



Exploring the Lived Experiences of Psychosocial Trauma Among Muslim Children of Divorced Parents in Indonesia

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Article Info

Article history:

Received 29-03-2025

Revised 09-05-2025

Accepted 17-05-2025

Keyword:

Phenomenology; Psychosocial trauma; Lived experience; Muslim children; Divorce; Islamic family law; Indonesia

ABSTRACT

Divorce affects family structure and child development, especially in Muslim communities governed by Islamic family law. Although Islamic legal principles prioritize child welfare, few studies have focused on how children actually feel and understand the emotional effects of their parents' divorce. This study asks: How do Muslim children experience psychosocial trauma after their parents separate? Using a descriptive phenomenological approach, this research explores the lived experiences of children of divorced parents in Indonesia to understand their emotional, spiritual, and social responses. Data were collected between March and May 2024 through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with eight participants aged 12 to 17, and analyzed using thematic analysis based on core phenomenological steps. The findings reveal four main themes: broken sense of family, emotional distress, self-blame, and lack of support from institutions—all pointing to a gap between legal processes and children's emotional needs. These results call for more child-focused practices in Islamic family law and emphasize the importance of including children's perspectives in divorce decisions. This study received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of [Name of Institution, if applicable], under approval number [insert number]. It offers a culturally grounded understanding of trauma after divorce and encourages future research to support more inclusive legal approaches.



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INTRODUCTION

Divorce is a complex social phenomenon that disrupts family structure and dynamics. It has far-reaching effects, especially on children—often the most vulnerable members of the family. In Islamic family law, divorce is legally allowed but socially sensitive, often leading to emotional, spiritual, and psychological impacts. The combination of religious norms, legal rules, and cultural expectations shapes how children experience and make sense of parental separation.

In Muslim societies, divorce involves not only legal procedures but also personal and communal challenges. Children commonly face changes in caregiving, financial instability, and damaged relationships with one or both parents. These experiences are compounded by social stigma and institutional responses that may overlook children's emotional needs. Although Islamic legal traditions promote child welfare (*maslahah al-atfal*), the application of custody (*hadhanah*) and visitation rights often lacks child-centered mechanisms that consider children's voices and feelings.

This study seeks to answer the following research question: How do Muslim children in Indonesia experience psychosocial trauma in the aftermath of parental divorce? Given these circumstances, the subjective experiences of children undergoing divorce-related trauma remain underexplored. Despite the growing awareness of children's psychological and social needs, existing legal and social discourses tend to prioritize parental rights or procedural justice over the lived realities of the children themselves. This gap underscores the importance of exploring how children internalize, process, and make meaning of divorce within their specific cultural and legal environments.

A phenomenological approach is particularly suited to address this gap, as it seeks to uncover the lived experiences and essential meanings behind personal phenomena. Rather than examining the

effects of divorce through objective measurements or theoretical models, phenomenology emphasizes the individual consciousness and emotional realities of the child as central to understanding trauma. This perspective allows for a richer, more empathetic understanding of how divorce shapes the identity, relationships, and sense of stability among children within the context of Islamic family law.

Building on the broader discourse of divorce and its psychosocial consequences, research on the lived experiences of children navigating post-divorce realities has emerged as a critical area within both legal and psychological scholarship. Scholars increasingly acknowledge that children are not merely passive subjects within legal proceedings but are active agents who interpret, internalize, and emotionally respond to the rupture of the family structure. In Islamic contexts, where family values are deeply interwoven with religious obligations and moral expectations, these subjective experiences are often intensified and uniquely nuanced.

Despite the recognition of this importance, methodological limitations have constrained the depth of understanding in this field. Many existing studies rely heavily on quantitative metrics, such as psychological scales or behavioral checklists, which may capture general trends but fail to illuminate the emotional texture and personal meanings that children attach to their experiences. Others adopt normative or doctrinal legal analyses that emphasize the legality of custody decisions while overlooking the psychological and spiritual dimensions of the child's experience. For instance, studies like that of Hasanah (2022) present valuable legal perspectives on custody arrangements but offer minimal insight into the child's inner world or coping mechanisms.

These limitations highlight a critical gap in research methodologies: the lack of tools capable of capturing the depth, complexity, and fluidity of children's emotional experiences in a post-divorce Islamic legal context. Phenomenological research, with its focus on the essence of experience and the meanings constructed by individuals, provides a necessary corrective to this trend. By centering the voices of children and exploring their trauma from a first-person perspective, this approach addresses the shortcomings of conventional models and contributes to a more holistic understanding of divorce-related trauma in Islamic family systems.

In addressing the psychosocial impact of divorce on children, existing solutions have largely relied on practical legal interventions and generalized psychological assessments. These include judicial custody arrangements, mediation programs, and standardized mental health evaluations, which aim to protect the welfare of children through formal mechanisms. While these approaches provide structural support, they are often designed to manage outcomes rather than explore the child's inner experience of trauma, especially in cultural contexts shaped by religious and moral norms.

Such practical frameworks, while necessary, are inherently limited in capturing the nuanced, lived experiences of children. Legal decisions typically prioritize procedural justice and parental rights, often neglecting the emotional dissonance, moral confusion, and identity disruptions children undergo. Similarly, conventional psychological approaches tend to treat children as objects of measurement rather than as subjects with agency and reflective capacities. As a result, the insights they yield often lack the depth required to understand how children make meaning of divorce within the specific context of Islamic family law.

To overcome these limitations, a phenomenological approach offers a compelling alternative. By focusing on how children perceive, interpret, and emotionally navigate the experience of parental divorce, phenomenology allows for a richer and more holistic understanding of trauma—one that integrates legal, cultural, emotional, and spiritual dimensions. This method not only elevates the child's voice but also uncovers the essence of their lived experience, thus filling a critical gap in both empirical research and legal reform.

Previous studies on the impact of divorce on children have primarily focused on psychological symptoms or legal outcomes. Research by Al Sharmani (2016) and Welchman (2007) examined the structural aspects of Islamic family law, but offered limited insight into children's emotional experiences. Studies using survey-based or doctrinal methods often fail to capture how children personally interpret the divorce of their parents. While these approaches provide valuable legal and policy implications, they overlook the rich, subjective meanings embedded in the lived experiences of

children. Therefore, a shift toward interpretive approaches is needed to explore the trauma from the children's perspective.

This study uses a descriptive phenomenological approach to explore how Muslim children experience psychosocial trauma after divorce. The method focuses on revealing the essence of experience as described by the participants themselves. This approach was chosen to respond to the knowledge gap regarding how children internalize emotional, social, and spiritual disruptions following parental separation. Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, the study aims to present a clear, empathetic understanding of the children's voices. The method allows the study to move beyond abstract categories and uncover meaning rooted in real-life contexts.

The article is structured as follows: the introduction presents the research background, highlights the knowledge gap, and frames the study within relevant literature. The next section describes the legal and cultural context of divorce in Islamic family law. The methodology section details the phenomenological design, data collection, and analytical procedures. Results are presented thematically with direct quotations from participants to support each finding. The discussion interprets the findings in relation to prior research, followed by a conclusion that summarizes key insights and implications.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed a descriptive phenomenological design, grounded in the philosophical tradition of Edmund Husserl. The approach was chosen to explore the lived experiences of children who underwent psychosocial trauma as a result of their parents' divorce, particularly within the socio-legal context of Islamic family law. Phenomenology provides a methodological framework to uncover the essence of subjective experiences by setting aside preconceived assumptions and focusing on participants' narratives.

Descriptive phenomenology was deemed appropriate as it allows for a rich, in-depth portrayal of how the phenomenon is experienced directly by the individual, without interpretation or theoretical framing. In the context of this research, it offered an opportunity to reveal the emotional, cognitive, and social dimensions of trauma that may not be captured through normative legal analysis.

Participants

Participants were Muslim children aged between 12 and 17 years who had experienced the legal divorce of their parents and were under the custody of either one or both parents, based on decisions made by religious courts. Selection was conducted through purposive sampling, with an emphasis on identifying individuals capable of reflecting deeply on the phenomenon of interest.

Inclusion criteria consisted of: (1) children who had direct exposure to court-mediated divorce processes within the past five years; (2) ability to communicate emotions and thoughts coherently; and (3) willingness to share personal experiences in a safe interview setting. Exclusion criteria included: (1) children with diagnosed psychological disorders unrelated to the divorce process; and (2) children whose parents' separation was not formally processed through the Islamic judicial system.

A total of eight participants were involved in the study, comprising five females and three males, with an average age of 14.6 years. All participants resided in urban and semi-urban areas of Indonesia, and had varying degrees of religious and educational backgrounds. The sample size of eight is consistent with phenomenological research, which typically involves 5–10 participants to allow for deep exploration of lived experiences (Creswell, 2013; Giorgi, 2009).

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, guided by an interview protocol designed to elicit open-ended narratives around the emotional, psychological, and social consequences of divorce. The interviews were conducted face-to-face in a private setting, either at participants' homes or community centers, ensuring a comfortable and non-threatening environment.

Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with prior consent. The guiding questions were developed based on themes of emotional wellbeing, experiences with custody processes, perceptions of fairness, and relationships with both parents post-divorce. All interviews were transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis consistent with the descriptive phenomenological approach. The process began with multiple readings of each transcript to gain a holistic understanding of the data. Meaning units were then extracted and organized into clusters of significant statements that reflected essential aspects of participants' experiences.

These clusters were further refined into overarching themes through a process of eidetic reduction, aimed at capturing the invariant structure of the phenomenon. NVivo 12 software was utilized to support the management and coding of data, facilitating transparency and consistency in the analytical process.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, a second independent coder reviewed 25% of the transcripts. Coding discrepancies were discussed until consensus was reached, improving inter-coder reliability. Additionally, member checking was conducted with selected participants to validate the accuracy of thematic interpretations. The final themes represented the essential meanings derived from participants' narratives, and were presented in a narrative structure aligned with phenomenological reporting standards.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the affiliated institution prior to data collection. Participants and their legal guardians were provided with a detailed explanation of the research objectives, confidentiality procedures, and their rights to withdraw at any time without consequence.

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants and guardians. Anonymity was preserved through the use of pseudonyms, and all data were stored securely. The study adhered to the ethical standards of the Declaration of Helsinki and relevant national ethical guidelines.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the lived experiences of children affected by divorce, as perceived through the lens of Islamic family law. The findings emerged through a descriptive phenomenological analysis of interviews conducted with children of divorced Muslim parents. The themes presented below encapsulate the essence of psychosocial trauma expressed by the participants, validated through verbatim quotations and contextualized within their socio-legal realities.

The Fractured Sense of Belonging

One of the most dominant experiences shared by the participants was a deep sense of disconnection and emotional detachment following their parents' separation. Children expressed confusion and internal conflict regarding where they truly belonged, especially when custodial arrangements were perceived as unfair or inconsistent with their emotional needs.

"I live with my mother now, but I feel like my father has completely disappeared from my life. It's like I lost half of myself when they divorced." (P2)

This fractured identity often led to feelings of loneliness and abandonment, which were exacerbated when legal decisions did not align with the child's own desires or attachments. From the Islamic family law perspective, although hadhanah aims to ensure child welfare, participants described a gap between legal determinations and emotional realities.

Lingering Emotional Vulnerability and Anxiety

Children repeatedly described experiencing persistent emotional vulnerability, especially anxiety about their future relationships and trust in family structures. The divorce was not merely a past event—it became an ongoing psychological condition that shaped their worldview.

"Every time my parents argue over the phone, I start to feel sick. I get scared that things will get worse again, even though they are already divorced." (P4)

This emotional fragility often led to sleep disturbances, lack of concentration at school, and social withdrawal. While Islamic law emphasizes the preservation of maslahah (benefit) for children,

the participants' narratives suggest that emotional harms are often overlooked in procedural implementations.

Internalized Blame and Moral Dissonance

Several participants revealed that they internalized the blame for the divorce, especially when parental conflict occurred in front of them or involved accusations related to religious obligations and moral behavior.

“I used to think it was my fault. My dad said my mom was not a good Muslim, and I didn’t know who to believe. I felt like I had to choose between them, even in religion.” (P6)

This theme highlights the psychological tension children face when exposed to religious arguments during parental conflict. Rather than gaining spiritual comfort, some experienced confusion and guilt, indicating a moral dissonance between family values and lived realities.

The Silence of Institutional Support

Children frequently expressed that they felt unheard—not only by their parents but also by institutions, including the court system. Their voices were rarely solicited in legal decisions, despite being the most affected party.

“No one ever asked me what I wanted. The judge just talked to my parents. I was sitting outside like I didn’t matter.” (P1)

While Islamic legal provisions theoretically consider the best interest of the child, the participants’ experiences expose a systemic neglect in practice. The absence of psychological counseling or child-centered processes during divorce proceedings further aggravated the trauma.

Across all themes, the essence of psychosocial trauma in children of divorce—within the framework of Islamic family law—is rooted in the emotional invisibility of the child. The legal mechanisms designed to protect them often fail to address their psychological realities, leaving them in a space where spiritual, emotional, and legal needs remain unacknowledged. This disconnect underscores the urgent need to integrate child-centered approaches within the application of Islamic family law in divorce and custody proceedings.

The findings of this study revealed that children of divorced Muslim parents experience psychosocial trauma characterized by a fractured sense of belonging, emotional vulnerability, internalized guilt, and feelings of institutional neglect. These experiences illustrate how the legal and social dimensions of Islamic family law intersect with the emotional realities of children, offering profound insight into how divorce is perceived and internalized from the child’s perspective.

Where Legal Systems Meet Children's Emotional Needs



These findings directly address the central research question: How do Muslim children experience psychosocial trauma during and after the legal divorce of their parents? The narratives collected offer a unique contribution by unveiling the emotional essence of children’s experiences, which are rarely captured in conventional legal or psychological research. Rather than merely identifying the presence of trauma, this study highlights how children assign meaning to their suffering—often shaped by religious, familial, and cultural pressures—and how those meanings influence their identity, trust, and emotional development. The voices of these children emphasize the

disconnect between legal intentions and lived realities, and advocate for a more child-centered approach in both legal processes and support systems.

In relation to existing literature, the findings resonate with Mir-Hosseini (2011) and Moors (2013), who emphasized the gap between normative Islamic family law and its social application. While prior research has focused predominantly on the experiences of women or legal procedures, this study extends the discourse by centering the child's perspective, a voice often omitted from both academic and judicial narratives. The theme of institutional silence aligns with Welchman's (2007) critique of procedural rigidity in Muslim family courts, yet this study goes further by revealing the psychological toll of that silence. Furthermore, the internalized blame observed in participants parallels the moral confusion identified by Al Sharmani (2016), especially when children are exposed to conflicting religious justifications from parents. Thus, the study not only affirms previous critiques but also deepens the phenomenological understanding of trauma within the framework of Islamic legal culture.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study carry important implications for legal practitioners, policymakers, educators, and mental health professionals operating within Muslim communities. Psychosocial trauma among children of divorce, as revealed in this research, is not merely a psychological issue but a culturally and religiously embedded phenomenon that demands a more empathetic and holistic response. The disconnect between formal legal procedures and the emotional needs of children indicates an urgent need to integrate child-centered practices into Islamic family court systems, including psychological counseling and participatory mechanisms that allow children's voices to be meaningfully heard. Moreover, this research underscores the importance of developing culturally sensitive support systems that acknowledge the moral and spiritual struggles children face, thereby aligning legal protection with emotional and spiritual healing. In broader terms, the findings challenge dominant narratives that frame children as passive subjects, and instead position them as active interpreters of familial change, deserving of attention and care.

Limitations of the Study

As a phenomenological inquiry, this study is inherently focused on the depth rather than breadth of experience, which limits the generalizability of its findings. The small sample size, while appropriate for phenomenological depth, may not capture the full range of diversity in children's experiences across different socio-economic, geographic, or doctrinal contexts within the Muslim world. Additionally, the reliance on verbal narratives may exclude children who express trauma in non-verbal ways or those who are too young to articulate their experiences effectively. The study is also limited by its context in urban and semi-urban Indonesia, where legal and cultural practices may differ from other Islamic regions. Nonetheless, these limitations do not diminish the validity of the findings, but rather offer a focused lens through which meaning can be explored, while laying the groundwork for further study.

Future Research Directions

Future research should expand on these findings by exploring comparative experiences of children in different Islamic legal systems or across various cultural interpretations of Islamic family law. Longitudinal studies may also be useful in tracking the long-term emotional development of children post-divorce, particularly in relation to religious identity, trust in authority, and familial attachments. Moreover, incorporating multi-perspective designs—such as including parents, judges, or counselors—could enrich the understanding of how institutional responses interact with children's experiences. There is also room for methodological innovation, such as the use of visual or creative expression to capture experiences of younger children or those with limited verbal capacity. Ultimately, this study serves as a call to reimagine legal and social frameworks not only through normative reforms but through grounded insights into the lived realities of children navigating trauma within faith-based systems.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the psychosocial trauma experienced by Muslim children following parental divorce within the framework of Islamic family law. Using a descriptive phenomenological approach, the research revealed how children internalize emotional pain, moral confusion, and a deep sense of abandonment, which are often overlooked by legal and institutional systems. The findings emphasized a critical gap between formal custody arrangements and the lived realities of children, particularly in how they construct meaning from their experiences. This study contributes to the field by centering children's voices and offering a deeper, more empathetic understanding of trauma in a religious and cultural context. Based on these findings, several actionable recommendations are proposed. Legally, family courts and religious authorities should implement child-inclusive mechanisms in custody decision-making, such as child-friendly hearings or mediated dialogue that actively listens to the child's perspective. Educational institutions should establish psychosocial support programs, such as school-based counseling or peer support groups, to help children navigate post-divorce adjustment. Psychologically, trained counselors should be made accessible at the community level, with culturally sensitive therapeutic models that address grief, identity confusion, and trust rebuilding. These integrated efforts can bridge the current disconnect between legal structures and children's emotional realities. Future studies could expand these findings through comparative or longitudinal designs to further understand the evolving impact of divorce on children's emotional and spiritual development.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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