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The Changing Family Patterns among immigrants:
An evaluation of the causes of divorces/separation
among Iranian families in Sweden



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ABSTRACT

Studies have showed that family instability is more frequent among immigrants than among native Swedes; marriages do not last to the same extent among immigrants as it does among native Swedes. It is also shown that European immigrants divorce less than non-European immigrants. On this ground the current research is an academic attempt to study and evaluate the causes of divorce/separation among the Iranian families in Sweden from the perspectives of ordinary divorced men and women from Iran in Sweden. This research attempts to answer the following questions as: 1) how do women and men from Iran in Sweden make sense of their divorce; 2) is it a “problem” or an “opportunity”; and 3) how do they speak about power in their former relationships and in their lives and what can this say about causes and increase of divorce among immigrants in Sweden? Based on qualitative research method, semi-structured interviews were used for the purpose of collecting empirical data. The findings reveal that there are numerous factors that could explain the causes for high rate of divorces among Iranian immigrant group. Women from Iran find the life after divorce both ‘problematic’ and comparatively ‘comfortable’, while men showed more interest in sustainability of the marriage. Access to the social resources such as education and gainful employment can be perceived as Iranian woman’s power resources, in Sweden, on the basis of which she challenges the traditional patriarchal stance of her husband. Iranian woman seems to want new symbols, new people and new name and therefore she is in fact divorcing from her ‘predecessors’.

Keywords: Divorce ♦ Iranian Immigrants ♦ Family conflict ♦ Gender role ♦ power relation

“...when we came to Sweden, one of the first words I learned was ‘divorce’”.

(a female interviewee)

CHAPTER 1

1.1. INTRODUCTION

Divorce as an experience, affects the lives of many people all over the world. But the essence of such affects vary in relation to whom you are (woman or man, poor or rich), where you are, how are the general social opinions constructed and what are the legal measures – and under these conditions the structure of your life after divorce would develop its meaning. Divorce among immigrants is yet another condition with various dimensions.

Compared by international standards, in Sweden the family instability and divorce rate is higher than the rest of Europe. Studies show that break up is very common among couples from the non-European immigrants' background in Sweden. Iranians, who constitute the largest immigrant group in Sweden, coming from an Islamic country, are the second after Chileans who divorce more often than other immigrant groups. The view on the theme of divorce is very different in Iran as compared to Sweden. While in Iran the divorce is still a drama, in Sweden it is considered as an 'opportunity' (Darvishpour, 2002) to rebuild your life and do something better than you previous experienced. Making research on immigrant families is a problematic and complicated work, because the conditions differ greatly between immigrants from different countries and culture and of different social backgrounds. The concept of 'immigrant' also does not have a universal meaning and it is not always understandable what is meant by immigrant. In this particular research immigrant means people born out side of Sweden by non-Swedish parents.

This study tries to sketch a theoretical explanation of the causes of divorce among Iranian immigrants, as perceived by ordinary men and women from Iran in Sweden. It focuses on the Iranian immigrant group, which constitutes one of the largest immigrant groups in Sweden, coming from an Asian and Islamic country. Besides, it is an attempt to describe and analyze the causes of divorce among Iranian immigrants in the Swedish context, from the perspective of the ordinary men and women from Iran in Sweden. The research analyses are based on empirical data obtained from the interviews conducted with the Iranian divorcees in Gothenburg.

The reason for which I chose this particular topic for my thesis is that, being a woman from a somehow similar social background, it was interesting for me to dig out for causes that could explain the familial transitions among immigrants coming from a developing country to Sweden.

1.2. PROBLEM AT ISSUE

Numerous studies by Statistics Sweden (SCB) reveal that family instability, which is the high separation risk for couples living together (as married, as well as by common law), with or without children, is more common among immigrants than among native Swedes. Marriage and relationships between couples living together do not last to the same extent among immigrants as it does among native Swedes (Statistiska centralbyrån, 2003). Moreover the same studies demonstrate that European immigrants divorce less than non-European immigrants. According to a study done by M. Darvishpour (2002), Chileans and Iranian women divorce 4-5 times more often than Swedish women, and often it's the woman who takes the initiative. He claims that immigrant women go through a quicker time-travel in their new homeland and will get divorced before their husband settle in him self to a more equal relationship.

1.3. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this study is to describe and analyze the causes of divorce among Iranian immigrants in Sweden, from their own perspective. The overall aim is to provide guidelines for further studies in the concerned area of social life; as well as to identify and elaborate the risk factors affecting the social life set-up of a particular community of immigrants living in Sweden. This study would enable us to begin to understand the essence of migration within 'space' and 'time'. Iranians come from a developing country and constitute the largest group of immigrants from an Asian and Islamic country, who come to Sweden with experiences and values different from those of Swedish natives. Therefore, using results from other studies and the data obtained through the interviews, the study would also attempt to give an account of the social background such as: family structure and social relations in Iran and Sweden.

Research questions

The current study is a hypothetical intention that shall attempt to answer the following questions:

- How do women and men from Iran in Sweden make sense of their divorce? Is it seen as a "problem" or an "opportunity"?
- How do they speak about power in their former relationships and in their lives?
- What can this say about causes and increase of divorce among immigrants in Sweden?

CHAPTER 2

EARLIER RESEARCH

This chapter will give a critical overview of the divorce situation among Iranian immigrants in the Swedish society. But before making a description of the main topic with regard to earlier research, it is worthwhile to briefly describe the main concept(s) that will be used in this study.

In simple terms a *divorce* is the legal termination of the marriage. However the divorce laws are different in the legal context of various countries and can also be very complex as well. As far the legal procedure for divorce in Iran is concerned, women (in particular) face rather discriminating conditions regarding the grounds for divorce, as compared to their new homeland (Sweden as a western country). In order to provide background information for the reader, the family structure and social relations in Iran and Sweden will be illustrated and discussed in the following chapter of the current study.

2.1. There are several researchers analyzing the factors responsible for splitting of the non- European immigrant married couples in the West, especially in Sweden.

Darvishpour M. (1999), attempts to examine the “open conflicts in Iranian families” by differentiating between old problems that Iranian families bring with them to Sweden and the new types of problems that arise here. He argues that arranged marriages create problems for both women and men. Family interests lead to ill-matched couples entering into marriage.

Chileans and Iranian women divorce 4-5 times more often than Swedish women, and often it's the woman who takes the initiative (Darvishpour M., 2002). As far conflicts within Iranian families in Sweden are concerned, it has been related to the ‘changing image of the women concerning the power relationship’ (ibid).

Furthermore, numerous studies by the Statistical institute/board in Sweden (SCB) reveal that family instability, which is the high separation risk for couples living together (married, common law), with or without children, is more frequent among immigrants than among native Swedes. Marriage and relationships between couples living together do not last to the same extent among immigrants as it does among native Swedes (Statistiska centralbyrån, 1995:76-77). Moreover the same studies illustrate that non-European immigrants divorce more than European immigrants. As well as, during 1995 Chileans (with 5.8%) and Iranians (with 4.8%) were the two immigrant groups that divorced the most, while for native Swedes were 1.2% for all marriages that dissolved in the same year, which was the lowest percentage among the focused group (ibid).

According to Darvishpour (2002), immigrant women go through a quicker time-travel in their new homeland and will get divorced before their husband adapts himself to a more equal relationship. He illustrates that after divorce the Iranian women's positions are improved from various angles despite difficulties after immigration – e.g. discrimination etc. – and here they have more opportunities to change their situation. The factors of education and employment or professional position have been highlighted as the important resources of power that can affect the family relationships with regard to conflicts, its solution or dissolution. The research reveals that the Iranian women, in Sweden, have gained the capacity to afford separation when they feel unsatisfied in their relationships. In brief it concludes that after immigration, there arise greater possibilities for the individual to separate and seek new alternatives. But, in a way, this research maintains the pre-dominant assumption of Sweden as a land of opportunities and economic self-sufficiency for women. In my opinion what neglected in Darvishpour's (2002) research is the fact that in the global context 'economic self-sufficiency is not the reality for the majority of women and poverty is an ever present risk when women head households on their own' (Daly M. et al., 2003:153).

On the ground of Darvishpour's observation, it can be concluded that divorce is perceived as an act of emancipation (at least) by Iranian women in Sweden and serve as an 'opportunity' for a better life.

2.2. From a global perspective, I believe it would be interesting, for a comparative analysis, to see an overview of the situation of divorce and changing family configurations in the European context.

A study, presented at the Royal Economic Society's 2006 Annual Conference at the University of Nottingham, shows that divorce rates have increased considerably in Europe since the 1960s. In 1960, there were 2 to 3 divorces per 1,000 married couples. By 2002, this rate had more than tripled, with over 7 annual divorces per 1,000 married couples. The divorce rates in the UK have been among the highest in Europe since the 1970s, reaching almost 14 divorces per 1,000 married couples in 2002 (University of Nottingham annual report, 2006: online issue).

Another study shows that, in Europe the model of families as forming after a marriage has gradually found itself in competition with many new familial patterns. There are now numerous ways of living as a couple: in or outside wedlock, or even separately, cohabiting between the same sexes, etc. However, the new familial patterns are subject to controversial debate. Most of critics have come from the Church. Trujillo (2003), for instance, believes that "a single-parent family is to deny the existence of the absent parent, usually the father, and to give credit to the growing matriarchal model".

Comparative studies on the factors leading to divorce are rare in Europe and the frequently proposed causal models have only rarely been tested identically in different countries. However, a research by Charton L. (2003), tries to weigh the role of individual factors, those characterizing the formation of the couple, and those linked to conjugal history in cases of divorce using data collected in the 1990s by FFS studies in France, Italy, Sweden, and Switzerland, countries that represent the considerable range of marital and fertility situations found in western Europe, as well as biographical methods. Furthermore, the study attempts to ascertain, using a semi parametric survival model, the respective roles of individual factors, those characterizing the formation of the couple, and factors related to their life together, in the frequency of divorce. It analyzes three suspected factors leading to divorce, which includes individual factors, factors related to the formation of the couple and the marital situation of the spouses, and those linked to the couple's conjugal and family life. There are a certain number of individual factors, with couples and couple formation act as a check to divorce. Religious observance is an outstanding factor among these. Other factors, however, seem to increase the risk of divorce, such as parental divorce that might direct the behavior of individual(s) and premarital cohabitation. In Switzerland, this is possibly because most couples make their first union official, whereas premarital cohabitation tends to reduce divorce (as official termination of marriage) in Sweden where a first cohabitational experience frequently ends in separation, or a relatively young age at marriage. It has also been noticed that some factors frequently suspected of playing a role in the instability of relationships, such as premarital pregnancy, for example, do not significantly affect relationship stability (ibid).

According to research, the social and family environment appears to retain, at least in France, Italy and Switzerland, an important role in the formation and preservation of conjugal ties. The greatest number of breakups are observed in social environments that are the most unusual from traditional (including religious) values, particularly in the roles assigned to men and women within a couple (for example, when a woman has a higher degree of education than a man and is employed at the time of marriage). By contrast, women with lower educational levels who are not financially independent are more likely to be married and remain so. This shows that education plays a significant role in the process of women's emancipation act from a gender perspective. However, in Sweden, as new issues seem to be linked to marriage (for example, it is no longer the primary paradigm for child-rearing, nor a decision made at the expense of a career), it would appear that divorce is more of an individual choice with lessened social and economic constraints. Therefore, as a general overview, reasons to divorce or not to divorce appear to be correlated to the meaning that individuals, whether consciously or not, attribute to marriage, their relationship, and the role of each gender within the couple (ibid).

Wagner M. and Weiss B. (2004), in a similar study, describe and explain the heterogeneity of divorce risks in Europe. They concentrated on such divorce risks that

play a major role in frequent divorce models: the level of information about the partner, the birth of children after marriage as indicators of marital investments and several social resources like the educational attainment of the respondents and of the father's as well as women's employment status, as well as the divorce experiences. They found that the age effect is not stronger in highly modernized countries in Europe but in less modernized countries. Accordingly, the higher the level of modernization the weaker age at marriage affects marital stability. In European countries that are highly modernized, men and women marry late. This is mainly due to the requirement of the educational system and the labor market. Early marriages are kind of burden and are likely to break up. But in contrast to this, in Eastern Europe – where the modernization level is relatively low – age at marriage is more important for an explanation of marital stability (ibid:14). The study also confirms the connection of cohabitation on the divorce rate. In countries where traditional marriage norms are strongly institutionalized, cohabitation has a stronger effect than in countries where marriage norms are weaker (p.12). Besides, the study shows that social resources are also “nearly” associated with the divorce rate. Social resources are much needed to cover the vacuum resulted by divorce. The higher these costs of divorce are the more social resources are required to overcome these costs. Therefore, the weaker divorce norms are the less important social resources are for an explanation of divorce (p.18). Furthermore, it indicates that the implementation of the "dual earner" model such as in Sweden or in East European countries facilitates a divorce in case of the involvement of children as well. However, in the context of the current research, the latter fact can explain as why involvement of children does not effectively avoid the risk of divorce. In the following chapter we may read that the presence of children has a strong affect on the decision of divorce between couple in Iran.

The above observation would allow one to conclude that in Europe the concept of family has lost its meaning in its traditional form that is usually after marriage. Instead it is an ever changing meaning and much difficult to catch. This change has its roots largely in the dynamics of the modernity and the state policies regarding family matters. Living in or outside wedlock, or even separately, cohabiting between the same sexes, etc. are some new forms of family that are catching strength in the modern Europe.

CHAPTER 3

FAMILY STRUCTURE AND SOCIAL RELATIONS IN IRAN AND SWEDEN

In order to understand the essence of specific behaviour of a particular group (of immigrants) within a defined area of social life, it is first important to know about the social background of that group. Therefore, this chapter is allocated to a brief analytical description of the relevant background information on family structure, in relations to marriage and divorce, in Iran (as the country of origin) and Sweden (as the host country) of the focused group in this study.

Statistics show that for men in Iran, marriage is most common between the age group of 20 – 24 years old. Moreover, the statistical observation reveals that the earlier claim of girls being married between the ages of 24 – 25 is incorrect. Because for most of the girls who have married during the first half of 2007, the average age for marriage has been between 15 – 19 years (Focus on Iranian women, 2007: www.irwomen.info).

After the “revolution” in 1979 Iran became an Islamic Republic. The hard liner policies of the new regime result in enormous emigration of Iranian, especially to the West. According to UNFPA (2002) report, the total population of Iran was 72.4 million, by 2002, with the under 35 age group representing 70 per cent of the total population, while forty per cent of the population under 35 age group is under 16. In the context of the current study, it worth mentioning that Iran has one of the highest urban growth rates in the world, which can partly explain the changing family patterns. Besides, literacy is high and the country has a rich and ‘proud’ cultural history (British Council, 2006: www.britishcouncil.org).

Iranians are among the top asylum seekers in many countries (RFE/RL 2002: www.globalsecurity.org), which can be argued as the dynamics of the family transition among Iranians. Nevertheless, after Iraqis, Finns and Yugoslavs, Iranians are the largest immigrant group in Sweden. The majority are from Tehran and other large cities. At the end of 2000, 52,038 Iranians born individuals resided in Sweden, 25 years earlier there were only 998 of them (ibid). So far many reasons have been titled by the Iranian asylum seekers. Some of the main reasons are listed as: politics, religious oriented problems and social relations; for many have given the reasons that they are seeking a divorce and have the fear that their husbands might harm them, etc. (ibid)

3.1.1. Typology of Iranian family:

Before speaking about the marriage and divorce, I would like to shed some light on the family type in Iran. However, there is no decisive study that could give explanation of a precise typology of Iranian family.

Traditionally speaking, family in Iran is an autonomous unit of production and consumption, based on ancestral descent through the paternal line and patriarchal in nature and based on male supremacy. In traditional families, usually, the eldest male of the family (i.e. grandfather, father, eldest son, uncle) is considered the master and expects to be obeyed. Marriage concerns not only two individuals but two family trees.

Through the passage of time, *modernization* has also applied its impacts on family system in Iran. Concerning family, the Iranian society has undergone profound changes in political, socioeconomic, and cultural sphere, during the past century. In the beginning of the 20th century signs of modern changes in the family system appeared in the form of the constitutional reforms, as well as, propagation of new ideas. The socio economic phenomena that appeared during the first half of 20th century in the form of, industrialization, juridical and administrative reform, urbanization, democratization and secularization of education and introduction of mass media of communication played a significant role in transition process of the mental and socio-cultural structure, as well as, paved ground for tendencies towards reconsideration of family structure. However, certain social institutions have remained unchanged, and those that have been modified have been so only in part. But, as Vida N. (1985:558) asserts, “it [family] has been exposed to change but at the same time has maintained a high degree of continuity”.

However, in spite of the evolution of Iranian society, *the choice of a spouse* is still controlled and usually decided by the family. Marriage within one’s own social class and particularly with a member of the family is important. Endogamous marriage (with cousins) is a common practice. 25% of marriages in Tehran, 36% in rural regions, and 51% among nomads are endogamous (Khazaneh 1968, as cited in Vida N. 1985).

3.1.2. Marriage:

In Iran marriage regulations are described by *Shia* religion law, however non-*Shias* are allowed to pursue or follow their own religious practices. Only before the Revolution, the legal marriage age was eighteen for females and twenty-one for males. In rural families and lower-class urban, most couples are younger than the legal age when they marry each other. However, according to the international declaration of child’s right, all the individuals under the age of 18 are considered as children, but in the present day Iran there is no specific age that could differentiate between a child and an adult (BBC Persian 2007: www.bbc.co.uk). A quantitative research shows the number unmarried women between 15-34 age group mounts to 4,348,000 while the number of unmarried men between 20 – 39 age group is

2,361,000, which shows that there is a difference of 900,000 more unmarried women in comparison to men (Shahla K. 2005).

As alluded above, the choice of a partner for marriage is usually determined by customary preference, economic circumstances and, as well as, geographic considerations. There is also a preference for marriage within extended kin relations, and a high number of marriages among first and second cousins exists. Marriage arrangements among the lower and traditional middle classes of urban areas and in rural life set ups are inclined to follow traditional patterns. Most often the “arranged marriages function in the following manner: when a boy or a man is ready for marriage, his parents or close relatives will visit girl’s family which has been selected for suitable match. Usually the man already expresses his interest in the girl. Then other formalities begin if the girl’s family shows the same interest and the conversation quickly turns to money. A contract on the *bride-price* is fixed which will be given to girl’s family on the day of marriage. It is important to mention that not all families ask for this amount or fix amount. However, the later ritual creates the possibility to assume woman as commodity or a possession owned by a man (see the chapter on theoretical perspective “power”). Nevertheless, within a period of time the wedding ceremony takes place. One significant feature of the marriage is the contract of mahriyeh (مهریه), a stipulated sum that the groom gives to his bride. This amount is not paid at the time of marriage but it is paid at the time of divorce (in case the husband makes the demand) or in case of husband’s death. This amount can be paid in installments or all together.

In Iran conditional polygyny is allowed by Islamic custom, which entitles a man to have up to four wives at the same time. The main logic behind the latter fact is ascribed the bigger number of female population, which is presumed to enter into prostitution if remained unmarried (Naik Z.: www.youtube.com). However, the practice of marrying four wives is not very much common in Iran, the reason for which could be the economic conditions or emancipation from a gendered explanation. According to the “1976 Census of Population (Iran Statistical Center, 1980), the ratio of men with two or more wives to those with only wife is about 11 to 1000 (sited in Aghajanian, 1986).

Second type of marriage in Iran is a temporary marriage called *sigheh* (temporary). In this temporary marriage the man and woman sign a contract and agree to live together as husband and wife for a specified period of time, which can be short as well as for a life time. Responding to my question about sigheh, one of my respondents answered that, “one of the reasons why people go for temporary marriage is that they need a legal document, so that if a couple is stopped on the street they could prove that they are not committing adultery [...] *sigheh* legally cover premarital sex in an Islamic veil” (IM2, see chapter 5, informants). But in general, Iranian society still looks down on temporary marriage as a cover for prostitution. However, temporary marriage contracts are mostly done for traveling to other parts of the world and for women who

need financial support. In one sense, is a measure in which the woman has a sexual role that is less than a married wife but (usually) more than a mistress, not to speak of a side affair, with certain publicly recognized rights. The institution of 'temporary marriage' is an alternative to marriage, as contribution to sexual flexibility mostly in favour of men.

3.1.3. Divorce:

Divorce in Iran is considered a social disgrace where the women are the biggest sufferers. Although Islam, the dominant religion in Iran, does not prohibit divorce but it is strongly discouraged. Divorcee women in Iran are usually not very happy, because they are more vulnerable when it comes to a legal separation, in terms of hiring a lawyer, the bureaucracy in the legal process and so on. They live in a society where they are discriminated in many areas of social life. Legal measures are comparatively in favour of men. One of my informants in the current research stated his view as follows:

In our country a divorced woman is often discriminated. She is generally perceived as someone who can be used for anything (IM2, male interviewee).

Such attitudes of the society make a divorced woman see her self in an unfriendly society (BBC Persian, www.bbc.co.uk/persian). A female informant in my research stated:

Though divorce should be our natural right, but when it comes to the Iranian law, it does not give women the complete right of making choice about divorce, even at extreme situations when they are beaten by their husbands. I filed a case for divorce in Iran but the court did not give any importance to my reasons. All it was caring about was that whether my husband gives me enough food or not. Moreover, for the child the state provides higher subsidies to men than to women, in case of a divorce. Therefore, most often women remain in their same painful life and only suffer and adjust (IW2, see Ch.5).

Although Iranian men can still easily obtain a divorce, the rate of marital dissolution is relatively low, hanging around 10 percent (Sanasarian 1992). Marital dissolution is particularly rare in rural and tribal communities. In urban communities and metropolitan areas, the situation is different, and the rate of divorce is reported to be higher and rising (Nassehi-Behnam 1985).

3.2.1. Family structure in Sweden:

The modern Swedish family is characterised by dual-earner, (where both men and women are wage earners). Conversely both participate in domestic work. While at the end of the 1960s about 70% of married mothers were housewives and about 30% in labour force, (Axelson, 1992) notes that by the beginning of the 1980s, the situation was almost reversed: 20% were housewives and 80% were in the labour force

(Liljestrom et al, 2002:164). They further argue that in Sweden, it is common to have children and live together without being married. It is no surprise therefore that even divorce rates are reportedly high with 50% of children born out of wedlock (Hessle & Vinnerljung, 1999:10). The economic empowerment of women it can be argued is a factor in high divorce rates. This is because, as Webner & Abrahamson, (2004:1) note, the idea of romantic love has come to dominate the relations between the couples in the family and marriage has become dependant on emotions instead of economic necessity. It is therefore safe to argue that, the family structure, is more individualistic while state social policy is socialistic in Sweden.

Brembeck, (2004:38), asserts that family relations have become more complicated, uncertain and varying – the statistics do not even capture the variability of the ever changing family forms children widely experience. Four types of families in Sweden are more common: they are single or lone parents, heterosexual, homosexual and cohabiting families. However, the last two are not yet legalised but are allowed.

3.2.2. Family and individuality

Giddens (1991) stated that ‘in the wake of modernization and cultural change, existing marks of individuality and autonomy in family life – as well as in other fields of existence – have been strengthened. This notion paved way for the dual breadwinner system within the family (cited in Liljestrom et al, 2002). Nonetheless, the dual breadwinner model within the family set-up has certainly challenged the traditional trend of the *male breadwinner* and has brought tremendous changes in the phase of gender roles and power relation in the family. But the establishment of the dual-earner family model influences family stability only if it is accompanied by some changes in traditional gender relations within the family, as it is argued by Olah (2001), that women’s and men’s labor-market behavior have different effects in spite of the relatively long history of women’s (also mothers’) labor-force participation in Sweden. It can be added that this change seems to have shaken the family foundation and has resulted in an increasing frequency of marital crises – i.e. divorce/separation – as well.

According to Einarsdottir, ‘when a childless couple has a child, their position as independent, negotiating individuals – in accordance with increasing individualization and modernization – is restricted’ (Liljestrom et al, 2002:198). Sweden is a child friendly welfare state and emphasis on creating circumstances which are in the best interest of the child. Therefore the individuality of the parents becomes secondary in favour of the child’s best interest. The child is seen as so-called “anti-modern” (Bäck-Wiklund and Bergsten, in Liljestrom et al 2002), because it challenges the modern notion of individuality regarding the gender relations. As mentioned above, the law provides same opportunities to both parents in order to take care of the children, however, because of the mother’s close relationship with the child and her continuous communication and interaction with it, she is the one who gains an understanding of the rules that apply in the new sphere (Einarsdottir, cited in Liljestrom et al 2002),

where a child is involved. On the other hand the assumption “good parents/good mother” (Sheppard 2000), limits the sphere of the individuality of the parents (in particular, the mother).

The law allows divorced or separated parents to have *joint-custody* for their children. In Sweden, joint custody means that parents have to cooperate in important questions regarding their children, such as agreeing on their residence, education, sports and other activities, even though they usually live in separate households after family break-up. The *joint-custody* rule has led to increased involvement in the children by both parents even after the relationship ends (Bernhardt 1996). In Sweden divorce or separation does not necessarily mean the loss of the parental status for either parent (Olah, 2001).

3.2.3. Gender equality:

In Sweden the male attitude towards gender equality seems to be positive. A study revealed that "almost all the men in the Swedish sample talked positively about gender equality and argued for shared responsibility in family work" (Plantin et al, 2003). The gap between the proportions of women and men with higher education has also greatly diminished in Sweden. In parallel, women's labor-force participation has reached high levels as compared to other industrialized countries (Olah, 2001), while the policy discourse has aimed more broadly at a general transformation of traditional gender roles into a system with equal participation in paid work but also in family responsibilities for women and men (Sainsbury,1996).

The evolution of the Swedish legislation on Gender

The gender equality policy was introduced and implemented in Sweden in the beginning on the 1970's. The following are important laws introduced (Pavlova, 2003):

- Individual Taxation Act 1971
- Governmental Committee on equality between man and women 1972
- New Family laws 1973-74
- Parental Leave Insurance Act 1974
- The Law of Free Abortion 1975
- Parliamentary Commission on Equal Status 1976
- Ministry of Equal Status 1976
- Decree for Gender Equality in the Civil Service 1976
- Right to a 6-Hour Day for Parents with Small Children 1979
- Law Against Gender Discrimination in Employment 1979

From this it can be concluded that the Swedish legislation on gender has evolved, during the last four decades, which indicated its tendency towards a system that is based more on gender equality. It can, also, be argued that the Swedish society is a

profoundly individualistic. But this individuality loses its essence in the family context, especially when the child is involved. According to (Einarsdottir cited in Liljestrom et al, 2002), “the family is born with a child” and the decisions between the couple strongly depend on the circumstances of the child. The child breaks the logic of individualization; it inevitably links one person to another and it cannot be abandoned, in contrast to most other areas.

CHAPTER 4

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

There are a number of theories on this subject, which can explain the family conflicts between men and women that can result on divorce or separation. However, in the context of the current study, I have tried to pick the most relevant to my topic, which can also explain the changing power relationship within Iranian families in Sweden and their family conflicts after immigration. They are: gender and power perspectives.

4.1.1 Gender perspective:

The gender perspective is the most important explanation for the high number of divorces. As Westkott (cited in Akpinar A., 1998) suggests that, one cannot only study women's actions if one wants to understand women who live under patriarchal subordination. Therefore, the social behavior of immigrant Iranian couples (especially the women) concerning the family structure can be traced in gender perspective, which is discussed bellow:

Gender is determined by the conception of tasks, functions and roles attributed to women and men in society and in public and private life. Women as well as men shape gender roles and norms through their activities and reproduce them by conforming to expectations. Men as well as women can promote changes in gender relations. Gender relations are reproduced not only between but also amongst women and men (e.g. mother/daughter, father/son). Gender relations are inherent to all aspects of life. Whatever our age, religion, ethnicity, class etc. we are always either a woman or a man, with the limitations and opportunities that are associated with it in a particular context (www.sdc.admin.ch). Describing the gender role conflict, as O'Neil (cited in Mintz R. *et al*, 1996), consists of four factors: (a) success, power, and competition; (b) restrictive emotionality; (c) restrictive affectionate behavior among men; and (d) conflict between work and family relations.

In many situations, culturally conditioned expectations influence the ideas and practices of people, and families in particular, regarding gender roles. However, the complexity still remains in differentiating the “nurture” and “nature”. The role that men and women play in the family, it can be argued, is due to culture through the process of socialization. A large portion of what we know and bear as “responsibility” or “obligation” is the result of a learning process that we, willingly or unwillingly, have gone through. Therefore, all that we approve or disapprove in the area of our social life is under the influence of the dominant *culture* in our respective societies, which undoubtedly, plays a key role in determining our character and even the *gender* (as far as our roles, particularly in a family context, are concerned). There are, of course, natural differences between girls and boys (men or women) which determines their biological role (in sexual act and reproduction, etc.), but I think that is not a logical explanation in determining the privileged one among the two sexes.

This idea catches more strength when we come to the Swedish context where the welfare state *social policies* shape the cultural dimensions of the society, to a large extent. It, consequently, influences the general perspective of the people regarding certain issues such as gender roles in the family. "Our masculinity or femininity is not biologically determined. Although our biological or genetic inheritance gives each of us the sex organs of a male or female, how our "maleness" or "femaleness" is expressed depends on what we learn [...] it can be said that while our gender is part of our biological inheritance, our sexuality (or masculinity or femininity) is part of our social inheritance" (Henslin, 1997:139).

As for the immigrant women, the feminist researchers who have used a gender perspective in their research have suggested that immigrant women are three times subordinated: as women, as workers and as immigrants. Also, the three dimensions of subordination were not separate aspects in immigrant women's existence (Kosack, G. 1976:373).

According to Westkott (1979:422, cited in Akpinar A., 1998), one cannot only study women's actions if one wants to understand women who live under patriarchal subordination; there is an ongoing tension between women's actions and consciousness. Women's unique interpretation of their own 'adjusted' actions influences their actions in a way which is only comprehensible through reference to the women's consciousness. Patriarchal subordination implies varying degrees of *power* and *control* and in which women submit and resist in diverse ways, as well. Therefore, patriarchy can best be understood contextually. That is, its different forms depend not only on different cultural contexts but also on the emergence of hierarchical power relations in interaction with other dimensions such as race, ethnicity, social class etc.

The Swedish welfare state is based on a dual breadwinner model (Johansson H, 2008, class notes). In the context of the family structure and apart from circumstances such as related to child birth, married women are covered by the same labor, tax and social security legislation as men. This could be counted as a prominent instance of the state attitude towards the principle of gender equality within the family. The state seems to emphasize on gender equity in the family. According to Pavlova (2003:1), it also provides a favorable combination of circumstances for (single/divorced) mothers. She argues that the state uses separate taxation for men and women within the same family, generous public day-care provision for pre-school children and extensive programs of parental leave to encourage married women/mothers to remain in proper and gainful employment and also support themselves in case of separation.

Theoretically, gender orientated roles is perceived as ranging on a succession from traditional gender roles, where the roles of men and women are perceived as different and separate, to a focus on nontraditional gender roles, which is characterized by

flexibility or role sharing between men and women. A study analyzing gender role of men in connection to family tasks revealed that “men who saw their roles as interchangeable with their wives' roles accepted more responsibility for tasks associated with child care, meal preparation, and cleaning than men who endorsed specialized roles between men and women” (Mintz R. et al, 1996, www.findarticles.com).

4.2.1 Power perspective:

Most often, the immigrant women from Asian countries, first, dependent on family for their financial resources to a far greater degree than men. Secondly, such an imbalance plays out in the private sphere, shaping power relations between women and men. Therefore, in order to make a comprehensive analysis of the family conflicts, it is necessary that one should initially understand the *power* oriented dynamics in a family context. According recent studies on family, the family can be seen as an organization comprised of individuals with comparatively different objectives and interests. Thus, concepts such as “negotiation”, “power” and “conflict” become central (Anne et al, 1996, cited in Darvishpour M, 2002). These situation mainly emanate from conditions where individual members of a family get access to more social resources such as education, gainful employment and partially to a social network with different values from ones own.

It is therefore that this chapter is allocated to a theoretical approach on power relation in a family context and the question as; how does power relation function and how can it define the conflicts of interest – satisfaction or dissatisfaction – between spouses?

Dahl, in his article ‘The Concept of Power’, describes the functioning of power among individuals in the following manner: ‘A’ party has power over ‘B’ party to the extent that he can get ‘B’ party to do something that ‘B’ party would not otherwise do’ (Dahl 1957, cited in Lukes, 1974). From this observation power is viewed gain and loss – i.e. who wins and who loses. Satisfaction can be achieved in case the two concerned parties practice mutual exchange and cooperation. However, conflict may arise if the process of cooperation does not satisfy either of the parties. Dependency, of one individual on the other, is the basis of power relations. It means the more dependants an individual is; the less power he/she has (Arne et al. 1996). The question may arise as how and when can dissatisfaction or the conflicts of interests end in open conflicts between spouses. I think silence or lack of protest should not be interpreted as satisfaction, because many women might not hide their subordinate position for the fear of consequences – for which they may not find themselves prepared enough – or facing the power. As Korpi (1987:85-86) states, the absence of protest and open conflict does not present the picture of the whole reality about whether a person is satisfied or dissatisfied. The power relation is very strong as long as the one with less

power submits to the prevailing power or the dominant party. It is important to mention that dissatisfaction alone can not change the situation unless there is capacity to afford to challenge the power relation. This capacity can be defined as having access to other alternatives – for instance, economic resources, education and social support etc. Korpi describes the circumstances that could lead to open conflicts in the following manner:

If the difference in power resources between two actors is great, the likelihood of conflicts of interest between them is therefore small, because conflicts of interest between them would develop into open conflicts. In such situations, it is instead likely that different forms of “non-decision” and/or exploitation will develop. But when the difference in power resources between the two actors decreases, both the likelihood of success and motivation increase for the weaker party, something that increases the likelihood of open conflicts (Korpi, 1987:99).

Dissatisfaction is often expressed in two ways that are “exit” and “voice”. For example if a person is not satisfied within an environment, as a sign of protest he/she would try to make her/himself heard, in order to bring a possible change. The second alternative is to leave that place as an expression of protest against what is undesirable.

But as Stan Lee, the American writer says, with power there must also come responsibility. Besides power there are certain codes of responsibility attached to the one with prevailing power. Failure to meet such responsibilities also brings the power relation into question. According to Foucault (1975:202-3, cited in Lukes, 1974), “he who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he inscribes in himself the power relations in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection”. Power relation is also attached to identity descended from a social position. In the case of immigration the bases of identity is shaken. For instance, to restore a power position, men have to strive for a new identity suitable in his new social situation.

CHAPTER 5

METHODOLOGY

For many Iranians divorce is still a kind of forbidden subject, and it is a struggling work to make them to speak about their private lives. As such it is not easy to capture relevant information about the Iranians' family lives, concerning the subject of divorce. Moreover, divorce by itself is a complicated and sensitive issue. During my interview sessions, as I was expecting, I found that there is a considerable amount of suspicion towards 'strangers' among Iranians, which, of course, does have an effect on the outcome of the study. This behaviour of the respondents (except one woman) minimized their willingness to co-operate in interviews. One of the male informants, to whom I am thankful for participating in my research, denied even to reveal his name. However, the interview method does provide a better possibility of getting an explicit and more detailed image of the situation among the interested participants; and also a chance for attempting to answer the research question on the bases of first hand personal experiences of the individuals in focus.

5.1.1 Informant

For finding the informants I chose *Judgment sampling* method. It is a common nonprobability method in which the researcher selects the sample based on judgment. In this method a researcher decides to draw the entire sample from one 'representative' city, even though the population includes all cities. When using this method, the researcher must be confident that the chosen sample is truly representative of the entire population (StatPac survey: www.statpac.com). To ensure this method I selected the samples from different backgrounds in terms of socioeconomic situation, class and gender.

For the current qualitative research, six divorcees from the Iranian immigrant group participated in the interviews out of which four were women, aging from 35-50 and two men, aging 40 and 43 years; the period of informants' residing in Sweden was 5-20 years and their time of divorce was 2-7 years ago. I got in contact with the informants through the circle of my Iranian friends. Except one woman, who withdrew her participation in the interview hours before hours before it could happen and without expressing the reason, all others whom I could approach participated in the interviews. As for criteria, I considered the informants' time of residing in Sweden, period of divorce, age, gender and number of children. Except one woman, a mother of two children who was financially dependant on social assistance, all informants were employed in a way or other. The informants were from different parts of Gothenburg city, namey: Mölnlycke, Hamarkolin, Gunnered and Kortedala. I conducted all the interviews personally between 2nd of April 2008 to 10th of May 2008. The interviews were conducted in Persian, which made it much easier for the respondents to express themselves in their own mother tongue. All the interviews (except one of them) were recorded in audio cassetts and were transcribed and translated into English.

5.2.1 Method

For seeking possible answers to the research questions I chose the semi-structured qualitative interviews method. Before explaining the semi-structured interview method is worthwhile to first know what we mean by *qualitative research*:

A qualitative researcher aims to gather an in-depth understanding of human behavior and the reasons that govern human behavior. It relies on reasons behind various aspects of behavior. In more simple words, it investigates the *why* and *how* of decision making, rather than just *what*, *where*, and *when*. Therefore, the need is for smaller but focused samples rather than large random samples, which qualitative research categorizes data into patterns as the primary basis for organizing and reporting results. It typically relies on four methods for gathering information: 1) participation in the setting; 2) direct observation; 3) in depth interviews; and 4) analysis of documents and materials (Marshall 1998).

5.2.2 Semi-structured Interviews

Kvale (1996:14) assert that ‘qualitative research interview is a construction site of knowledge’. Moreover, ‘interviews bring rich insights into people’s experiences, opinions, values, attitudes and feelings [...]’ (May, 2001:121).

For the present research, I used semi-structured interviews, because it provides more space for the participants to answer more in their own way, as compared to ‘structured interviews’, but still it provide a greater structure that may guide and facilitate the data analysis made by the researcher (May, 2001). My research included six audio-taped interviews, each with nearly 1-hour length.

5.2.3 Interview setting

Out of totally six interviews, four of them were conducted in the informants’ own residences according to their own choice, one of them at my residence and yet another in the cafeteria of the city library. As mentioned above, I approached the informants through the circle of my contact, except one man whom I happened to meet in the library and who agreed for an interview after learning about the purpose of my research.

5.2.4 Validity, reliability and generalizability

The interviews helped me to generate new findings and to construct knowledge on the bases of personal experiences of divorced men and women from Iranian in Sweden, as how they perceive their divorce after immigration and what does it tell about the prominent causes of divorce. The validity and reliability of the information obtained through interviewing was ensured through follow up questions, clarifications and summarizing made by the interviewer. Furthermore, using the previous literature, I

compared and complemented the data obtained from the interviews, thus ensuring the internal validity of the research. The interview guide assured the reliability of the obtained results by follow up and repeated questions, focusing the semi-structured interview on a set of specific questions directed to the defined group of informants. Besides the complexity of the topic of the present research, I think that by repeated interviewing with same questions, more or less, the same results might be obtained. Nevertheless, the qualitative studies might have different interpretations by other researchers.

However, considering the specificity of the personal experiences of the interviewees, it is difficult to generalize the obtained findings. But a comparative effort of results obtained from the present study with the previous research can provide space to generalize the findings of my research. According to Matt (2000), by generalizability one can generalize from a sample of observations to a universe of observations from which it was randomly sampled.

5.2.5 Advantages and disadvantages of the chosen methods

Some advantages of the semi-structured interviews are as follows:

- This type of interview allows respondents to answer more on their own way, comparing to structured interviews, but still provide a greater structure that guides and facilitates the data analysis made by the researcher (May, 2001);
- The questions are in order but the interviewer has the right to ask the respondent to elaborate on answers;
- Share many of the advantages of structured interviews;
- Plus interviewer can probe for more information;
- Adds depth and validity to research data.

Disadvantages:

- Loss of standardisation & comparability;
- Probes make each interview slightly different;
- More chance of interviewer bias than in structured interviews;
- Less quantitative data – less scientific;
- Sometimes it goes beyond the expected limits. For instance, the interviews that I conducted for the present study provided a lot of raw material with very little use for my research purpose, which made the transcription a time consuming work and created complications in analysis work.

5.2.6 Methods of data analysis

I used two methods for the analysis of the *semi-structured interview*: meaning condensation and meaning categorization. '***Meaning condensation*** is a synopsis of the meanings expressed by the interviewee, as well as a diminution of large interview texts into more succinct formulations' (Kvale, 1996:192). I condensed and ordered the translated and transcribed interviews, conducted with the informants from the Iranian immigrant group in Gothenburg, in order to make easy the analysis of the obtained data. ***Meaning categorization*** aims to code the interview into certain simple and clear

categories (Kvale, 1996). This method allowed me to place the factors defining the causes of divorces among the Iranian immigrant couples as separate themes, in order to be able to make comparisons between and within the interviewed individuals and make possible conclusions on the obtained data. In the study I have divided the sexes for the purpose of comparative analysis.

5.3.1 Ethical considerations

I realize that the subject for the current study has been complicated as well as sensitive. On my part as a researcher, I have done my level best to not to touch on any such issue that may affect the inner feeling of my informants for the present study, by any means. According to Gilbert (2001), “ethics is a matter of principled sensitivity to the rights of others. While truth is good, respect for human dignity is even better [...]”. Within a qualitative research, where the researcher is on his/her own accord, not only the study’s purpose must be put in evidence, but also its impact on the involved informants. For the present study, the following ethical considerations were assured:

1. *Informed consent* was ensured through the presentation of the research aims and expected results to all the interviewees who voluntarily participated in the process of study.
2. *Requirement of consent*: all the interviews were made through voluntary consent of subjects for participation in the study.
3. *Principle of confidentiality* – no information that might disclose the identity or any personal information that might affect the informants, was revealed in the current study. In order to facilitate the analysis and reporting of data, as well as respecting the confidentiality, I have given coded names to all respondents who participated in the interviews. These coded names are as follows: four divorced Iranian immigrant women code named as IW1, IW2, IW3, and IW4 aging 35-50; and two divorced Iranian immigrant men code named as IM1 and IM2, 40 and 45 year old (‘IW’ is short form for Iranian woman and ‘IM’ for Iranian man).
- 4 *Restriction of use* – the information, data and findings of the current study are used just for the academic purposes.

The results of the current study will be presented through the following chapter.

CHAPTER 6

THEORETICAL ANALYSIS OF THE IMPERICAL DATA

This chapter presents the results of the current study, using interviews, as empirical evidence. It will also discuss and describe, from a theoretical point of view, as how the ordinary women and men from Iran experience the power conflict and functioning of gender roles within the family context, and how do they perceive their separation after immigration in Sweden. Reasons to divorce or not to divorce appear to be associated to the meaning that individuals, whether knowingly or not, relate to marriage, their relationship, and the role of each gender within the couple. The results of this study identify a number of factors that could explain the changing notion of the immigrants' family and the conflict of interests within it. It also worth mentioning that there could be innumerable reasons for a divorce/separation, so the account of one particular case can not be held as a universal fact for all others. Therefore I have tried to understand and analyze the life accounts of the interviewees, concerning their experience after divorce, in the light of their own individual cases. However, the results obtained from previous studies facilitate the opportunity for the author to generalize the outcome of the present study as well. Therefore, on the bases of the empirical data obtained by current research, and results from earlier studies, a number of factors are identified that can explain the causes of increasing divorce rate among Iranian Immigrants in Sweden. I have classified these factors into separate themes which are: Iranian men loosing their previous family position; Education and Employment; The impact of socioeconomic factors on divorce risk; that will be explained bellow.

Besides, it needs to be clarified that divorce is a rather sensitive and complicated social issue, which certainly does affect the result of the study. The respondent for the current study most often tended to speak in general terms instead of describing their own life situation. Obtaining precise information about their personal experiences was a tough and tricky task for the author. However, the outstanding fact that was revealed through the interviews is that from all the six interviews I conducted, women have been the first to set forth a demand for divorce. Following are the theoretical analysis of the empirical data obtained by the present study, which is discussed as separate themes mentioned above:

6.1.1. Iranian men loosing their previous family position

The data, obtained from my respondents, show that men are rather in lose in terms of their power position in a family context. This fact is also in line with the observation made by previous studies (Darvishpour, 2002). Men seem to be more dependent on a relationship comparing to women. One of the men whom I interviewed was already into a new relationship while the other one had a tendency for a new relationship. Surprisingly, men are less in the favor of separation with their spouse; as well as, their expectation seemed to be less from a conjugal relationship compared to that of the

female interviewees. The interviewee code named as IM1, a 40 year old man who had a white collar job in Iran and now works as a cab driver in Gothenburg, is of the opinion that:

[...] divorce should always be the last resort. Quarrels and differences of opinion between husband and wife are a natural thing but it does not mean they hate each other. If divorce is an easy and usual thing in a society to happen, all minor quarrels and difference can end up in divorce and consequently can become a social problem. Such conditions reduce the hope for future and the attempts for better conjugal life and as a result both the spouses try to think of his/her own benefit so he/she suffer the least in case of separation. [...] my wife's expectations were very high, but before I could adjust with the new environment, she went far beyond... (IM1)

Although for many Iranian men family is an important part of life (Darvishpour, 2002), and they are willing to preserve it, but, as the results of my study show (which may not apply to all cases), they fail to do so. The reason for such failure could be traced in the fact that they want to preserve their family in the frame of the old 'patriarchal' values. It means they are not completely ready to submit to the prevailing notions of the new society they have come to. I think, if men could adjust to a more equal relationships exhibiting flexibility in terms of 'exchange' and 'cooperation', they would be capable of preserving their conjugal relationship. Previous research results show that women with equal relationship with men are more satisfied (ibid). But doing so does not seem to be an easy task. Most of the men, especially from the Islamic countries, perceive their behaviors as an inseparable part of their 'identity'.

Only by coming to Sweden we can not become Swedish over a night. Our response towards certain behaviors within the social life area is indeed a conscious or may be unconscious attempt towards preserving our identity. We have our own values. Our identity is interrelated with our social behavior. Swedish people would not consider us as Swedes even after our third generation and adoption of their kind of behaviors in regard to certain matters. There might be assumption that Iranian women are emancipating in the societies of the host countries, but in reality they liberate from one situation only to get trapped in another and more complicated one (IM1).

From the results of the previous research on similar topic (Darvishpour, 2002) and through my investigation, I found that Iranian men are not very comfortable seeking help from family counselor, which is more common among Swedish people in terms of finding a way for solution of their family problems. Many men fear that if they ask for help from a family counselor, they will be forced into a solution that they consider

being Swedish. Therefore, most often it is the immigrant's own network – i.e. relatives and friends – that is the most significant source of help and support (Ibid). From a theoretical perspective it can be seen as a power relation problem. After couples come to Sweden they find themselves spontaneously in an equal situation and with almost equal opportunities. Each one is as new, in terms of access to social resources, as the other. This very fact by itself reduces the gap between power resources and brings it to a rather equal level. The one who is ahead in the process of integration in the new society (i.e. learning, gaining (more) education and securing a gainful employment) wins the race. As the interviewee code named as IM2, a 45 year old man who was divorce 5 years ago, puts it:

My wife left shortly after we came to Sweden. I noticed the first changes in her after she started going to '*SFI*' (Swedish for foreigners). Family matters were usually discussed there and she would come with new ideas time and again; ideas which were not [till that time] very common in our family. She started behaving like a rival or a business partner; trying to confirm her share in everything. I was always trying to remain calm because I wanted our marriage to survive, at least for the sake of our children; but then I found that she never loved me (IM2).

It could be argued that waged work tell us a lot about women's emancipation from an unequal gender oriented relationship; as well as about the causes of separations among Iranian immigrants. Dependence on the spouse's financial resource holds an individual back from free choice. Peltonen (Darvishpour, 2002) maintains that the 'family crisis must be understood as the crises of patriarchy, because it is the man's position that is tottering'. The dual earner systems provides basis for a crack in the patriarchal position of the male breadwinner and brings his patriarchal oriented image under question.

6.1.2. Education and employment: as a factor of increasing power resources

Two important power resources that affect family relationship are education and professional employment. Indeed, education and employment are amongst the important aspects of life. Many Iranians who have fled abroad and who have come to Sweden, are highly educated with middle-class and urban backgrounds (Bäckman, 1989) and many have gained education after migration. Almost in the cases of all my interviewees (in particular the women), education and waged work has played a vital role in terms of their decision about divorce and maintenance of their socioeconomic situation afterwards. The evidence reveals the education and waged employment has been a means for establishing and maintaining self sufficiency for better social conditions and mobility in the lives of individuals. It also worth mentioning that

higher education has often been the reason for temporary migration from Iran in order to gain qualifications which help secure some kind of professional or white collar job (Mark & Shahram 1997). Individuals who acquire either or both – education and employment – are autonomous and hold a comparatively superior position in household set up. Education and a permanent job provides an individual with wider outlook regarding their social life and the world around; as well as, it provides a rather sustainable income in the long run. Describing the importance and the connection between the above mentioned factors in her life, my interviewee code named as IW1, a 58 year old woman, who has been residing for 20 years in Sweden and had around 40 years of married life, divorced 3 years ago and who presently works as assistant at the old age house, states in the following manner:

I hold a bachelor degree in Arts, from Iran and according to me every person has the right of education; if you are educated you gain respect, automatically. Education is an important power that affects everyone including family. I think because of my education I have influenced the people in my network. Because of my previous education, I could easily learn Swedish language which is the main obstacle on the way towards social integration. It also helped me securing a job, much easier. As far as I know, in our country [Iran] women are very interested in education. You must be aware that only in Sweden there are lots of doctors, engineers, and teachers etc. who are from the Iranian background. I do not think that without education and my job, I would have managed a life as a single (IW1).

Iranians in Sweden are among the largest immigrant groups with higher education, who have been educated even before moving to Sweden (Darvishpour, 2002). Moreover, the education level of women has increased which has made them less dependent on their husband's financial resources. Many of my informants in this study find themselves over qualified for the job they have right now. The factor of education plays a significant role in the process of an individual's emancipation in a new country. On the other side, in Iran men enjoy a prevailing power position that is mainly based on their role as the sole breadwinner of the family. The latter fact can explain the *silence* maintaining and adjustment of women in an undesirable conjugal relationship before their migration. Studies show that the number of educated Iranian women is in a stage of constant increase (Harison F. BBC Persian, www.bbcpersian.com). But, as we may read in the statement of my other interviewee, in spite of women having higher education they are expected to take care of only household matter in Iran, and in the following case, even in Sweden (by their husband). From a theoretical perspective, the reason for latter behavior can be traced in the distribution of household task on the bases of gender division. Gender role is seen as descending from traditional patriarchal notion, where the roles of men and women are considered as different and separate. But in contrast the nontraditional gender roles are characterized by flexibility or role sharing between men and women.

As alluded above, in Swedish society there is a tendency towards a system that is based more on gender equality. But women find themselves in a rather different situation in Iran, concerning the gender role. IW2, working as an assistant at dental clinic, narrates that:

In Iranian society mostly men are the breadwinners for a household, and women are at home taking care of children. Although I was educated in Iran also, but there I was expected to look after only the household affairs, with very little cooperation from my husband. I had rather a passive role in our conjugal life. I was feeling that gradually I am loosing my dignity and self respect. My husband was the main breadwinner and so he had a bigger share in decision making in almost all areas of our life. Once my [first] husband purchased a house in Tehran and did not even asked my opinion, because he thought that it is his own money and he would spend it the way he likes. In Iran the woman's view does not hold big importance and so was in my case. [...] When we came to Sweden, the first word I learned was 'divorce'. But I was not ready for it yet. I only focused on my studies and respectively secured a job and only then filed a divorce application.

On the bases of the above statement one can argue that women lack power resources in Iran or are rather frustrated with the 'patriarchal' set up of the society. When they move to the western countries, especially to Sweden, they find that they can afford the possible consequence of a separation and so they file a divorce as an act of protest against the power relation. Almost all the interviewees, men and women, agreed the fact that education has helped the women to decide by their own accord.

6.1.3. The impact of socioeconomic factors on divorce risk

Family financial circumstances turn out to be a powerful predictor of marital crisis. Families that are in great social and economic problems are at high risk of separation. According to the statistics, immigrants are often unemployed and have lower income, and the majority of those who come from the developing countries are refugees (Statistiska centralbyran, 1998:66-74). Employment rate is low among immigrants from countries with refugee migration. Some years back, employment intensity (i.e. the portion of employed people show in percentage) among Iranians in the age group 20-64 year was 32% (36% for men, 27% for women), while the corresponding numbers for persons born in Sweden and Finland were 76 and 65% respectively (ibid). The length of stay in Sweden also effect the immigrants' social and economic conditions and as such there family relations as well. Compared to 92% Fins and 58% Turks who have lived in Sweden for more than ten years, up till 1998, the portion of Iranian immigrants is 35%. (cited in Darvishpour, 2002). Beside, a comparative opinion survey shows that among the other groups, the stress of alienation is greatest among the Iranians. They find themselves as discriminated against and are least satisfied with their economic situation compared to others.

IW3, a 35 year old woman says:

My share of contribution in the household expenditure was more than my ex-husband. But this was not the main cause for our conflicts. I wanted him to contribute in equally in other responsibilities of the household, such as taking care of children, etc... (IW3).

It indicates that among immigrant families with children, in which the woman has a gainful income than man, the risk of divorce is higher than in families in which the man has an equal or higher income. A bigger portion of Iranian immigrants in Sweden are reported as blue collar workers (Statistiska centralbyran, 1998:66-74). In my opinion, this can be explained from class perspective angle. From a class division perspective the situation of women, thereby, can be interpreted as under triple oppression: as women, as immigrants, and as workers. According to Alund a tough work environment often leads to psychological and physical strain, which influences the immigrant woman in her home environment and lead to reaction (Alund, 1991). As such, it could be argued that socioeconomic situation has great impact on the factors of divorce risk in various area of social life.

6.2.1. Discussion:

Is divorce considered a problem or an opportunity?

If the question that whether divorce is a problem or an opportunity is asked in the context of Iranian society, there is certainly one answer – a problem – especially in the case of divorced women (which is described above). However, the state and the dominant religious law, provide opportunities to divorce – which is more limited for women – but yet the general opinion in society is not much in the favor of women. It is therefore, women often try to maintain ‘silence’ and remain within the marriage lock. In the western world, where Sweden is my focus in the context of the current study, the society is more flexible in terms of considering a divorced/separated woman. However divorce might have been a solution for certain problem in domestic life, but according to the findings of my study it is more of a problem for a women in the long run. As quoted above (in “theoretical perspectives chapter”), immigrant women are three times subordinated: as women, as workers and as immigrants, also, the three dimensions of subordination are not separate aspects in immigrant women’s existence (Kosack, G. 1976:373). One of the interviewees whom I have given a code name as “IW2”, is a 50 years old woman, living in Sweden for more than 14 year and who has been divorced twice in Sweden, once from the marriage in Iran and the second from the marriage in Sweden (both with Iranian men). Besides being a professional hair dresser, she is currently working in a dental clinic as an assistant. Experiencing the life after two divorces, in Gothenburg city, she narrates the situation of her life in the following manner:

Divorce is not a good thing. It is a loss not an achievement. I always suggest my friends that, if you are unhappy with your married life and

yet can adjust with it somehow then do it, do not ask for separation. You become very alone. Many difficulties come one after another after divorce. For us, the women from Asia, it is more difficult; because the outside works [economic...] have always been the husband's responsibility. When you become alone there are many things to do during the day. Shopping, doing the paper work which is very much in Sweden, women really get tired with all hard work, because they are weak even by nature. I am not in favor of divorce. For us foreigners it is difficult, if we also do not have any one from the family who tell us that what has been done is good or bad, it is really difficult. Most of the times I cry out loud and I talk to God, I ask Him why am I in such a miserable situation. Praying to God only makes me relaxed. I am a person who loves to be surrounded by a family, a husband, children and family members. I still think that why did I end up in such a circumstances that resulted in divorce? But I fought for 13 years to save my married life [the second marriage] but it did not help... (IW2)

I think, individuals who migrate to the western countries, bring along a set of predominant ideas in terms of gender divisions regarding the 'share of responsibilities', between men and women. The patriarchal idea of woman as a "weaker human being" is still a dominant factor, even among the immigrant women. In this case, "access to social resource" – i.e. gainful employment and education... – can not tell the whole story about the reasons risk factors for divorce, mainly because it lacks emotional support. Of course, human beings can not be measured only by material devices. But could emotional support (i.e. love) be a strong factor to prevent a possible divorce between spouses? May be yes, but not in all occasions. It is rather a question of dissatisfaction between couples, emanating from believes in different sets of values and ideas that provide ground for open conflicts, which at their extreme ends in divorce. According to Darvishpour (2002), the more often the spouses have different ideas and both try to act proceeding from their opinion, the more often open conflicts occur.

My husband was a conservative person. He always wanted me to concentrate on him. Whenever I received some guests at home, he wanted me to ignore them, so that they go back soon. I was very uncomfortable with this kind of behavior by him. Soon when guests were gone, he would create a scene and blame me for my behavior in front of the guests. He would also restrict my out goings as well. Above all he would lie on various occasions [...] He was a miser. He would never let me spend his money on things which I selected for home or for myself, even though he was rich enough... It was my daughter [from the previous marriage] who supported me most to leave my husband (IW2).

In terms of power relations, as quoted above, if the difference in power resources between two actors is great, the likelihood of conflicts of interest between them is therefore small, because conflicts of interest between them would develop into open conflicts (Korpi, 1987:99). But 'dissatisfaction' alone can not change the situation unless there is capacity to afford to challenge the power relation. This capacity can be described in terms of having access to more than one alternative – i.e. economic resources, education and social support etc.

However, in one interpretation, one can say that divorce provides a wider space, at least for women, in terms of decision making regarding the choices of setting their social life. But divorce in the case of working class or immigrant women can not be considered as 'opportunity'; however it could be other way round in the case of women with a higher constant income. According to Daly M. (et al, 2003:153), 'economic self-sufficiency is not the reality for the majority of women and poverty is an ever present risk when women head households on their own'. As such, this explanation deny the observation made by Darvishpour, where he builds his idea of 'divorce as an opportunity' on the bases of employment as financial independency.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The aim of this study was to describe and analyze the causes of divorce among Iranian immigrants in Sweden, from their own perspective. The overall aim was to provide guidelines for further studies in the concerned area of social life; as well as to identify and elaborate the risk factors affecting the social life set-up of a particular community of immigrants living in Sweden. The study also aimed to describe the family structure and social relations in Iran and Sweden.

Through the qualitative research, based on perspectives of women and men from Iran in Sweden about their divorce, I identified three factors that can possibly explain the causes responsible for divorces and separation among Iranian spouses residing in Sweden. The factors were categorized as: Iranian men losing their previous family position; Education and Employment; The impact of socioeconomic factors on divorce risk, which responded to the research questions to a far great extent. Besides, the study described the family structure and social relations in Iran and Sweden. Furthermore, it can briefly be concluded that:

Waged work explains the Iranian immigrant women's emancipation from an unequal gender oriented relationship; as well as about the causes of separations among Iranian immigrant families. Dependence on the spouse's financial resource holds an individual back from free choice. The later fact has opened way to the crises of patriarchy, because man's position is tottering. The Swedish dual earner systems has provided basis for a crack in the patriarchal position of the male breadwinner and has brought his patriarchal oriented image under question. Moreover, the education level of women has increased which has made them less dependent on their husband's financial resources. Many of my participants in this study consider themselves over qualified for the job they have right now. The factor of education plays a significant role in the process of immigrants' integration process in the socioeconomic sphere which has direct impacts on their family situation. Divorce can be perceived as an opportunity in the initial phase; but in the long run it has led to poverty and psychological stress both among men and women.

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APPENDIX 1

Interview Guide

Based on *semi-structured interview* method
for research on divorce among Iranian immigrant families in Sweden

Background question:

Name:

Age:

Gender:

Number of children:

Education:

Job status:

Married:

Divorced:

Themes:

Gender role;

Education and employment;

Differences in opinion concerning life values;

Socioeconomic condition.

Main questions:

Q. 1. What do you think of a marriage?

Q. 2. On what reasons did you get married?

Q. 3. How would you consider your marriage?

Q. 4. How would you define your former husband/wife?

Q. 5. Who was the sole bread winner?

Q. 6. How were the household responsibilities shared between you and your spouse?

Q. 7. What changes did you wish to see in your spouse?

Q. 8. What is your definition of a good wife or a good husband?

Q. 9. Was your marriage a self-willing decision or your relatives arranged it?

Q. 10. On what issue(s) did you have problems with your spouse?

Q. 11. What did your spouse value in life as well what did you value?

Q. 12. On what reasons did you get separated from your spouse?

Q. 13. How do you experience the life after divorce?

Q. 14. How do you consider a divorce? A problem or an opportunity?

Q. 15. Did your family conflicts emerge after your migration or was it an extension of the ones back in Iran?

Q. 16. What caused your dissatisfaction?

Q. 17. What were your and your spouse's goals in life?

Q. 18. For how long did you want to divorce your spouse?

Q. 19. Who initiated the idea of divorce between you and your former husband/wife?

Q. 20. After migration, what changes did you sense concerning your family relations?

Q. 22. Were there any differences between the level of Employment and education of you and your spouse?

Q. 23. Was there any difference in the amount of income of you and your spouse?

Q. 24. Did your financial condition affect your conjugal life set up?

APPENDIX 2

Informed consent

The following is a presentation of how I will use the data collected in the interview.

The research project is a part of my education in the International Masters program in Social Work at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. In order to insure that my project meets the ethical requirements for good research I promise to adhere to the following principles:

- Interviewees in the project will be given information about the purpose of the project.
- Interviewees have the right to decide whether he or she will participate in the project, even after the interview has been concluded.
- The collected data will be handled confidentially and will be kept in such a way that no unauthorized person can view or access it.

The interview will be recorded as this makes it easier for me to document what is said during the interview and also helps me in the continuing work with the project. In my analyze some data may be changed so that no interviewee will be recognized. After finishing the project the data will be destroyed. The data I collect will only be used in this project.

You have the right to decline answering any questions, or terminate the interview without giving an explanation.

You are welcome to contact me or my supervisor, in case you have any questions (e-mail addresses below).

Student:

Wida Akbari, e-mail: worashka@yahoo.co.in

Supervisor:

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