



A young Saudi couple walk past a clothes shop at a local mall in Riyadh on August 18, 2012.

The Growing Problem of Divorce for Young Saudi Men

by *Mark C. Thompson*

The Saudi Ministry of Justice 2016 statistics for divorce show some 157,000 marriages and 46,000 divorces, suggesting that almost 30 percent of couples end up separating.¹ Most divorces in Saudi Arabia—about 60 percent—occur early in the marriage, after the couple is exposed to “real life.”² Increased social media usage is also an enabler, with 20 percent of divorces happening as a result of extramarital affairs or misunderstandings facilitated through the exchange of messages and photos on popular applications such as WhatsApp and Snapchat.³ But many young men—according to those surveyed for this article—still argue that the culture surrounding arranged marriages is the largest factor ultimately exacerbating the growing problem of divorce.

The majority of young men report acquiescing to the traditional way of finding a wife, even though among friends they frequently discuss the possibility of making a “love match.” Respect for parents and societal norms usually supersede personal preferences when it comes to choosing a bride. For this reason, young men across Saudi Arabia argue forcefully that a space for communication must be made available during the engagement period so the relationship can be ended if the couple is incompatible.⁴ Divorce does not occur because of arranged marriages per se, they argue, but because of the lack of knowledge about a prospective partner.⁵ The rising divorce rate seen across Saudi Arabia has in turn forced many families

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to be more flexible when it comes to courtship—providing adequate space for the couple to get to know each other during the engagement period.

False expectations

Another significant problem is that expectations of the future marriage partner (on both sides) are often wildly inflated. As far back as 2000, the Saudi author Dr. Mai Yamani observed that a symptom of these changing expectations was the rising divorce rate.⁶ A young woman said that divorces are increasing not only due to a lack of communication and understanding between the two genders, but also because their expectations are totally different and frequently unrealistic.⁷ One young man said it is common that prospective brides expect “knights of their dreams,” while grooms think their brides are going to bring back “the days of their spoiled childhoods.”⁸ These unrealistic expectations are exacerbated by representations of gender roles on social media, particularly the “ideal” partners that celebrities project on Snapchat and Instagram.⁹ Those interviewed said that judging an individual by how he/she looks on social media is extremely negative, but they also concede it is both highly addictive and an extremely common practice among young Saudis.

These “idealized” gender roles become evident when encountering mixed groups of young Saudis, with men often emulating celebrities to appear ultra-masculine and women ultra-feminine.¹⁰ According to many young men—including some who are newly married—this typically occurs during the engagement period and early stages of marriage.¹¹ When real life does not match their imaginary ideals, the novelty of being a husband wanes. Some young men therefore return to their bachelor lifestyles, preferring to spend time with their friends at the *istiraha* (“relaxation spot”)—often causing huge marital strain and divorce.¹²

In addition to official divorces, many married Saudis also experience a “silent divorce”—couples who stay together in name only due to social necessity and fear of public shame. Mohammad bin Ali Al Radi, director general of Mawadah Charitable Society, describes hidden divorce as a major problem threatening the fabric of Saudi society.¹³ There are likely many broken marriages that go unreported because of conservative cultural norms. Young Saudi men are all too aware of the extent of these dissolved or unhappy marriages because if they don’t directly experience it themselves, they certainly have or will see it happen to many of their friends.

The fact that relatively little in the way of marriage counselling is available in Saudi Arabia makes it harder to solve relationship troubles as they arise. There are few services available—even in major cities like Riyadh—and many people do not consider counselling a real option. If it does take place, it is usually carried out by an untrained family member. Although counselling is beneficial and can facilitate happier relationships, Saudis are extremely private people and reluctant to solicit outside help.¹⁴ Furthermore, the cost and quality of existing services are also issues—most reputable counsellors are only available at private sector facilities that charge around 500 Saudi riyals (\$133) a session.

The high costs of divorce

When divorces do happen, the high cost of getting married—often around 300,000 Saudi Riyals (\$80,000)—can lead to financial hardship or ruin, especially for those who do not come from wealthy backgrounds.¹⁵ Young men across Saudi Arabia say that it was cheaper to get married in the past, as nowadays everyone expects a “luxury” marriage. If a young man is lucky, he will have a wealthy father who will provide him

with a sumptuous wedding and all the necessities for married life. Indeed, societal pressure linked to socio-tribal traditions mean that if a father does not splash out a great deal of money on a large wedding the community will say he is not “man enough”—a particular problem for those who come from an influential tribe and family.

But many of these costs are in fact not traditional nor do they have any historical roots—they are new consumer habits that have become costly socio-cultural norms. In response, some young men hesitate or even question the need to get married out of fear of acquiring too much debt in case the marriage ends in divorce. Beyond the wedding itself, some young men cannot cope with the financial costs of being a newly-wed couple, particularly if they live beyond their means.¹⁶

Financial costs aside, many young men acknowledge that while divorce is bad for them, it is usually more problematic for women. Conservative gender norms make it more difficult for a woman to get remarried—when divorce occurs, it is usually the woman’s reputation that is damaged.¹⁷ Young men therefore contend that only when individual families and the wider society become more “open-minded” when considering the practice of marriage can the divorce rate be reduced.¹⁸

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¹ Katie Beiter, “Divorce Rates Skyrocket in Saudi Arabia,” *The Media Line*, September 28, 2016, www.themedialine.org/women/divorce-rates-skyrocket-saudi-arabia.

² This article is based on fieldwork conducted in Saudi Arabia. The most important component of this fieldwork comprised approximately forty-five focus groups convened at multiple locations across the kingdom between October 2016 and June 2017, with each group consisting of between three to eight members. For the most part, the group participants were young Saudi men aged from 18 to 26.

³ P.K. Abdul Ghafour, “Saudi divorce rate high: The ‘message’ is clear — stop abusing social media,” *Arab News*, May 9, 2015, www.arabnews.com/saudi-arabia/news/744426. This concern is supported by Princess Sarah bint Musaed, chairperson of the Board of Directors of Mawadah Charitable Organization, who reveals that 60 percent of divorces occur in the first year of marriage.

⁴ Views expressed by multiple focus groups across Saudi Arabia between 2016-2017.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Mai Yamani, *Changed Identities: The Challenge of the New Generation in Saudi Arabia* (London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2000), 111.

⁷ Focus group with three females in Riyadh, May 4, 2017.

⁸ Riyadh focus group, February 2017.

⁹ See, for example: Anon, “Turkish soap ‘Noor’ takes Arab world by storm,” *Al Arabiya*, August 25, 2008, <https://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2008/08/25/55419.html>.

¹⁰ Views expressed by multiple focus groups across Saudi Arabia between 2016-2017.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Riyadh focus group, April 2017.

¹³ Anon, “Hidden divorces’ threaten fabric of Saudi society,” *Arab News*, July 23, 2016, <http://www.arabnews.com/node/958346/saudi-arabia>.

¹⁴ Riyadh focus group, May 2017.

¹⁵ Safwa focus group, January 2017.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Riyadh focus group, February 2017.

¹⁸ Views expressed by multiple focus groups across Saudi Arabia between 2016-2017.