

Marriage, another Covid-19 casualty - The pandemic, financial instability, lack of family values can strain a marriage

PETALING JAYA: The pandemic has had a mixed impact on relationships, as some couples have found that spending more time together has strengthened their bond. In contrast, others realised they were incompatible and decided to part ways.

These trends are reflected in the statistics on marriages and divorces in Malaysia, with Muslim marriages increasing and divorces decreasing, while non-Muslim marriages are reducing and divorces are increasing.

According to the **Department of Statistics Malaysia**, overall marriages increased by 15.4% in 2021, while divorces decreased by 7.1%.

Among them, Muslim marriages increased by 21%, while divorce decreased by 16.4%.

However, it was not so rosy for non-Muslims, as non-Muslim marriages dropped by 4.7%, and divorce increased by 30.4%.

It is important to note that the pandemic has been a difficult and stressful time for many people, which can strain relationships. It is also possible that the changes in marriage and divorce rates are influenced by economic instability, job loss and other pandemic-related stressors.

For those experiencing relationship difficulties during the pandemic, seeking support from a trusted counsellor or therapist may be helpful.

Additionally, couples can work to strengthen their relationship by communicating openly, setting boundaries and finding ways to prioritise their relationship despite the challenges posed by the pandemic.

The Kuala Lumpur & Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall (KLSCAH) vice-president Ng Geok Chee said the legal advice and counselling centre under the KLSCAH receives more than 30 cases of women seeking a divorce every month, with more than 50% of them seeking a divorce due to financial problems in the family.

She shed light on various factors contributing to women's divorce in Malaysia. Financial problems continue to be a significant cause of divorce, particularly among women between 30 and 40.

"It is encouraging to hear that the number of women seeking divorce due to domestic violence has decreased and that women are becoming less ashamed of their failed marriages," she said.

She said the number of women seeking divorce due to domestic violence decreased by at least 50% in recent years.

She explains that educated women, who are financially independent and promote gender equality, are more likely to divorce when their relationship flounders due to either money or violence.

In the cases handled, she found that women between 30 and 40 do not dither and will divorce quickly.

Furthermore, financially independent women in their 50s through 70s choose to divorce when faced with their husbands' failings and the mother gaining the support of their children increasing in divorce cases can also be attributed to changing attitudes toward gender roles and societal family values.

Ng pointed out three factors for women initiating divorce based on an analysis of recent counselling cases handled by the centre.

First, the social phenomenon of male superiority over women is gradually changing, and women no longer feel ashamed to face their families and friends after divorce.

Second, social equality for men and women is being elevated. When women are encouraged to enter the workforce, their mindset gradually changes, and the education and raising of kids becomes a joint responsibility of the couple, not just the mother.

Third, the increase in divorce cases is due to a lack of a strong sense of family values in society.

She suggests that premarital counselling could be valuable in helping couples prepare for a long and healthy marriage.

This type of counselling allows individuals to consider and communicate their thoughts about various topics that commonly arise in marriage.

Meanwhile, she said the pandemic has also contributed to divorce cases, mainly when couples are separated due to travel restrictions.

"Husbands or wives who cannot return to their home countries or are locked down in other locations may find it difficult to maintain their marriage, leading to divorce," she said.

One of those whose marriage was impacted by the pandemic is Brian Lee, 34, an e-hailing driver.

He was married for five years but his wife divorced him last year because he had lost his job and the family's financial situation had worsened.

"Because I couldn't meet her needs, she chose to end the marriage. She felt she had no future security.

"All I could do was respect her decision.

"After losing my job, I chose to work as an ehailing driver; at the very least, this job could sustain my life," he said.

He claims that while he was unemployed, he and his wife fought over the fact that their household income was decreasing, and she became concerned about the future.

"We constantly fought over small matters, and life became unpleasant, so we divorced."

But the pandemic isn't the only reason why some marriages fail. Mandy, 30, is a doctor who was married for four years. She divorced her husband last year because of a difference in opinion.

She and her husband, both doctors, had been together for more than seven years and married in 2019.

They spent even less time together due to their profession.

She claims she returns home while her husband is still on duty and that there is conflict in the marriage even though the two are not under financial duress.

“Many of my husband’s habits became suddenly unacceptable to me, and we drifted apart.

“Our living pattern became even more erratic during the pandemic, with little time to see each other and no communication at home.

“I returned to my mother’s house, and we decided to divorce last year,” she said.

<https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2023/04/08/marriage-another-covid-19-casualty>