

Radio Divorcees: A Unique Voice for Divorcee Women in Egypt

By Fazzur Rahman

In general Islamic parlance, divorce between the couple is permitted as a last resort if it has become almost impossible for the two to stray in a marital bond because of the growing difference in day-to-day life and both are experiencing a complete absence of mercy, compassion or love in their usual interaction.

Over the years there has been rampant rise in the case of divorce among the Arabs and there are various reasons that could be attributed to it. Among many, the most visible reason behind the phenomenon is increasing depravity and perversion among the partners, extra marital affair among the couples. What has further given impetus to these malpractices is the pathetic economic condition in the family, marital boredom, intellectual incapability, losing faith in each other religion and pursuit of modern western style and forcing their partners to veil or unveil without caring about the religious, cultural and ethical heritage to which they belong.

What is more surprising is that number of petition seeking divorce is larger among wives rather than husbands. According to a statistic, 56 % are women who first approach the court to get rid of their husbands while 44% are male who rush for separation. In the Arab Gulf countries the incident of giving divorce and seeking divorce is on the rise and couple is preferring a separated life rather than a stressful one. In Kuwait alone, only in 2017 around 60 % of marriage ended in divorce. Though both the partners passes through the same procedure while seeking the divorce but social and cultural burden are more on the female and they are more stigmatized and they are the real sufferer and are bound to live same traumatic life even after coming out of their marriage

When it comes to Egypt, the rise in the case of divorce is alarming despite its all claim of being a torch bearer of Arab and Islamic civilization. In the country of around 100 million, around 40 % of the marriage ends in separation within the first five years of the marriage. This rise and its afar effects did not go unnoticed within the political class and recently President El-Sisi of Egypt called to enhance the bureaucratic obstacles to the permission of divorces. The number of divorcee women in Egypt is around two and half million and every six minute, one couple is separated or divorced and it is believed that in Egypt the separation rates are the highest among all the Arab countries. Despite the stigma attached to it, , more and more women file lawsuit to obtain the divorce.

Out of every 100 marriages in Egypt 33 ends in divorce as reported by the Central Agency of Public Mobilization and Statistics. Most of the divorces take place between those couples who are between the ages of 20 and 34 and this practice is more prevalent with 52.7 % in urban areas while the country side constitutes the 47.3% of total divorce cases. However in the country, the age of marriage is primarily governed by varying cultural diversity rather than by any fixed religious category.

Farha was only 19 with an eleven month daughter when she was divorced and now she has no place to go. Today she cannot talk to a male colleague because many think that it would be her plot to trap once to enter into a relationship. Similarly an Egyptian wife traveled to the US but to

deliver her first baby came back to Egypt and soon she received divorce paper and the husband refused to recognize his child as well. One can measure the insecurity of a divorcee woman in Egypt in the light of a UN 2013 report, which claims that 47 % of divorcee women are reportedly attacked in public.

Many women came forwards to fight the disgrace and shame that Egyptian women are forced to go through after their divorce. But the most astonishing and amazing job is being done in this field by the Radio Divorcee which has a very unique history of its own.

Mahasin Saberah, 39, a master in Islamic studies from Indonesia and a divorcee herself with a son was exposed to marriage, childbearing and separation experiences. She had to fight a long battle to get the custody of her ten year old son and in that process, she came across many similar cases and this is what motivated her to overcome the problem not for herself alone but for other ill-fated women too. She pledged to convey the voice of divorced women to society and correct misconceptions about those women who are leading a life of divorcee. Her basic motive was to confront the social stigma associated with the divorce and to fight the ideal why only women had to face the disgrace for an act where two parties are involved.

Mahasin Saberah as a divorcee mother started an internet radio service, Radio Divorcee, in 2018 in the governorate of Ash Sharqia in northern Egypt. Radio Divorcee is non-profitable chartable network and primarily devoted to raise and discuss the issue of divorcee women in the country and offer counseling and advice to those who face this stigma of being divorcee in the Egyptian society. She first started a blog(I want to get divorce) in 2010 highlighting the suffering of a divorcée and her message in the blogs as when there was no peace in marital life, then women are welcome to most hated of the lawful. Later she bought a server for the website, registered it in the name of the radio station, and began broadcasting electronically, through the famous (Live Stream) website, One day she shared the idea of launching a radio station for the same purpose and it was welcomed and within months she has 8000 followers. Gradually the blog expanded into a full-fledged radio program which in the early days was being run from an internet café .The primary goal of MS. Mahasin, as a divorced mother, was to advise on the legal procedures for divorce and to raise awareness about the rights of separated women and acquainting them with potential services government provides them. The program of Radio Divorcee also aimed at correcting the negative image of divorced women and supporting them psychologically. It also offers service of experts and psychiatrist to overcome the crisis and involve them in some projects to engage them.

In an interview, Mahasin Saberah tells that she resorted to this novel idea to respond to the rumors and the deplorable looks of the woman after her divorce, as the divorced woman is seen as the evil or bad party, and not the man who took that step.

Today the listeners of the Radio Divorcee are not only confined to Egypt alone but it has started attracting listeners from across the continent and females from Saudi Arabia, UAE, Morocco, Lebanon Sudan, North America and Italy and Spain share their tragedy and trauma without shame or fear of disapproval of the community. An Italian woman, Daniela, was so inspired by the Radio Divorcee that she started her own electronic radio program entitled "Jellyfish". Similar initiative was taken in country as far away as Mexico. Mahasin Saberah also tells that many international media like "CNN", and "The Daily Telegraph" wrote about her initiative. As far as

the audience of the Radio Divorces' in Egypt is concerned, they mostly belongs to urban-based middle class because the phenomenon of divorce is more prevalent among the middle and higher middle class in the metros . Meanwhile the radio is not acceptable among traditional elders and conservative section of the society as they mainly view it as a source of abetting the cases of divorces and therefore a mean of family destruction.

The Radio can be seen as a major success because when she started the radio, there were only 30-50 persons who had shown enthusiasm and volunteered to work for the program. One of the early associates of Mahasin Saberah, Raymond, tells that he joined the program for the sake of children who are the real victims of separation between parents. The author of the program refused the funding from foreign countries due to the sensitivity of the situation as many may claim that it is a foreign plot to corrupt the Egyptian family.

Mahasin Saber says: Her Radio is trying to end marital problems between the wife and husband, in addition to rebuilding the divorced woman psychologically and socially, and helping her to communicate with people. Once started off, the objective of the service has diversified and today it has become a family radio, and also works as guidebook for mothers about how to raise their sons and daughters and it even offers suggestions to unmarried women about how to choose their life partners.

Some of the most popular program aired on this service is "You Misunderstood Us and "Before You Say This, I want Divorce" which aims to educate the female members before they opt for drastic step of seeking the divorce. Program like Diary of Divorcee and "Oh you understand the mistake oh Hanna" are aimed at discussing the pressures that the divorcee woman is exposed to from those around her. She says that divorce itself is not an abnormal act but it is the society which only shames the women and takes her all rights as a normal human being.

Ms. Laila 27 tells that this electronic radio service "...makes us express which was unthinkable before and we can express what we are suffering without any fear and apprehension".

The program has worked as a pressure tool and a law has been passed to enable women also to seek the divorce. In Egypt there has been constant rise of 10 % in divorce case since 2014. Radio Divorcee provides woman a platform through which such women can say: "I am not bad, and my divorce experience was in front of me as a matter of necessity and not optional." The radio service was subjected to malicious campaign by state institution and other civil society members and they accused it of encouraging the divorce in the society.

Some men see the experience of "Radio Divorce" as an invitation to women to get divorce and to enhance their rebellion against men, and according to them, such women's movements reinforce a "culture of ruined homes".Ms. Mahasinis ready to accept all criticism leveled against the radio because the change it is seeking to achieve does not happen overnight.