

## **Impacts of Divorce on Women with Child Custody from the Cultural and Gender Perspectives (case Vietnam)\***

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### **Abstract**

The divorce rate in Vietnam is increasing rapidly, which raises questions related to ways individuals can recover socially, economically, and emotionally after stressful divorces. The dissolution of marriage disrupts all areas of individuals' lives, including residence, child custody, finances, willingness to work, and transformation in social integration, social support, and social networking. Accordingly, divorce may have long-term effects on various aspects of individuals' lives because it often leads to economic hardship and added childcare responsibilities for those who retain custody of the children. Using the statistics on divorces at the Vietnam Supreme Court, this study recoded information from the profiles of the entire population of divorcees recorded during a 10-year period and examined recent surveys from 2018 on the effects of divorces among divorced people. In particular, this paper analyzed the social perception of child custody and explored the implications of child custody upon gender equality and post-divorce life of individuals, especially women, from gender and cultural perspectives.

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### **Key words**

Child custody, post-divorce effects, gender equality, social norms, South Vietnam

## **Introduction**

For decades, divorce rates worldwide have been increasing, reflecting social change in many countries. In the context of changes in demographic and social transformations, marital dissolution has become increasingly prevalent (Raymo, Park, Xie, & Yeung, 2015). However, in recent years, divorce rates around the

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world have begun to follow an opposing trend, that is, incidents of divorce have decreased slightly in some developed societies (Zahl-Olsen, Thuen, & Espehaug, 2019) due to changes in perceptions of marriage and gender roles, as well as economic changes (Raley & Sweeney, 2020). Divorce in Asia is showing a rather complicated transformation. While divorce rates have increased sharply in China and Southeast Asia (Law et al., 2019; Quah, 2018; Tran, 2023), divorce rates in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan have been declining (Cherlin, 2017; Jones, 2015; Tran, 2023), a trend that is visible in the West as well.

One of the most important and difficult decisions couple make during divorce is the child custody arrangement. Custodial dispositions are important because they reflect the relative preferences, resources, and power between the couple. Therefore, the legislators and courts often pay special attention to the legal divorce arrangements in terms of who the child will live with after the divorce (Amato, 2000).

Current literature shows various consequences of divorce for individuals. Divorce significantly influences economic circumstances, division of work, residence location, and psychological health of individuals, especially women with child custody (Amato, 2000; Kitson & Morgan, 1990). Women report feelings of depression, anger, vulnerability, low self-esteem, fear of loneliness, financial security, and aging, awareness of losing, lack of support, and childcare pressure (Amato, 2000), which may influence their capacity to provide care to their children. Furthermore, divorced women also face challenges with respect to the possibility of future marriages post-divorce (Amato, 2000). Divorce also has a negative impact on support networks, as many contacts with relatives and mutual friends are lost in divorce. Social integration after divorce also has gender differences (Amato, 2000).

In both Western and Asian societies, most children live with their mothers after divorce (Amato, 2000; Tran, 2014). Nevertheless, the negative effect of divorce on women with child custody in Vietnam has not been overcome as divorce has become more common. The impacts of divorce on the well-being of custodial parents have received limited attention. This is due possibly to the lack of data on post-divorce effects and the recent focus in Vietnam on family. Thus, many interesting and important questions remained unanswered.

In the following analysis, the paper uses national statistics on divorce and results of a new survey among divorcees in Vietnam to examine how child custody influences post-divorce life under gender and cultural perspectives. The paper aims to answer the following empirical questions: 1) Has Vietnam witnessed the rise of the “gender equality” and decline of “patriarchy” in child custody?; 2) How do social

norms and gender equality influence social perception of child custody in contemporary Vietnam?; and 3) What are the implications of child custody on gender equality and post-divorce life of the individual, especially women?

The paper first outlines the research context, which provides the socio-cultural background for the study, and then discusses the theoretical approaches in this analysis. Next, the data and research methods are briefly described. The paper then presents research findings to respond to the research questions and concludes by explaining its contributions and policy implications.

### **Research context**

Marriage and family in Vietnam continue to be among the most important values in Vietnamese culture (Tran, 2021a). The Vietnamese family is experiencing an obvious trend of nuclearization, as the average family size has decreased in the last decade to only 3.4 people per family in 2019 (General Statistics Office (GSO), 2019). Likewise, there is stronger individualization in mate selection; strong child value (Tran, 2021a); declining birth numbers; and increased age at first marriage (GSO, 2019). Patrilocal co-residence is currently common, but family relations among members are more liberal. Although patriarchy is strong, women have substantial decision-making power within the family, and it is perceived that this power has increased.

The transformation of marriage and family in Vietnam is associated with gender equality. Vietnam has attained remarkable achievements in gender equality, such as a higher level of female participation in the labor force (GSO, 2019), expansion of education for women, as well as more equality in family investment in boys and girls. At the same time, the vestiges of gender inequality left over from feudalism and Confucianism are still visible, such as the traditional domestic division of labor wherein housework and childcare is the responsibility of women, and sex imbalance at birth (GSO, 2019). Women tend to be self-biased and prejudiced by feudal and Confucian gender stereotypes, such as agreeing to prioritize their husbands' career despite the absence of evidence that women perform differently in the workplace (Tran, 2021a). Society expects men to be the breadwinners of the family economy, but in reality, women participate almost equally in the labor market despite receiving unequal wages compared to men (GSO, 2019).

Recent studies on divorce in Vietnam showed that, while divorce has long been culturally discouraged and limited, it rapidly increased in both number and rate after the renovation policy in late 1980s (Tran, 2014, 2023). There is a dominant

trend of women initiating divorce regardless of social circumstances, which is significant with respect to exploring gender perspective in child custody in divorce, as analyzed in a study on divorce in the northern region of Vietnam between 2000 and 2010 (Tran, 2014).

The Southwest region of Vietnam has shown even more complex characteristics. Marriage and family in the Southwest region are influenced by the process of modernization and cultural acculturation, including trends of later marriage age, later childbearing age, lower fertility compared to some other regions, a high degree of nuclearization, and greater individualism within their marriage and family behavior (GSO, 2019; Tran, 2021a). The average age at first marriage in the Southwest is 25.4 years, which is higher than the national average (25.2 years old). This region also shows the lowest average population growth rate in the country (0.05%/year), which is related to the highest level of emigration of this region. The Southwest also has the highest aging index national wide (58.5%) and greatest decreasing household size (i.e., currently 3.6 people/household). Women in the Southwest region are also birthing fewer children with the total fertility rate in 2019 only 1.8 children, which was much lower than the national average of 2.09. The imbalanced sex ratio at birth, which is observed in the northern provinces, is not a problem in the Southwest with a sex ratio at birth of 106.9 percent (GSO, 2019). The southern region also demonstrates a heightened sense of import placed on children's psychological and emotional states (Tran, 2021a). The divorce rate of this region is the highest in the country currently (GSO, 2019).

Nevertheless, the Southwest region has retained some more traditional marital and family characteristics. Despite the late mean age of first marriage, the Southwest shows the phenomenon of high early marriage, especially in the rural Southwest (GSO, 2019). Moreover, the percentage of unregistered children under 5 years old is the third highest in the country (i.e., 1.8%) (GSO, 2019).

The Southwest region is adjacent to Southeast Asian societies and shares a common family system such as flexible and equal family standards (Quah, 2018). While northern Vietnam is more influenced by the Confucian patriarchal system, which built personal lives around the family, the South more emphasized individualism. Southerners show a combination of socialism, Western values, Southeast Asian culture, and vestiges of past feudalism in their marital perceptions and behaviors (Tran, 2021b). These complex marriage and family characteristics show the strong collision of modern values, traditions, and indigenous culture in the process of economic integration and development of the Southwest region, which can lead to the breaking and restructuring of the institutions of marriage and family.

## Theoretical approaches

### Egalitarian approach

Gender equality has a significant relationship with the divorce process, especially post-divorce. It can be said that divorce leads to a dual role for many women, including paid jobs to make a living and unpaid childcare work with typically fewer resources than divorced men. In particular, women may have to make significant adaptations to live with her child or children. In Western cultures, women's domestic situations, such as their responsibilities for their children and household tasks, are the primary determinants of the impact of employment on their social integration (Amato, 2000). For most Asian societies, the gender division of labor in marriage and family remains the norm; men are often the leaders and breadwinners, while women are the lower position and are heavily burdened by the dual pressure of house chores and childcare tasks (Ochiai, 2015).

Men often cope with greater hardship in the early stage of divorce (Kalmijn, 2007), but post-divorce adaptation and cultural resources have reduced gender differences in these outcomes. Most women experience a significant loss of income after a marriage breaks down, while men's economic conditions do not seem to be affected or even improve in the long term (Amato, 2000). The largest and most persistent gender disparities are women's dissymmetrical losses in income and the associated increases in poverty risk and their single parenting (Van Scheppingen & Leopold, 2020).

Divorce often results in a significant decline in women's living standards as they have to raise children, often living below the poverty line (Amato, 2000). In the West, after divorce, women's incomes drop significantly compared to men's and they face a high risk of poverty (De Vaus, Gray, Qu, & Stanton, 2014). In Asia, divorced families face greater financial constraints and have lower median incomes than married families. Therefore, financial hardships related to divorce can have a negative impact on pursuing happiness and the living conditions of individuals (Cheung & Park, 2016; Law et al., 2019).

Despite these patterns, the majority of women initiate divorce in a variety of cultural contexts (Rosenfeld, 2018; Tran, 2014), and they are more satisfied with life after divorce compared to men (Van Scheppingen & Leopold, 2020). This situation can be regarded as a paradox of contemporary marriage; although women face more challenges and costs in divorce, they often benefit more psychologically.

There is a strong relationship between marital dissolution, particularly negative

forms of communication, and post-divorce life. Stress is one of the factors that reduces the quality of communication between spouses during divorce as well as between parents and children (Raley & Sweeney, 2020). Women's domestic situations, such as their responsibilities for their children and household tasks are the primary determinants of the impact of employment on their social integration (Amato, 2000).

Social networks are disrupted by divorce as measured by loss and change of friends, disrupted socializing, and loss of contact with affinal kin. Juggling economic and domestic roles, single parents are often prevented—by both a lack of time and financial resources—from providing their children with adequate care. The strain experienced by single parents also undermines the affective quality of parent-child contact as fathers maintain less communication with their children than mothers (Meier, Musick, Flood, & Dunifon, 2016).

### **Cultural Contexts**

Some Asian countries share a heritage of or are heavily influenced by Confucianism, which centers its values on male domination, filial piety, and collectivist goals over individualistic fulfillment (Xu & Lai, 2002). Under a patriarchal familial system, which can be identified by its androcentric values, women are often viewed as temporary residents of their natal homes. Therefore, marital roles are prescribed by unequal gender ideology inherent of the institution of marriage in East Asia (Yen & Yang, 2010). Ochiai (2015) compares the strong patriarchal influences on marriage and divorce in traditional Chinese culture with more flexible attitudes over these issues in Thailand, whereas Japan, Korea, and Vietnam are in the transitional period between them. Due to persisting patrilineal traditions, many men are reluctant to foster someone else's bloodline (Hu & To, 2018). Single mothers are viewed unfavorably in the marriage market and their children are often marginalized in stepfamilies (Huang, 2012). Previous literature also shows a trend in rising divorce rates in Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, China, and Singapore (Jones, 2015). However, in recent decades, the prevalence and to some extent normalization of divorce in Asia (Law et al., 2019; Tran, 2021b), combined with changing family values (Tran, 2021a), have created a new demographic and normative background that allows for different perspectives within the context of marriage and family, like not getting married.

Couple relationships in Asia have been more tightly enmeshed in wider networks of extended family members, at least until recently (Jones, 2015; Tran,

2021b). Collectivism has its roots in Confucian ideology, which values family and community and has been supported for generations by the need for collective strength and will in the arduous resistance for national independence and freedom. Despite cultural interactions with other ethnic groups, collectivism still prevails among Vietnamese people, though it is losing strength (Tran, 2014).

Vietnam has been strongly influenced by Confucian ideology, which ensured patriarchal power. Therefore, there is limited gender equality under these cultural circumstances (although several studies also emphasized that women are held in high regard in such cultures). However, economic independence and policies supporting gender equality have made women more independent and made them brave enough to end unhappy marriages. With materially improved lives, individuals are now no longer satisfied with marriages just to maintain a family or obey society (Tran, 2014).

## Methods and Data

This study applied the combination method, including quantitative and qualitative studies. As the first source of quantitative data, the paper included every divorce court profile from six urban and rural districts (i.e., Ninh Kiều; Thốt Nốt; Ô Môn; Phong Điền; Cờ Đỏ; Vĩnh Thạnh districts) in Can Tho city to analyze the impacts of divorce on various perspectives of the divorcee life in the Southwest Vietnam from 2009 to 2017. This analysis is restricted to couples granted divorce under the divorce decision with the total of 8,993 divorce cases. The court profiles usually comprised the following variables: year of birth, year of marriage, place of residence, year of divorce, number of children, reported properties, divorce-initiating person, reported reasons of divorce, and court decision on child custody and properties. From these divorced profiles, the study analyzed, recoded, and computerized in the SPSS statistical software using the anonymous principle, and subsequently calculated more variables from the available information in these court profiles. In particular, the dependent variable of child custody after divorce was defined by three categories: 1=living with father; 2=living with mother; and 3=sharing child custody (i.e., each raising at least one child) (Table 1). They are subsequently recoded into dummy living with father, dummy living with mother, and dummy shared child custody for the logistic regression (Table 2). It is noted that the child custody variable was available for divorced couples whose children were under 18 years of age, i.e., 2,034 observations. The predictors included:

Residence was a two-categorical variable: rural residence and urban residence,

and also recoded into dummy rural residence and urban residence.

Number of children was treated as a continuous variable as reported number of children in the court profiles.

Marriage duration was obtained by subtracting the year of marriage from the year of divorce and was treated as the continuous variable.

Living standard was a newly constructed three-category variable based on the reported properties at the time of divorce of the couples. Improved living standard included those who had a private house and properties to divide at the court; poor living standard included those who had no house, no properties, and had debts; average living standard included the remaining cases. The variable is then recoded into dummy better off, dummy average, and dummy poor living standard.

Age at divorce was obtained by subtracting the year of birth from the year of divorce for the wife and husband, respectively. This continuous variable was included in the logistic regression.

Divorce initiation was a dummy wife initiation and dummy husband initiation. This analysis included dummy wife initiation as majority of divorce initiated by women.

The paper applied basic description to reveal the percentage distribution of child custody of the divorce population (Table 1). Subsequently, the logistic regression to investigate the determinants of child custody after divorce was applied. In the regression analysis, only divorced people born before 1990 were included in the analysis sample to reduce bias caused by some individuals marrying and divorcing early, and the youngest cohort in the sample may not have divorce experience (Table 2).

The second source of quantitative data was a new questionnaire survey to measure post-divorce effects, which followed 120 divorces in one rural district (Ca Mau province) and one urban district (Can Tho city) in 2018 in Vietnam (Table 3). The background and control variables analyzed were based on the availability of information from this whole divorce sampling, with assumptions from the previous studies on divorce that sex, education attainment, number of children, age, and place of residence are significantly related to divorce issues (Amato, 2000). The questionnaire included 66 single questions asking about various marriage and divorce experiences of the divorcees, including socio- and demographic backgrounds, first marriage, divorce process, and post-divorce effects. The paper recoded the question asking who divorcees live with currently (i.e., with categories including: living alone, living with children, living with current spousal/partner, living with parents, living with siblings, and living with friends) into a two-category



variable: living with children=1 and not living with children =2 in order to measure the post-divorce effects of those with and without child custody.

The predictor variables included Sex; Residence; Receiving financial support from ex-spousal; Meeting ex-spousal; Self-reported economic condition after divorce; Frequency of work after divorce; Emotion after divorce; Self-reported health after divorce; Frequency of meeting with immediate family; Having a partner; Remarriage; and Reasons for not remarrying.

For the qualitative study, among the divorced individuals in these two provinces, 30 case studies were implemented, including male and female divorcees who divorced within 10 years of the study. The interviews were conducted face-to-face at the divorcee's private residence. After the introduction of the study, ethical concerns, and anonymous rule, the divorcees were asked to tell their life stories. This narrative was to refer implicitly to the totality of a person's experience, including their family background and childhood memories; mate selection; their wedding experiences; the living arrangement model after marriage; births of children; the sequences of the marital conflicts; divorce and reconciliation procedures; the negotiation process of child custody; parenting after divorce; and various types of social and economic integration.

### **Has Vietnam witnessed the rise of the “gender equality” and decline of “patriarchy” in child custody?**

The current law on marriage and family in Vietnam requires couples to be responsible for the care, education, and rearing of children under 18 years of age and adult children with a disability after divorce. Mothers are granted custody of children under three years of age, if the couples have no other option. If children are above nine years old, the arrangement will be determined by asking the child's opinions.

First, data show that child custody is predominantly granted to mothers after divorce, as 69% of divorces from 2009 to 2017 resulted in the mother being awarded custody after the divorce (Table 1), which reaffirms the results of prior literature from north Vietnam (Tran, 2014). The percentages of fathers with custody and shared custody situations were much lower.

**Table 1**  
*Percentage distribution of child custody after divorce in Vietnam, period 2009-2017, (N=6,439)*

Child custody	Granted by court
Living with father	24.8
Living with mother	69.0
Sharing child custody	6.2

Note. Calculated from divorce court records in Can Tho, period 2009-2017, by author.

Second, social perceptions of gender and social norms affect child custody after divorce in Vietnam. Logistic regression (Table 2) identifies the relationship between the independent variables and childcare arrangements after divorce as decided by the courts in three models. Model 1 tests for the social determinants of the possibility of children living with the mother. Model 2 tests for the social determinants of the possibility whereby fathers are awarded child custody. Model 3 identifies the social differences among divorced couples in child sharing custody.

Children of divorced couples in urban areas report a higher likelihood of living with their mothers, compared with the rural counterpart. Women in urban areas may have better economic conditions than rural women, so they can be more active in obtaining child custody. Most women want to take care of their children after divorce and sometimes sacrifice their own happiness for their children, considering their children as an important source of consolation after a divorce. Divorcees in urban areas are also more likely to share childcare responsibilities than in rural areas, which may indicate that gender equality is higher in urban areas.

This study reveals consistently that women would be more likely to bear childcare responsibilities when they have better capital and economic autonomy. For instance, the longer the marriage, the more likely it is that the court divides the children to stay with the mother after the divorce because the longer the marriage, the higher the mother's autonomous ability. The length of marriage is negatively related to children living with their father, and vice versa. Similarly, couples with a better standard of living are more likely to have their children raised by the mothers and less likely to be raised by their fathers.

Divorce age is a significant variable with respect to child custody after divorce. Women, whether in a marriage or divorce, consider their children an important asset that can make up for their injuries. That is why women are more willing to gain custody of their children after marital dissolution and are also more worried about

them. Data show that wives who divorced at a younger age had a lower probability of taking on the childcare responsibilities. A young age of divorce also increased the likelihood that the child would live with both parents, compared to the older divorcees, assuming the other variables are constant. The older the mother's age at divorce, the more likely the child would stay with the father after the divorce. Younger divorced mothers seem to alter this attitude toward childcare, indicating changes in gender equality among the younger cohort.

The number of children has the strongest influence on shared custody between husband and wife after divorce. The reason is that when there are more than two children, it is more difficult for one person to take care of the children.

The initiating divorcee is a strong statistical determinant of child custody. When the wife initiates divorce, this reduces the likelihood of the mother gaining custody and increases the possibility of the father gaining custody. This mirrors previous literature in Vietnam that women who have more children will be less likely to initiate divorce (Tran, 2014).

**Table 2**  
**Logistic regression on determinants of child custody (N=2,034)**

Predictive variables	Logistic regressions on determinants of		
	Children living with mother after divorce (B & SE)	Children living with father after divorce (B & SE)	Sharing child custody (B & SE)
Sample	2,034	2034	2034
Nagelkerke R Square	.083	.113	.208
Residence (Rural residence is reference)			
Urban residence	.479***(.124)	.028(.105)	.840***(.238)
Number of children	-.078(.085)	-.003(.072)	1.674***(.166)
Marriage duration	.056***(.015)	-.130***(.013)	-.027(.030)
Living standard at time of divorce (Poor is reference)			
On average	-.033(.154)	-.233(.142)	.142(.291)
From better off	.441*(.256)	-.415*(.230)	.515(.517)
Wife age at divorce	-.096***(.016)	.074***(.014)	-.073**(.028)
Husband age at divorce	.007(.013)	.000(.011)	.032(.022)
Wife divorce initiation	-.818***(.112)	.607***(.101)	.118(.221)
Constant	1.463	-.828	-4.715

Note. Significance at: \*:  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*:  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*:  $p < .0001$ .

Calculated from divorce court records in Can Tho, from 2009-2017, by author.

The qualitative research also reconfirms the mentioned statistics and reveals various aspects of social norms that influence the social perception of child custody in contemporary Vietnam, whereby childcare is assigned to women regardless of their marital status.

### **What are the Implications of Child Custody on Gender Equality and Post-Divorce Life of the Individual, Especially Women?**

Vietnam maintains a traditional approach to child custody and support; that is, assigning custody responsibility to one parent and granting visitation and alimony rights to the other (though courts encourage non-custodial parents to participate in parenting, for those whose children are under 18 years of age). The living arrangements of divorced people are strongly influenced by childcare responsibilities. Moreover, these childcare responsibilities are strongly influenced by familism and Confucian ideology—placing care responsibility on the mother; in fact, many women see children as the most important property—they are ready to make sacrifices for their children. Therefore, in reality, in many cases, children still want to live with their mother even though the court orders them to live with their father. The percentage of mothers staying with their children after a divorce is much higher than that of fathers staying with their children (83.6% versus 16.4%) (Table 3)

Children are a burden on the economy and care of the divorced. The divorcees living with children rate that their economic situation as very good is significantly lower than those not living with children (11.5% versus 27.6%). Most of the divorcees confront economic constraints, such as the following case in which a mother struggles to feed her children and stabilize their lives after divorce without the support of her ex-husband.

I have lots of disadvantages because I economically depended on him (ex-husband) during our marriage. So when divorced, I felt so inadequate. I have no stable job and wait for his frequent subsidy (NTN, female, born 1965, Ca Mau province).

Economic autonomy gained by securing a job and income is important for the recovery and integration of divorced people, because high incomes and stable careers can give them the strength to overcome the psychological crisis after the divorce. However, childcare has its own impact on the divorcee's employment. Despite the need for income, divorced people living with their children are sig-

nificantly less able to go to work daily than those who did not live with their children. As a result, the majority of jobless divorcees are those who have custody of their children. Personally owned businesses are more prevalent (27.9% vs. 19%) among those with child custody, since they allow flexibility; however, this work is not formal and sustainable (Table 3).

Economic hardships of women with child custody is closely linked to financial and care support from non-custodial parents, mostly fathers. Though some interviews reveal stories of divorced men sending alimony and catching-up on their children's development, it is more common for the non-custodial parents to not provide any financial or care support to the custodial parents following the divorce. The number of people receiving regular support from a former spouse is very low, especially for those living with children (i.e., proportions of 46.7% sometimes and 40% never receive subsidy and support from their former spouse).

**Table 3**

***Percentage distribution of effects of living with children after divorce on individual's lives***

Variables		Not living with children	Living with children	All
Sex	Male	56.9	16.4	36.1
	Female	43.1	83.6	63.9
Receiving financial support from former spouse	Regular	29.2	13.3	20.4
	Several times per year	20.8	46.7	35.2
	Never	50	40	44.4
	Almost no	41.7	36.1	38.5
Meeting former spouse	Daily	0	1.8	0.9
	Weekly	12.3	3.5	7.9
	Monthly	12.3	7	9.6
	A few times per year	43.9	56.1	50
Economic condition after divorce	None	31.6	31.6	31.6
	Very good	27.6	11.5	19.3
	Normal	63.8	79.0	73.1
Going to work after divorce	Hard, difficult	8.6	9.5	7.6
	Daily	67.2	60.7	63.9
	Sometimes	12.1	6.6	9.2
	Not working	1.7	4.9	3.4
Emotion after divorce	Self-business	19	27.9	23.5
	Positive	36.8	54.1	45.8
	Negative	36.8	26.2	31.4
	Normal	26.3	19.7	22.9

**Table 3**

*Percentage distribution of effects of living with children after divorce on individual's lives (Continued)*

Health after divorce	Good	60.3	39.3	49.6
	Normal	34.5	57.4	46.2
	Weak	5.2	3.3	4.2
Having partner	No partner	72.4	86.9	79.8
	Having within 2 years	20.7	6.6	13.4
	Having after two years	6.9	6.6	6.8
Remarriage	No remarriage	80	93.3	87
	Remarriage	20	6.7	13
Reasons of not remarriage	Child responsibility	14.3	40	28.9
	No opportunity	52.4	20	34
	Do not want	23.8	36.4	30.9
	Other	9.5	3.6	6.2

Note. Author's survey on divorced people in Can Tho and Ca Mau (2018).

In the divorce story of Ms. NTQ, the husband failed to perform child support responsibilities, creating an economic burden for his ex-wife and children. Her story shows the frustrations and helplessness of many women who have to manage to raise their children and get by on their own after a divorce without support from their ex-husbands.

Going to court, he also promised that a month's child support would be 200,000 VND and said that this amount is a lot. Yet the truth is nothing. I waited for 1, 2 months and longer but nothing. He has no responsibility. Even if I went to the court to claim that I didn't receive his alimony, the judge failed because he said he was in difficult condition and not asked him anymore! Though I had a husband, and my children had a father, yet we received nothing. My sadness endures forever, I can't look up (NTQ, female, born in 1962, 7th grade, sewing, married in 1992, divorced in 2013).

Former husbands' neglect and refusal to provide alimony is likely rooted deep within the social norms of patriarchal feudalism, which previously accepted polygamy, and the gender inequality of Confucianism that assigned childcare and housework to the wife. The historical context of various patriotic wars in which men fought in the battlefields and women were responsible for all family work may even highlight the women's care roles. The in-depth interviews emphasized women's thoughts of good motherhood entailing never abandoning children in any cir-

cumstance as the natural penalty or reward. That stereotype is so strong that men continue to hold that view even during divorce, when a court orders the husband to provide alimony and care.

Another reason former husbands fail to maintain proper support for their family is due to the insufficient legal supervision of the implementation of rights and responsibilities after the divorce. Men are often free to leave after marriage without supporting their ex-wife and children without being judged by public opinion, nor subject to any supervision by the legal system, especially if they do not work in the public system. This fact highlights the urgent need for strict sanctions on former husbands who do not fulfil their subsidy responsibilities after divorce.

In the decision, every month, he was asked to give 300,000 VND per month for child custody. He could only support twice and stopped. The Department of Justice contacted to ask him to send the subsidy, but I still received nothing. But it is necessary to claim with the superiors to take strong control over men after divorce. It is very difficult for women to raise children alone. Even though the wife does not ask, he still has to take the responsibility (NNT, female, born in 1962, two children, married in 1985, divorced in 2015, Can Tho).

As custodial parents without proper financial support, these divorced people with child custody report worse health conditions than those without child custody. The divorcees also show diverse and complicated emotions during and after divorce, including positive emotions (i.e., relieved, free) and negative emotions (sadness, shame, suicidal thoughts). The divorcees report higher positive psychological status than negative ones, especially among women. The release from the bondage of a suffocating marriage brings a sense of relief, happiness, and self-esteem. Positive mood was higher among those living with children (54.1% versus 36.8%), reaffirming the similarity with many previous studies, that even though women bear the burden of childcare and economic difficulties after divorce, they still choose divorce and feel liberated when they get out of an unhappy marriage. Some in-depth interviews show that some people feel relieved and happy to be liberated from the abusive life, when both of them are no longer in love, such as the case of LTAD.

It took me many years for him to sign (the divorce application), so I was very comfortable and relieved. It was like I was able to throw up

a stone in my body (LTAD, born in 1981, married in 2005, her husband is an Indian overseas Vietnamese living in Vietnam, divorced in 2009, remarried in 2013).

However, divorce is stressful for many people. Though 31.4% felt negative, this feeling was less prominent among those living with children than those not living with children (26.2% vs 36.8%). By gender, men have a higher rate of post-divorce distress than women, possibly because men are less proactive in divorce than women. In-depth interviews show that many people have feelings of pain, depression, anxiety, and disorientation when they divorce, especially in cases of passive and betrayal in divorce. In Mrs. DTN's story, because the cheating husband left to live with another woman when the family suffered the loss of their youngest child in a drowning accident, the divorced wife continues to feel hatred and is unable to forgive the former husband. She cannot handle the pain.

I got married at the age of 27, then it was kind of left-over. My family lived on a small boat in the river and one of my kids fell into the river and died. That year my husband left with his concubine. I had to bear with the kids. He didn't go to court, but he was at fault because we are Christian. Since then, I have not seen him again. He also did not ask anything about the child. I was so sad, I cried often. Eating rice in the mouth like eating stone. I have to eat to gain strength to feed the children. I cannot fall down. I hate him so much. If anyone asking about my husband, I left and dare not to hear (DTN, born in 1953, divorced in 2008, three children, living with youngest daughter, hometown in Hai Duong, living in Can Tho).

Some individuals are not ready for a divorce, but their spouses fall out of love and insist on divorce after long conflicts. In these cases, feelings of uncertainty, sadness, and anxiety happen to both men and women.

Divorcing in old age means no one to take care of each other. It is said that tears drop down. Parents can give children everything but children cannot take care of parents for their entire lives. Divorce is miserable due to the absence of a lifelong caregiver (Male, born in 1965, divorced in 2018, Ca Mau province).

Despite being proactive, after a divorce, individuals still experience complex



psychological problems in the context of a culture that upholds family values, linking personal happiness with the happiness and perfection of the family. From the traditional point of view, an intact family with two biological parents was regarded as vital to ensure children's healthy and successful development. Now, on the one hand, it is easy to get out of an unhappy marriage to restructure their lives. However, on the other hand, in a society that emphasizes the intact family, attaching the success of individuals—especially women—to family happiness, a family dissolution makes individuals feel ashamed and guilty. Even with a supportive family by their side, many people still have psychological neglect soon after divorce. Most interviewed cases have a common psychological emotion of imperfection. In a cultural space steeped in ancestor worship, belief in the law of karma and reincarnation, in fate, in Heaven, Buddha, God, Holy Mother, etc., the imperfection in familial happiness of individuals, which is so closely tied to fate and karma from previous lives that this life has to pay, helps individuals reduce guilt and suffering:

I think this is the karma I have to endure. It is my fate I find a bad husband and blind in love. That is my fate I have to pay when karma comes. I have absolutely no regrets since this is a fate but sadly that I cannot keep the intact family to my children (NTQ, female, born in 1962, sewing, married in 1992, divorced in 2013).

At the same time, the responsibility of taking care of children also makes it difficult for individuals, mainly women, to find new happiness, such as finding a new partner or remarrying. The majority of divorced people do not have a partner (i.e., 79.8%), and this rate is higher in the divorced group living with children (i.e., 86.9%) than its counterpart (i.e., 72.4%).

Unlike many Western countries where remarriage is quite common, in Vietnam, remarriage is not yet common. Only 13% of divorced people remarry. The rate of remarriage is much higher for those who are not responsible for raising children after divorce. There are a number of reasons why individuals may not remarry, including the responsibilities and burdens of parenting, lack of opportunity, no need to remarry, or fear of marriage after a breakup. In NNT's story, after the divorce, she no longer wanted to remarry due to the fear of betrayal in the marriage. Moreover, she revealed her strong desire to focus on childcare due to the guilt of not being able to keep the intact family for her kids.

I was hurt once and never continued (to try to get married again). I don't trust men anymore. If I take another step, my child will suffer. At that time (of divorce), I was only 36. I could not foresee my fate, but I decided to stay single. My idea is to live and work to raise the children. If I am imperfect (due to divorce), I will only take happiness from my children (NNT, female, born in 1962, two children, married in 1985, divorced in 2005, Can Tho).

Recently, the phenomenon of staying single and childless has appeared in Vietnamese society. The fear of marriage bondage phenomenon is even more common and evident among divorced women. Though marriage for the sake of economic subsistence is an option for some women, the fact that many women receive no financial or parenting support from their former spouses makes it difficult for divorced women to reconsider marriage. As Vietnamese society discriminated against and discouraged divorce for a long time, the social stigma about the personal fault in the marital dissolutions make the divorcees, especially women, devalued in the marriage market. In addition, women's ideas of gender equality are progressing while men's patriarchal ideas have not decreased sharply, so many women do not want to enter into marriage to be subservient to a husband again. The fear of being in an unhappy marriage, the burden of being a wife, being a mother, or a stepmother constitutes the obvious psychological barriers to remarriage. Many people choose the single life and enjoy their social activities instead of married life:

I mainly go to work and take care of the children and travelling with friends. Having a husband then I have to take care of him and step children, it's very frustrating (NTN; born 1965; married in 1989; divorced in 2007; Obstetrician; Bachelor of Social Management; Can Tho).

## **Conclusion and Discussion**

In the recent decade the custodial trend in Southwest Vietnam was for children to remain with their mothers after divorce. Living with children after divorce ensures more positive emotions in women and fulfills their desires to be good mothers. However, child custody generates barriers to remarriage as well as social integration, in terms of employment for women. Having almost no financial and

care support nor any contact from the former husband is a big constraint for women bearing the childcare burden. Nevertheless, men face more health and psychological problems after divorce than women.

Given that the general living standard of the Southwest region is still low, it is common for people to have to work, forcing individuals to overcome their psychological shock of divorce to restructure their new life. Childcare responsibilities affect economic integration because the more children a divorcee has, the less often they go to work every day.

In the Southwest region, the remarriage rate is low, and it is even lower in the group living with children, which may be due to remarriage being negatively stigmatized and the added child custody burdens. Since individuality is believed to be stronger in urban areas, divorced people decide not to remarry in urban settings not because of the lack of opportunities or social prejudices found in rural areas, but because of their personal decision. This indicates that the marriage market is becoming more competitive and difficult for men as the percentage of Vietnamese women marrying foreign husbands tends to increase, and a percentage of young people are afraid to slow down to get married. This also shows a trend towards higher gender equality.

Vietnamese women are facing a double burden after divorce. They are responsible for taking care of their children and confronting economic and integration constraints. But the bigger challenge for Vietnamese women is the lack of financial support and care from their ex-husbands, while the regulations and forms of monitoring the implementation of court decisions on child support and allowances for children are limited. Therefore, the pressure to maintain income and employment for women raising children is serious, putting these women at risk of heightened stress and depression as they have to endure economic hardships due to the childcare responsibility, while their husbands neglect their support responsibilities.

Legal services and social work supporting the divorcees, especially women, are lacking and have not been clearly defined and implemented in the legal and practical contexts. Instead, as it stands, divorcees depend on strong family cohesion, their social networks, and the self-security to successfully transition from married life to divorced life. In order to comply with court decisions, Vietnam's law enforcement monitoring system and marital social services need drastic improvements to ensure subsidy support to children and women, and to mitigate the negative post-divorce effects.

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