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CHALLENGING EXPERIENCES OF CUSTODIAL MOTHERS FOLLOWING THEIR DIVORCE: IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

Although divorce leads to the separation of the parents, it does not proclaim the termination of the relationship between former partners but instead transforms it. Parents usually co-construct their roles to raise their children together. However, many studies have attested that divorce affects women more than men in many respects. This study was driven by the need to explore the challenging experiences of custodial mothers following their divorce. For this qualitative study, eleven custodial mothers who were divorced and co-parenting with former spouses were interviewed. Data were generated through semi-structured face-to-face interviews with open-ended questions in an interview guide. These were subsequently analysed thematically. Through purposive sampling and data collection, six themes emerged from the participants' narratives. The results revealed that custodial mothers face challenges of strained communication, lone parenting and lack of fathers' involvement in raising their children. The study recommends educating divorced parents, particularly on family therapy and mediation.

Keywords: co-parenting; custodial mothers; divorce; marital dissolution; parenthood

INTRODUCTION

Divorce inevitably entails the separation of the parents (Ramisch, McVicker & Sahin, 2009). Divorce is traumatic for all concerned, especially for the children of post-divorced parents (Lamela & Figueiredo, 2016). Following divorce, parents usually co-construct their roles to raise their child(ren) together (Stallman & Ohan, 2016). However, divorce does not proclaim the termination of the relationship between former partners but instead transforms it (Markham, Hartenstein, Mitchell, & Aljayyousi-Khalil, 2017). It is accompanied by changes in almost all

domains of a family's life, be it emotional, residential or financial (Stallman & Ohan, 2016). Parise, Pagini, Bertoni and Iafrate (2019) argue that separation involves adjustments on the logistical and financial side, such as moving to another house, changing family routines, revising the employment situation, or facing threats to economic security. Van Gasse and Mortelmans (2020) acknowledge that the experiences of many divorced people are complex and nuanced. Parents who divorce are confronted with the challenge of creating a co-parental relationship, which involves more than caring for a child but includes attitudes and behaviours (Markham *et al.*, 2017).

Many studies indicate that divorce affects women economically, emotionally and socially more than men (Nikparvar, Stith, Dehghani & Liang, 2021). For many divorced women, the process of post-divorce adjustment is multidimensional. Two of the most important post-divorce considerations are the physical custody and co-parenting of the children (Steinbach & Augustijn, 2022). In the main, co-parenting involves two broad constructs: conflict and support or cooperation between parents. In the context of divorce, the latter denotes positive co-parenting, which involves mutual respect, consistency, coordination and agreement (Ferraro & Lucier-Greer, 2022). Archer-Kuhn (2016) argues that parents who are emotionally ready to co-parent can often come to constructive agreements. The other possibility, which is the concern of this study, is more likely to lead to added economic or financial tensions and issues, and changing responsibilities (Ferraro & Lucier-Greer, 2022).

This article is structured as follows. The section following immediately below orientates the reader towards divorce and the transition towards co-parenting. The next section provides the theoretical conceptualisation of the study, followed by a brief discussion of the methodology. Since this study adopted a qualitative paradigm, the participants' experiences were captured and subjected to a literature control to either confirm or contrast the findings. This is followed by a section discussing the findings and their implications for social work practice, which leads to a section on recommendations and suggestions, after which the article concludes.

CO-PARENTING

Divorce necessitates a co-parental relationship with new boundaries. A co-parenting relationship is important for the adjustment of parents and children following the divorce (Ferraro *et al.*, 2016). A co-parenting relationship is a post-divorce arrangement where two parents work together to raise a child or children (Psouni, 2019). Divorced parents have the legal and moral responsibility to raise their children. Therefore, the environment and quality of the parents' post-divorce relationship can have an overwhelming impact on children (Ferraro, Oehme, Waldick & Stern, 2019). The Children's Act 38 of 2005, Section 18 (1) emphasises that both parents have responsibilities and rights to ensure the interests of their children remain paramount (Republic of South Africa [RSA] 2006). Parents are lawfully obliged to care for and support their children. Section 33(1) of the Children's Act attempts to put into place an ideal plan for co-parenting with parenting plans that define how parents will contribute to the wellbeing and maintenance of their child(ren).

A parenting plan is essentially a roadmap directing how children will be raised by both parents after separation or divorce (Mundalamo, 2016). Similarly, Ferraro, Lucier-Greer and Oehme

(2018) regard post-divorce co-parenting as entailing an ongoing shared responsibility towards raising children regardless of the divorce. In South Africa, the Office of the Family Advocate mediates disputes and assists co-parents with a parenting plan to safeguard the interests of minor children. A family advocate also assists by mediating parents' disputes over parental responsibilities and rights by recommending how parents can care for their children within their circumstances (Department of Justice and Constitutional Development, 2020). When parenting plans are prepared, it is vital to establish how the quality of children's lives can be enhanced by reducing the conflict between divorcing parents and setting out their responsibilities clearly to prevent further disagreement that can create even more conflict in the divorced family (Robinson, 2010).

Research on co-parenting relationships has mainly studied the interaction between co-parenting conflict and cooperation (Ferraro, Petren & Pasley, 2019). Cooperative post-divorce parenting is characterised by steady communication and little conflict, whereas continued anger between co-parents affects the relationship between the child and the other parent (Ya'rmoz-Yaben, 2015). Ideally, divorced parents should work together and cooperate for the benefit of their children, but this is sometimes difficult to accomplish because of the stressors accompanying the dissolution of the marriage. In a study conducted by Willèn (2015), the outcomes showed that appropriate feelings and regulations are vital to shared parenting after divorce, depending on whether the parents radiate enmity or friendship towards each other. Children can benefit from open communication between parents and children.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in the family systems theory, which studies connections among family members and emphasises the exchange of behaviour at a particular time of interactions (Smith, 2016). This theory is deemed relevant for this study for a number of reasons, including the processes of establishing and maintaining co-parental boundaries after divorce in family systems; this requires establishing co-parental boundaries after separation, maintaining the newly established co-parental limits, re-establishing boundaries after a remarriage or re-partnering of either parent, and maintaining these new boundaries (Ganong, Coleman & Jamison, 2015).

The family systems theory conceptualises the family as a system consisting of various parts, each influencing the other and leading to growth in the end (Van Jaarsveld, 2018). Divorce, on the other hand, is a process of change which alters the structure of the family and the functioning of the family members; hence, it is essential to understand the behaviour and emotions of each individual in the family. All communication, interaction, separation, connectedness, loyalty, independence and adaptation to demanding situations should be recognised when going through a divorce, as they influence the entire family (Van Jaarsveld, 2018).

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative study was undertaken with eleven (11) custodial mothers who were divorced and co-parenting with former spouses, using an exploratory, descriptive and contextual approach

to gain an in-depth understanding of the subject. This approach yielded first-hand information from participants who shared their realities and encounters.

This study aimed to explore the challenging experiences of custodial mothers following their divorce. It is important to note that the study was undertaken by the first author under the tutelage of a supervisor and according to the requirements for the degree of Master of Social Work. The following themes were explored with the participants: the custodial mothers' relationships with their ex-husbands; how they decided on the care of and contact with the children following the finalisation of the divorce; the benefits and challenges of co-parenting and how they deal with those challenges; and their recommendations and suggestions regarding co-parenting after divorce. Divorce often results in great difficulties in co-parenting during the post-marital period, which may inevitably be detrimental for children (Buchanan & LeMoyne, 2020). This article is confined to addressing these challenging experiences of custodial mothers following the dissolution of marriage.

The population consisted of custodial mothers who were divorced and co-parenting with former spouses. The main inclusion criterion for the participants was that they were females, irrespective of age, who were divorced and co-parenting with their former spouses for at least twelve months and beyond. Financial constraints limited the scope of the study; therefore, potential participants had to reside in and around Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal. The researcher obtained approval to conduct the research from the University of South Africa's Departmental Research and Ethics Committee (Reference number 47844581_CREC_CHS_2021). The participants were mainly recruited from the caseload of the welfare offices in Pietermaritzburg and by word of mouth.

Data were gathered through semi-structured telephonic interviews conducted by means of open-ended questions in an interview guide. Telephonic interviews were deemed ideal to collect data from the participants because of the Covid-19 pandemic. No face-to-face data collection method was permitted in terms of the Covid-19 Guidelines by the Ethics Review Committee (ERC). With the consent of the participants, the interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed. Data saturation was reached when interviewing the ninth participant, but two more were interviewed for confirmation. Data were subsequently analysed thematically by using the eight steps for qualitative data analysis as proposed by Tesch (cited in Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Credibility was achieved through continually verifying the current findings with previous findings, engagement of the participants in the verification process, and engagement between the first and second authors and the institutional research committees. Confirmability was achieved by documenting information during data collection. The findings were validated using an independent coder in the data analysis to ensure dependability. In this study, transferability was enhanced by providing thick descriptions of the findings with appropriate quotations.

Within qualitative research, the principles of reflexivity and bracketing become very important (Berger, 2015; Rae & Green, 2016). In practising reflexivity, the first author continually had to reflect on her involvement with the participants as some of them visited her workplace for

consultation. To avoid potential biases, the first author did not involve any of her clients or their immediate families in the research process.

The following ethical considerations were observed: obtaining written informed consent, assuring confidentiality, protecting participants from harm and managing the research data securely. For the ethical principle of informed consent, participants were furnished with information regarding the purpose of the study and the risks and benefits associated with participating in the study. The ethical principle of confidentiality was adhered to by not revealing the participants' identities, but instead reporting the data anonymously by using pseudonyms. After completing each of the interviews in the study, the participants were informed that a debriefing service was available if the interview had triggered any negative emotions. However, no participants expressed a need for the debriefing service.

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Table 1 provides the participants' biographical data. The themes that emerged from the data analysis are presented after that.

Biographical profiling of participants

Table 1: Biographical details of the participants at the time of the interview

No.	Age	Race	Period of marriage	Period of divorce	Source of income/occupation	Gender of the child(ren)
P1	46	Black	6 years	9 years	Professional nurse	Boy and girl
P2	47	White	10 years	7 years	Security admin officer	Boys
P3	42	Black	14 years & 8 months	7 years	HR Manager	Girls
P4	40	Black	5 years	1 year & 4 months	Unemployed	Girl and boy
P5	37	Black	3 years	13 years	MI and Risk Enablement specialist	Girl
P6	52	White	12 years	15 years	Self-employed (owns accounting practice)	Boys
P7	35	Black	2 years	1 year & 6 months	Receptionist	Boys
P8	45	Black	8 years	4 years	Domestic worker	Boy
P9	33	Coloured	11 years	7 years	Supervisor	Girls
P10	44	White	8 years	32 years	Medical doctor	Boys
P11	43	Black	15 years	15 years	Unemployed	Girl and boy

Below is a summary of the biographical profiles of the participants.

Participants' age

Since there was no age criterion for potential participants, the age composition of the participants varied considerably. At the time of the interview, the youngest participant was 33 years old and the oldest was 52. Some authors believe people who get married between the ages of 18 and 35 have the greatest possibility of getting divorced (Mohlatlole, Sithole & Shirindi, 2018); however, the ages of the participants gave a slightly different picture. Of the eleven participants, three were 33, 35 and 37 years old and the rest were over 40. Consistent with the age composition of the participants, Brown and Lin (2012) assert that the increasing incidence of divorce suggest that the divorce rate may be growing among older adults.

Participants' race

The participants were of diverse races, as it was important to get the experiences of different races. Although participation in the study was voluntary, most participants were black Africans (7), followed by three (3) white and only one (1) coloured participant. In South Africa, the percentage of divorce granted in 2019 for black people was about 45%, followed by white people at 22,2% and coloured people at 19% (Statistics South Africa, 2019).

Participant's occupation

Of the eleven participants, eight had full-time employment across different fields, two were unemployed, and one was self-employed. The increase in women's employment seems to have a positive impact and enabled them to be independent. According to Parker, Durante, Hill and Haselton (2022), women's professional achievement has helped free them economically from men and made them less dependent on their former partners. Similarly, Arfan, Radjab and Fachri (2022) contend that women's increasing rates of education influence the high divorce rate.

PRESENTATION OF THEMES

Participants were invited to share their challenging co-parenting experiences following the dissolution of their marriages. Six themes emerged from the data and are presented in Table 2 below. The excerpts and vignettes under each theme are then subjected to a literature control to either confirm or contradict previous research findings.

Table 2: Themes

THEME 1	Strained communication with ex-husband
THEME 2	Difficulties in making decisions alone
THEME 3	Financial constraints/burden
THEME 4	Lack of involvement by the father
THEME 5	Participants' challenges with sole parenting
THEME 6	Disciplinary issues

RESULTS

The study's findings are presented in themes as indicated below.

Theme 1: Strained communication with ex-husband

Co-parental communication plays an essential role in enabling both healthy family functioning and adult development (Schrodt & Afifi, 2019). Similarly, other authors emphasise that ex-spouses who cooperate, communicate frequently and experience little conflict following divorce create an environment that encourages their own and their children's positive adaptation to divorce (Russell, Beckmeyer, Coleman & Ganong, 2016). However, maintaining a supportive co-parenting relationship after divorce proves to be challenging. Effective co-parenting demands the parents to set aside differences in their previous relationship, but their relationship often remains strained (Dush, Kotila & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2011). The emotional negativity often spills over into the co-parenting relationship and hinders the parents' ability to resolve conflicts for the benefit of their children (Schrodt & Shimkowski, 2017). The following vignettes, in which three participants shared the difficulties of maintaining healthy relationships with their ex-husbands, bear out the above.

Communication is a challenge because when I try to communicate with him, he thinks I want him back or I want to cause trouble. We do need to communicate about the children, but my ex-husband does not want to co-operate; it's like he does not have any children; he just does not care. (P12, 43 years)

I don't speak to him, and I don't ask him for money; I don't even know whether he is working or not. Half of the time, I don't even know which part of the country he is in. We don't have any communication at all. (P9, 33 years)

The communication is broken; it's not existing actually, and it's really bad. Communication is the greatest challenge for me. (P5, 37 years)

The participants' experiences suggest that although divorce is supposed to only transform the relationship between former spouses and not end it, divorced parents are therefore faced with the challenge of creating a co-parental relationship (Markham *et al.*, 2017). According to James (2018), open conversation between former spouses may enable them to maintain a relationship, while limited conversation may damage the relationship.

In some instances, where parents are not on speaking terms, the non-custodial parent prefers to communicate only with the children. This was evident in the extracts below:

We are not that connected because even when he happens to call, he speaks to the children. We do not make friendly calls. (P1, 46 years)

Another thing is that kids are used by their father as a spy, which makes it difficult because now it goes back to that communication thing. It is not a healthy relationship, and it's not healthy for the kids. The kids are afraid to say things because he tells them not to tell me what they would have shared. (P2, 47 years)

The findings correctly highlight the poor quality of such co-parenting relationships. Similarly, the literature has indicated that co-parents with strained relationships tend to avoid direct communication; instead, they resort to indirect means (Markham *et al.*, 2017), such as speaking to the children, as in the case of the two participants above. Archer-Kuhn (2016) adds that such poor communication and cooperation tend to be more prevalent in the first three years after dissolution of the marriage. Although this assertion could not be established in this study, Toews and Bermea, 2017) claim that non-custodial fathers use children to exercise control and power over their ex-wives.

Theme 2: Difficulties in making decisions alone

Decision-making is generally defined as the legal right and responsibility to make all non-urgent decisions for a child, including those regarding welfare, education, health care and religious training (Pruett & DiFonzo, 2014). Shared decision-making enables parents to agree on these decisions (Archer-Kuhn, 2016). It requires parents to share the responsibilities of raising their children and participate in the decisions on their upbringing. Most of all, neither parent has the final decision-making authority without checking with the other parent (Afesha, 2017). Unfortunately, in most cases, women are put under great stress to endure the burden of making decisions about the children on their own (Leopold, 2018). This is evident from the experiences shared by the following participants:

I also consult with my new partner, but with their father I really struggle to have better interaction and to have that communication and to make decisions. When the other parent makes the decision, he also does not inform me, so it causes a lot of problems. For example, with the visitation, he doesn't allow me to speak to him. He blocked me on messages, so we have no way of making decisions together. I have to make decisions that I think are best for the children most of the time. (P2, 47 years)

I make decisions [alone]; their father does not assist me in any way, and therefore, any decision that needs to be made regarding the children has to be made by me. Even about the schools, I was the one who had to decide which schools they were going to and what they would need; I am the one who takes care of everything. (P1, 46 years)

It depends on the situation, but most of the time, I make the decision because I stay with the children. There are times when a decision needs to be made urgently, so in situations like that, I make them. Sometimes, it's hard to reach him on his cell phone; even the children struggle to get hold of him on his cell phone. (P3, 42 years)

The participants' struggles seem to go against the spirit of the Children's Act 38 of 2005 as amended, which prescribes that both parents should continue to be holders of parental responsibilities and rights towards their children upon divorce (RSA, 2006). Section 18 of the Act stipulates explicitly that parents must take care of their child, maintain contact with the child, be a guardian to the child and make sure that the child has financial support. Archer-Kuhn (2016) advises that co-parents should redefine their roles regarding managing the loss of the relationship with their partner, extended family and friends following marital dissolution. Successful negotiation of this process can lead to shared decision-making.

Theme 3: Financial constraints/burden

Child support paid by non-custodial fathers is an important source of income that can alleviate the economic disadvantages faced by single mothers and provide a less stressful home environment for children (Choi & Pyun, 2014). One of the most recognised stressors after a divorce is facing financial constraints (Symoens, Colman & Bracke, 2014). In most instances, divorced mothers are stuck in an unpleasant cycle of financial problems and other stressful life events (Damota, 2019). Single parents, mostly single mothers, are a socially and economically vulnerable group that is at risk of different physical and mental health problems (Kim & Kim, 2020). This assertion is illustrated in the following comment:

After the divorce, the challenge that I have is raising the children on my own. I never wanted things to turn out the way they did. In my life, I never wanted to get married and only to divorce. There are times when I wish there was somebody to assist me with the children financially. It's hard, especially if there is no one assisting you financially. (P1, 46 years)

A divorce decree can either enable or hinder co-parenting communication (Markham *et al.*, 2017). The father's lack of adherence to the divorce settlement places a financial burden on the participant, as was evident in the comments below:

It is not right because after the divorce settlement, there are things that we agreed on, but he only does [about] 20% of those things, the rest I do it myself. Okay ... when we got divorced, the two older girls were in matric [Grade 12], so he was paying for their school fees. He said he would continue to pay the school fees, and when they went to tertiary, we agreed to pay 50/50. He also agreed that he would take over and pay the school fees for the last-born [14 years] because I was paying her school fees. We agreed that we would go 50/50 [share] on the children's maintenance and medical aid, but he has not done any of these things that we agreed on ... (P3, 42 years)

My ex-husband is employed in one of the government departments, but he does not assist with the maintenance even for the child that is a minor. He wants me to run after him and call him all the time, but I choose not to. He does not pay maintenance, and the only time the children speak to their father is when they want something, and he always makes excuses about why he is unable to do it for them, so his answer is always a no. (P11, 43 years)

The comments above highlight some of the main challenges which women often have to face after divorce. The process of suing for maintenance disadvantages many women who have to go to court for claims (Chauke & Khunou, 2014). Parents are legally obliged to support their children, whether they live with them or not (Hakovirta, Meyer & Skinner, 2019). Nonetheless, authors caution against the adversarial attitude of the courts, which inadvertently aggravates the conflict between co-parents (Keating *et al.*, 2016). Archer-Kuhn (2016) also reports that many people feel disillusioned with the court process, which often does not meet their expectations. Instead, these authors support a non-confrontational alternative to litigation, namely mediation, which often yields a high degree of party satisfaction, less relationship damage and improved non-custodial parenting.

The findings reveal that the father's situation may change in some instances as he forms a new union and children are born, after which his bond with his children from the previous relationship is even weaker. This was evident in the following comment:

My biggest challenge is that I feel like he has proved to the world and to me that he does not value my kids as his kids because he does not make an effort. He does 100% [everything] for the kids he has with his current wife. I am not asking for a relationship with him, not even a friendship. The least I have always asked that he maintains them financially and have a relationship with them which he has failed to do, so I have just cut all ties with him for many years now. (P9, 33 years)

Previous research findings have shown that fathers' financial support is associated positively with children's academic success and negatively with displaying behavioural problems (Choi & Pyun, 2014). Therefore, it is concerning that some of the fathers withhold children's tuition fees, as was claimed by the participants in the following comments:

If there are any issues [at the school], he tells my daughter that I should be paying for it. I told him when she started that I cannot afford such a school [private school]; it's more than what I make per year, and he responded by saying no one asked me to pay for it. Now that he is struggling a few years later, I am likely to experience financial difficulties with paying the high school fees. That's the type of relationship we always had having financial constraints; he likes showing off and buying expensive clothes and going overseas. Money has been a problem. He has a lot of money, but he can't spend it wisely, and it causes issues. (P5, 37 years)

It's not like my ex-husband is struggling financially; he just does not want to take responsibility. He has a good job. He works for the government [state] department. My last-born is the only one in school; the other two girls are in tertiary. The second-born got a bursary, but sometimes, she needs money, but her father does not want to contribute anything. (P3, 42 years)

Based on the findings above, it is concerning that non-custodial fathers are withholding their financial support to the detriment of their children's future. Authors have also argued that financial support is positively linked to a variety of factors, such as the children's academic achievements, school readiness and general behavioural adjustment (Choi & Pyun, 2014).

Theme 4: Lack of involvement by the father

Visitation is not only the right of the non-custodial parent but also the right of the child, as the child has an interest in maintaining relations with both parents. Afesha (2017) asserts that parents have a right to spend time with their children after divorce, regardless of the divorce or unhealthy relationships. Equally and legally, children have the right to be cared for and parents have to protect them (Stokkebekk, Iversen, Hollekim & Ness, 2019). Ward (2019) emphasises that the parents' contact and care are important in the post-divorce phase to ensure the wellbeing of the children, as they facilitate the renewal of the family as a unit. Moreover, it is of the utmost importance that the non-custodial parent interacts with the child frequently.

However, the dissolution of a marriage often impacts the visitations between the children and the custodial parent, as was highlighted in the comments below.

He sometimes asks the children to visit him, but that's all he does. Even during Christmas, I must see that children have things that they need. My ex-husband once asked why the boy child did not like visiting him more often, and I told him that it was because the child could see that he did not have time for them, hence he chose to distance himself. (P4, 40 years)

Eish! [annoyed] ... after the decision [regarding care and contact] was made, I guess he wanted to show off [to show people that he was a good father], he only came for the children two or three times when they were still young. I cannot say he is keeping up with the agreement because he can spend three to six months without seeing or talking to the children. We just wait for him to say when he is fetching them. (P1, 46 years)

The absence of father involvement has negative effects on the whole family (Gyimah, 2021). When the relationship with one parent deteriorates after divorce, it can create a feeling of loss and lead to a decline in emotional and social support for the child (Kalmijn, 2013). Women sometimes become breadwinners after divorce and carry a heavier workload than men, who have less contact with their children. According to Hardesty, Crossman, Khaw and Raffaelli (2016), some mothers have fewer positive feelings about their ex-partners than the fathers do, and they see the fathers' relationship with their children as less important than their own. The participants expressed the same idea, as transpired from the following comments:

There is no co-parenting in this family; it does not exist. As I mentioned before, he does not even make time for the children. He contributes when he feels like doing it; when you are a parent, you have to be there financially, emotionally and physically in the children's lives. My ex-husband once created a WhatsApp group where he added all his children because he has other children outside of our marriage but the group was not active at all. (P3, 42 years)

When it comes to their father and I, the word co-parenting does not exist. I don't even have his cell phone number on my phone. I decide what I need to do; I do my investigations. When I moved to my new place, I did not tell him; he only heard from people that these people [me and my children] no longer stay where we used to stay. He did not even know, and it did not bother him. He was glad that the children were not under his nose anymore, where he had to pretend to be the father. (P9, 33 years)

The challenge is the lack of participation from their father in their lives, and I am constantly encouraging that relationship. If I didn't see my children for a week, I will go insane, but I think their father has seen them twice in the last three years. (P6, 52 years)

We also have an emotional disconnection for when my daughter has issues, he was never present. In all four incidents of attempted suicide, he was either overseas or went on a trip somewhere in South Africa or locally, but he was never there in the

hospital. There was emotional disconnection. He never avails himself for emotional conversations. (P5, 37 years)

Consistent with the study by Kelly (2017:376), the findings seem to present a somewhat dismal picture of “fading fathers”. This is concerning, because previous findings have indicated that fathers play an important role in families and their children’s mental and social development (Gyimah, 2021). Therefore, the father’s absence is likely to expose children to developing emotional responses and a lack of male role models (Damota, Gebretsadik & Nigatu, 2020). Admittedly, non-resident parents, usually fathers, tend to have a less intense and lower quality relationship with their children after divorce (Albertini & Tosi, 2018). Unfortunately, the limited involvement between the child and the father can harm the child’s development (Gyimah, 2021).

Theme 5: Participants’ challenges with sole parenting

Parenting is seen as playing a central role in helping children to successfully adapt following marital dissolution (Vélez, Wolchik, Tein & Sandler, 2011). However, most parents are usually unskilled in the task of raising children, especially when it comes to reducing the impact of divorce (Wambua, Otieno & Ichuloi, 2021). In cases where parents have no choice or control over change, they can experience challenges to support their children in adapting to change, as was the case with the participants who were thrown into the deep end of raising the children on their own. The participants’ experiences are recounted below:

There is no method that guides you on how to deal with the children after the divorce, and sometimes, you don’t know if you are doing the right thing or not, and you don’t want your children to feel like you are neglecting them. You do not want to hurt the child, and at the same time, you don’t want to spoil him because you are too lenient. It is not an easy journey, and I do not wish divorce on anyone; it’s just awkward, and at the same time, there is no time to lick wounds. Someone needs to be a parent to the children and play the parental role. (P11, 43 years)

You need to be a good example to your children. There is no manual to raise the child. You know ... I have a stepdaughter; she used to bring her friends over to the house, and my ex-husband used to drink alcohol with them. As the parent, what do you expect of the child if you do that? (P3, 42 years)

Loss of contact between the child and the father might lead to the deterioration of their relationship due to less emotional availability (Smith-Etxeberria & Eceiza, 2021). According to Garriga and Pennoni (2022), parental divorce harms children whose parents had a good relationship before their marriage dissolution, as was evident in the comment below:

The children miss their father. They were very close. They ask when they are going to visit him even during weekdays. It’s also a challenge for me because the children love their father, but because of the problems we encountered in our marriage, we had to divorce. This is not a good thing for the children to experience. Then there is my older son; he challenges me; he is very demanding, which is something he never

used to do with his father, but with me, he wants to have things his way. The younger children are still behaving well. (P7, 35 years)

Usually, divorce brings about significant changes in some children's lives, including leaving one parent and a decline in the standard of living (Amato, Kane & James, 2011). The extract above seems to prove the assertion that single mothers experience difficulties with discipline because of the absence of a male figure (Birara, 2021). Therefore authors believe that inadequate involvement by the father after divorce may lead to more behavioural problems, particularly among boys (Haimi & Lerner, 2016). Moreover, Kalmijn (2013) asserts that children may blame their parents for the divorce, which could result in further disengagement from both parents. The following participants recounted how their children blamed them after the marriage dissolution:

... and even at the times where she [participant's daughter] tried to commit suicide, she would blame me for leaving her father; she would say I hate her and her dad. I was emotionally, verbally, physically and sexually abused by my ex-husband. There was no way that I would go back. (P5, 37 years)

He used to come visit the child, but after divorce, things changed, and it was just me and my child. He never came into the house. When he wants to see the child, he would wait outside in his car. The child used to cry a lot saying he missed his father, and it was very painful. He then got a better place and the child started to spend some of the weekends with his father. I could see that the child was not okay, and one day, he asked me why I divorced his father. It now looks as if I was the one who divorced his father, he kind of blame me for the divorce. (P8, 45 years)

Similarly, Kalmijn (2013) asserts that it is common for a child to have a strained relationship with the mother and a good relationship with the father after divorce. Mothers who were subjected to labelling and undesirable verbal practices usually find it hard to reconstruct themselves as capable parents after marriage dissolution.

Theme 6: Disciplinary issues

The absenteeism of a parental relationship can have dire consequences for the child. Chauke and Khunou (2014) assert that a father's parenting status and influence decline if he is incapable of financially providing for his children. James (2018) states that ex-spouses should consider getting help from professionals when communication deteriorates to a point where it affects the children. The same sentiment is highlighted below:

The child is almost a teenager now, and there are things that he needs his father to talk to him about. He is at a stage where he needs a father figure in his life. When I discipline him, it's much harder now because I no longer have the support. It is not easy with his father gone; it's difficult and hurts a lot. I am trying different ways to discipline the child like taking his phone maybe for a week, and it seems like it's working for now. I do encourage him to concentrate on his studies and things are much better now. (P8, 45 years)

It is not easy to raise the children on your own, especially the boy children. I sometimes think it would be much easier if my children were girls. Your parents might be there to assist you, but it will never be the same as when my ex-husband was still with us. It's a big challenge, and it needs you to be more vigilant about what is going on, especially with the children. (P7, 35 years)

Single mothers have difficulties in maintaining discipline between children because of the absence of a male figure (Birara, 2021). Some authors claim that the emotional and mental consequences of divorce lessen women's confidence (Damota *et al.*, 2020). Eaton (2018) affirms that parents usually become harsher and stricter when punishing children, especially immediately before and after a divorce. Ahiaoma (2013) states that parents should observe and discipline their children properly. The following are some of the participants' experiences when disciplining their children:

It's difficult to teach my daughter my religion. Because of him [ex-husband], everything goes wrong. I would tell my daughter that certain things are not right but for him it's okay ... My ex-husband dates girls that are between eighteen and nineteen years old, so, how do you discipline your daughter when her father does bad things in front of her and makes it look okay and normal? (P5, 37 years)

I must discipline the children, and it's hard with the older child. Taking care of three boy children is not easy, and on top of that, I also have to go to work. When you have to discipline the younger children, they cry non-stop. They also tend to compare me to their father and say that he never used to beat them. I sometimes think the older child might run away to stay with his father because he complains a lot, and most of the time he compares me to how his father used to discipline him. (P7, 35 years)

Similarly, children's capacity to adjust to the changes in the family depends on the comfort level that parents demonstrate after divorce (Williams-Owens, 2017). The relationship between parents plays a vital role in the father-child relationship; furthermore, the significance of the mother becoming like a father-figure contributes to children's well-being (Viry, 2014).

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This study aimed to explore the challenging experiences of custodial mothers following their divorce. The findings painted a picture of a somewhat dire situation, at least based on the participants' accounts. The women in this study reported encounters consistent with those reported in previous studies, namely strained communication with the estranged husband, lone parenting and a financial burden (Koppejan-Luitze *et al.*, 2021).

The findings demonstrated that most participants' post-marital relationships are characterised by conflict. The findings show that most divorced parents cannot develop a constructive co-parenting relationship and continue engaging in very negative interactions. Some divorced parents cannot maintain relationships beyond their intimate ties (Szepsenwol, 2020). Markham *et al.* (2017) advise that divorced parents should renegotiate their interaction beyond their marital relationship for effective co-parenting to prevail. In this regard, Buchanan and LeMoyne (2020:431) introduce the concept of "optimal co-parenting", which denotes the

ideals of a successful divorce. This concept is based on parents' optimal involvement in their children's lives and their ability to communicate constructively with one another in matters related to their children. After all, the "best interest of children should always be paramount in any matter involving the children" (RSA, 2006). Maintaining a good co-parenting relationship will likely contribute to the child's wellbeing. Indeed, when co-parenting relationships are conflicted or absent, children receive worse direct parental care (Szepsenwol, 2020). Therefore, maintaining good co-parenting relationships should be a priority for both parents.

The participants' accounts seem to corroborate the assertion that divorce has serious implications for women regarding the support that marriage usually provides, particularly from the ex-partner (Her & Xiong, 2023). Mothers are confronted with living alone and having to raise the children with little or no support from their partners. The findings further illustrated that one of the most obvious repercussions divorced women suffer is their ex-partner's withdrawal of financial support. As such, they experience considerable financial difficulties by raising their children alone. This is further exacerbated by their ex-partners' withdrawal or refusal to contribute financially towards the children's expenses. It is important to highlight that this financial withdrawal occurs despite the legal obligations imposed by the Court order. Women seem to have very little legal recourse when their ex-partners do not fulfil their financial obligations. Financial withdrawal could be regarded as a common way in which men may still want to exercise their power over their ex-spouses. Whether subtle or not, this should be considered a form of financial abuse and be condemned with the utter contempt it deserves. The next section will assist with remedies that social workers can implement to disrupt what seems to be an antagonistic post-divorce co-parenting relationship and promote a supportive co-parenting relationship in which parents can cooperate in carrying out child-rearing responsibilities.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

The findings revealed a worrying picture of parents at war with each other. One of social workers' widely recognised strengths is their ability to bring people together to find solutions to whatever challenges they experience. They will also understand that co-parents experience much conflict following marital dissolution. Some participants' experiences suggested that co-parents need skills to improve mutual communication and decrease conflict. Because social workers understand co-parents' challenges, they will be best positioned to suggest the most appropriate intervention strategies.

Furthermore, Kelly (2017) suggests that divorced parents can benefit from education about divorce, family therapy and family mediation. Family therapy benefits divorced parents and children, as it can address the powerful and pervasive feelings of loss, sadness, betrayal and anger frequently associated with divorce. Family therapy focuses on addressing feelings of hurt and anger, which could permit the family to develop appropriate tactics to modulate aggressive and passive-aggressive manifestations of their hurt and anger. Some authors recommend that co-parents participate in programmes that will help them with the challenges of divorce by improving parent-child relationships and parent and child adjustment as well as reducing interparental conflict (Keating *et al.*, 2016). Lastly, social workers should strive to include non-custodial fathers in family therapy. Some authors express concern about social workers' limited

training on how to involve fathers in post-divorce family therapy (Thomas, Lee, Muhammed & Caldwell, 2021). Admittedly, the role of fathers has evolved beyond just being the financial providers and disciplinarians. Instead, many fathers are becoming increasingly involved in decisions regarding their children.

Thus, Palihapitiya and Eisenkraft (2014) recommend family mediation, particularly in contested cases of care and contact (previously referred to as custody and access). Moreover, parents are often confronted with challenges of family disruption and disagreement over custody (care), child support and visitation, among other issues. A parenting plan, therefore, becomes a very useful tool that can assist divorced parents who cannot be civil with each other.

CONCLUSIONS

The key finding drawn from this study is the common theme of strained relationships between co-parents following the dissolution of the marriage. Furthermore, women seem to carry the burden of caring for the children with limited or no support from their former spouses. It also emerged that women receive no joy from the legal apparatus meant to provide financial recourse when their former spouses do not fulfil their financial responsibilities. In summary, the study suggested that social workers should provide family therapy and family mediation in the best interests of the children.

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