see themselves that they are equal to men, they are busy with economic activities, most of the time they are not available at home, and this is normal nowadays because women fight for gender equality. In those years this didn't happen, a woman was a housekeeper; she was always at home or in the plantation (shamba). But after these so-called human rights and gender empowerment, everything has changed; women are fighting for their rights, education, employment, and the government reinforces these attitudes by offering trainings on gender empowerment. Women see themselves capable in doing everything without the assistance of men.

One male aged 36 from Buswelu ward also said that,

Nowadays, many women want to get married, but they are not always willing to fully embrace the role of a wife. Similarly, many women want to have children, yet they are not necessarily ready to take on the responsibilities of being a mother to those children. There is a distinction between giving birth and fulfilling the role of a mother, just as there is a difference between getting married and fully assuming the role of a wife. According to the Bible, history, and traditional norms in Tanzania, a wife was expected to live under the guidance and authority of her husband. However, in contemporary times, some wives desire to maintain their independence and even exercise a degree of self-governance within the domain of their marriage.

In a similar tone, a 39 male participant also said that,

Nowadays, there has been increased awareness among people about their rights and the importance of standing up for themselves, which has created challenges in social life. Traditionally, a child was expected to obey their father, but today a child has rights; even if you punish them, they can take the matter to the court. This situation is similar in marriage. Traditionally, a wife was expected to obey her husband, but now many wives have their own views and conditions, and even small issues can lead to conflicts or complaints.

This study also aimed at capturing the participants' opinions on how disagreements over gender roles contribute to divorce. Through Focused Group Discussions with victims of divorce, the study sought to understand whether disagreements over gender roles play a role in marital dissolution. Participants were asked to share their experiences and perceptions regarding how conflicts related to the division of household responsibilities, expectations of men and women, and adherence to traditional or modern roles may have influenced their marriages. One of the respondents reported that,

Yes, I believe that disagreements over the execution of household responsibilities significantly contribute to divorce. Often, when women strive to participate in both family and economic activities, some men are unable or unwilling to accept this and expect their wives to maintain traditional family roles without sharing responsibilities. This situation leads to daily conflicts, misunderstandings, and sometimes intense frustrations that can ultimately cause the marriage to fail. Furthermore, when differences in perspectives on family responsibilities escalate, they can trigger major disputes that often result in divorce.

An unmet expectation among spouses in marriage was another area that shaped this study. During Focus Group Discussions conducted in Buswelu and Sangabuye wards, 10 participants shared that their lived experiences that their marriages did not meet their expectations. They explained how disappointment arose when reality diverged from what they had envisioned. One divorced female participant, aged 37, stated that

First of all, when we talk about marriage, although it is said that one should not have expectations, in reality expectations always exist for both partners. For instance, when I was with my partner, he did not possess the qualities of being a family man; rather, he behaved like a hunter who was simply seeking assistance. Therefore, he entered into a relationship with me already having his own personal objectives.

Similar to that other female key informant, a social welfare officer aged 34 explained that

Today, when couples enter into marriage, they already carry their own expectations. For example, one may imagine that once married, the couple will call each other affectionate names, the husband will involve his wife in his personal and family matters, and they will share everything. However, once inside the marriage, the reality often turns out differently. With familiarity, things change, the husband may stop involving his wife and begin to treat her as ordinary. Recently, someone came to the office after only six months of marriage wanting a divorce, complaining that her husband does not involve her in anything; instead, he discusses matters only with his family and keeps her out of his decisions. This shows how unrealistic expectations, when unmet, often lead to divorce.

Divorced male participants with the age of 46 from Sangabuye ward explained his experience by saying that,

When I first married my wife, she did not consume alcohol. However, over time she began drinking, even local brews. When she drinks, she collapses and has to be carried on a stretcher because of excessive intoxication. Men end up bringing her home and telling me, this is your wife.

10 out of 12 participants said, normally some of partners behaviors are not well known during the process of marriage but many of the acts are being revealed after staying together in marriage. Behaviors such as wife battering, alcoholism, adultery, returning home late at night, and cruelty, ultimately become intolerable, influences married couples to separate. This finding entails that, spouses have expectations, and when these expectations are relented, spouses get disappointed and opt for divorce.

The study sought to gather insights from key informants, including social welfare officers, court officials, and religious leaders serving in Ilemela District, on how changes in traditional gender roles and expectations contribute to the rising incidence of divorce. These stakeholders were considered critical sources of information due to their direct engagement with families, marital conflicts, and divorce cases within the community. Through exploring their professional

observations and experiences, the study aimed to understand how shifting perceptions of men's and women's responsibilities within households influence marital stability and contribute to the increasing trend of divorce in the district. One social welfare officer noted,

Many couples enter marriage with traditional expectations, but when women begin to participate equally in decision-making or pursue economic independence, some men feel threatened, leading to constant conflicts that eventually end in divorce.

DISCUSSION

The study findings have revealed that the majority of respondents were aware of women's involvement in both productive and reproductive activities. Respondents noted that while husbands are typically expected to provide for household needs such as food, shelter, and school fees, wives are responsible for caring for children and managing household chores like cooking, cleaning, and laundry. Many participants highlighted that women's participation in productive activities, such as income-generating work, alongside their reproductive roles, has altered traditional family dynamics, sometimes creating tension when spouses perceive an imbalance in responsibilities. This aligns with Social Exchange Theory (SET), which suggests that marital stability depends on the balance of contributions and rewards; as women take on both economic and domestic responsibilities, the perceived costs and benefits within the marriage shift, influencing relationship satisfaction and potential conflict.

The study findings relates closely to Ismail (2019) who found that rising individualism and evolving gender roles are linked to increasing divorce rates. As women gain education and employment opportunities, they achieve economic independence, enabling them to question and reject unsatisfactory marital situations. This supports the study's findings in Ilemela District, showing that when women participate in both economic and domestic roles, traditional expectations are challenged, contributing to marital tension and, in some cases, divorce. The study underscores the importance of considering the broader social context and changing attitudes toward gender roles in understanding marital stability.

The study also revealed a high level of awareness among participants regarding gender empowerment and women's independence, highlighting its growing influence on marital relationships in Ilemela District. Many respondents noted that women's pursuit of education, economic participation, and decision-making autonomy has shifted traditional household dynamics, allowing them to assert their rights and participate more fully in family and community life. While this empowerment is seen as a positive step toward equality, it has also been reported to create tensions in marriages where men are unprepared or unwilling to share authority and responsibilities. Such shifts challenge long-standing cultural norms, sometimes leading to disagreements, conflicts, and, in extreme cases, divorce. The findings underscore the dual impact of gender empowerment: it promotes self-reliance and equality, yet also necessitates negotiation and adaptation within marital relationships to maintain stability. This aligns with Social Exchange Theory (SET), which suggests that marital stability depends on perceived rewards and costs; as women's empowerment shifts the balance of power, perceived costs for some spouses increase, potentially undermining marital satisfaction.

The study findings relate with Ramzan et al., (2018) who points out that, women empowerment through education attainment influences 6.74% of decision to divorce among women. These findings which were obtained in Pakistan should not be presumed as Tanzania has a completely different social and cultural context.

Van Aelst and Holvoet (2016) emphasize that global and national empowerment initiatives expose women to norms that promote independence and challenge patriarchal control, reshaping marital expectations. SET frames this as a recalibration of perceived rewards and costs: empowered women may recognize when their contributions, autonomy, or opinions are undervalued, and the costs of continued compromise and submission may outweigh the benefits of remaining in the marriage. Consequently, these shifts in expectations and awareness of alternative sources of social and economic rewards can increase the likelihood of divorce. The implication is that marital counseling and policy interventions should address evolving gender norms by fostering negotiation skills and communication strategies that accommodate women's empowerment while maintaining marital harmony.

The study revealed that changes in traditional gender roles and expectations significantly influence marital stability in Ilemela District. Findings revealed that men were traditionally expected to provide for the family while women managed domestic responsibilities. However, in recent years, women's participation in economic activities and decision-making has altered these conventional norms. Some men perceive this shift as a challenge to their authority or traditional role, which often leads to disagreements and conflicts within the household. Such tensions, when unresolved, may escalate over time and contribute to marital breakdown and divorce.

Furthermore, findings highlighted that the redefinition of roles is not limited to economic participation but also extends to decision-making in household matters and child-rearing. Women's empowerment and independence, while positive for equality, have sometimes created friction in marriages where spouses are unable or unwilling to adjust. The findings align with Social Exchange Theory, which suggests that marital satisfaction depends on the perceived balance of rewards and costs; when traditional roles are challenged, the perceived costs may increase, influencing decisions to separate. This underscores that evolving gender expectations, while reflecting social progress, also play a critical role in shaping the dynamics and stability of marriages in the district.

These study findings concur with Tchial (2024) who reveal that men often struggle to adapt to these changing dynamics, perceiving women's assertion of independence as a threat to their traditional status and authority. Consequently, these unresolved tensions and power struggles, rooted in the clash between emerging female empowerment and persistent traditional norms, become a significant driver of marital dissatisfaction and, ultimately, contribute to the rising divorce rates observed in Tanzanian society.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that the rising divorce rate in Ilemela District, Mwanza Region, is closely linked to shifts in traditional gender roles and evolving marital expectations. Women's increased participation in both productive and reproductive activities, coupled with greater awareness of their rights and empowerment, has challenged long-standing patriarchal norms and created tensions within households. These tensions are further exacerbated when men struggle to adapt to the redefinition of authority, decision-making, and responsibility within marriages. Additionally, unmet expectations and discrepancies between the envisioned and lived realities of marriage contribute significantly to marital dissatisfaction and divorce. The study underscores that while gender empowerment represents social progress, it also necessitates negotiation, mutual understanding, and adaptation within marital relationships to maintain stability. These findings align with broader trends observed in other low- and middle-income countries, where modernization and globalization are reshaping family dynamics and marital practices. Therefore, interventions aimed at promoting marital stability in Tanzania should consider the complex interplay between evolving gender roles, cultural norms, and marital expectations, emphasizing

communication, shared decision-making, and culturally sensitive counseling to support healthy and sustainable marriages.

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