



Muslim Women's Lived Experiences in Divorce Mediation at Islamic Religious Courts

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Article Info

Article history:

Received 27-08-2025

Revised 03-09-2025

Accepted 17-10-2025

Keyword:

Muslim Women; Lived Experiences; Divorce Mediation; Islamic Religious Courts; Gender And Islamic Law; Meaning-Making

ABSTRACT

Divorce mediation within Islamic Religious Courts is a significant topic at the intersection of law, religion, and lived experience. While existing studies emphasize procedures and institutional mechanisms, little attention has been paid to Muslim women's personal and cultural experiences in mediation. This study addresses this gap by asking: How do Muslim women perceive and construct meaning during the mediation process within Islamic Religious Courts? Adopting an interpretative hermeneutic phenomenological approach, the research involved in-depth interviews with 12 Muslim women who participated in divorce mediation in Indonesia. Data were analyzed thematically to explore emotional, spiritual, and relational dimensions. The findings identify four core themes: emotional ambivalence, negotiation of religious values and personal rights, spiritual resilience, and perceived power dynamics. These insights reveal that mediation is not only a legal procedure but also a deeply personal and spiritual negotiation embedded in broader socio-cultural contexts. This study contributes to Islamic family law scholarship by highlighting women's voices and experiences, and offers implications for developing gender-sensitive mediation practices. Future research should integrate multiple stakeholder perspectives and comparative contexts across diverse Islamic societies.



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INTRODUCTION

Divorce is a complex social and cultural phenomenon that significantly affects individuals, families, and communities. Within Islamic contexts, divorce carries profound legal, emotional, and spiritual implications due to its deep connection to religious norms, moral values, and societal expectations (Husni & Wira, 2021; Muhammad et al., 2021). In Indonesia, where Islamic family law is formally institutionalized through the Islamic Religious Courts, divorce mediation has become a central mechanism aimed at resolving marital disputes while promoting reconciliation whenever possible. This mediation process is not merely a procedural formality; rather, it reflects the intricate interplay between legal frameworks, cultural traditions, and personal experiences.

In recent years, there has been a growing scholarly interest in understanding how Muslim women experience divorce mediation, as their perspectives often reveal critical insights into the intersection of gender, law, and religion (Mukhlis, 2025a; Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). Divorce, especially in highly religious contexts, involves more than the dissolution of a marital bond; it often entails navigating complex emotional struggles, negotiating personal agency, and reconciling individual aspirations with communal expectations. For many women, mediation sessions represent a pivotal moment where emotional vulnerability, spiritual resilience, and legal realities converge.

Despite the increasing focus on family law reform and mediation practices, the subjective dimensions of women's experiences during divorce remain underexplored (Hakim, 2024; Nabilah et al., 2025). Most existing studies have concentrated on procedural efficiency, legal frameworks, and institutional challenges, with limited attention to the lived meanings and emotional landscapes shaped

by these processes. Yet, mediation is a deeply human encounter, influenced not only by formal legal rules but also by participants' personal histories, cultural identities, and spiritual worldviews.

Given the centrality of these experiences, there is a pressing need to explore the essence of women's lived realities during divorce mediation (Abubakar, 2021a; Faiz et al., 2022). A phenomenological approach offers a pathway to uncover how participants interpret their roles, negotiate their values, and construct meaning within the mediation setting. By prioritizing women's voices and subjective perspectives, this study seeks to provide a richer, more nuanced understanding of how divorce mediation is experienced, beyond its procedural and institutional dimensions.

Building upon the broader context of divorce mediation within Islamic Religious Courts, research exploring the lived experiences of individuals undergoing such processes has emerged as an essential area within qualitative inquiry (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023; Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). In particular, studies focusing on Muslim women's narratives have highlighted the complex interplay between religious obligations, cultural expectations, and personal agency during divorce. These works have begun to reveal that women's experiences cannot be fully understood through legal texts or institutional frameworks alone but must instead be examined through the meanings participants attribute to their circumstances.

However, despite this growing interest, significant methodological challenges remain in capturing the depth and complexity of such experiences (Abubakar, 2021b; Bilalu et al., 2022). Much of the existing literature on Islamic divorce mediation has relied on quantitative approaches that prioritize statistical generalizations over rich descriptions of personal meaning. While these studies contribute valuable demographic and procedural insights, they often fail to illuminate the emotional, spiritual, and existential dimensions that shape women's encounters within the mediation process. The limitations of traditional survey-based methodologies become particularly apparent when addressing phenomena where subjective interpretation plays a central role.

Additionally, even among qualitative studies, many have adopted descriptive frameworks that stop short of engaging with the interpretive layers of participants' experiences (Hadi et al., 2023; Setyawan et al., 2024). By focusing primarily on surface-level accounts, these studies risk overlooking how women construct meaning through their emotional negotiations, cultural identities, and spiritual reflections. Such gaps leave unresolved questions regarding how mediation processes are understood, experienced, and internalized within diverse sociocultural and religious contexts.

Consequently, there is an urgent need for phenomenological investigations capable of uncovering the essence of women's lived realities during divorce mediation (Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023; Mukhlis et al., 2024). A hermeneutic phenomenological approach, in particular, offers the methodological rigor required to interpret these experiences within the framework of Islamic family law while simultaneously giving voice to participants' perspectives. This approach aligns with contemporary calls in qualitative research for methods that bridge institutional practices and personal meaning-making, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of how mediation is navigated at the intersection of law, faith, and gender.

Although divorce mediation at Islamic Religious Courts has been widely studied, existing research has primarily focused on procedural efficiency, legal frameworks, and institutional practices (Firdawaty et al., 2024; Sidqi et al., 2023). These studies often employ practical approaches that emphasize resolving disputes and promoting reconciliation through standardized legal mechanisms. While such approaches provide valuable insights into the structural functioning of mediation, they offer limited understanding of the personal meanings and emotional complexities experienced by Muslim women during this process.

Furthermore, much of the literature relies on quantitative analyses or surface-level qualitative descriptions, which tend to overlook the subjective dimensions of women's lived experiences. For example, previous studies have documented mediation outcomes and participant demographics but have rarely explored how women interpret, internalize, and negotiate their identities, roles, and values within these proceedings. As a result, the current body of knowledge lacks depth in explaining how

women construct meaning amid the interplay of religious expectations, cultural norms, and institutional authority.

These gaps underscore the limitations of existing frameworks in capturing the holistic essence of the phenomenon. Traditional legal analyses and procedural studies fail to address critical questions, such as:

- How do Muslim women experience mediation emotionally and spiritually?
- In what ways do they reconcile personal agency with religious and cultural expectations?
- How do power dynamics within the mediation setting shape their perceptions of fairness and justice?

Addressing these unanswered questions requires an alternative methodological lens. A hermeneutic phenomenological approach offers the capacity to move beyond procedural narratives and examine the deeper, subjective meanings embedded in women's lived realities. By prioritizing participants' voices and exploring the essence of their experiences, this study aims to provide a richer and more nuanced understanding of divorce mediation within the framework of Islamic family law.

Recent studies on divorce mediation within Islamic contexts have explored various dimensions, including legal frameworks, procedural mechanisms, and institutional practices (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025; Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). However, few have examined the lived experiences of Muslim women who navigate this process, leaving significant gaps in understanding their emotional, spiritual, and social realities. Previous research has primarily focused on outcomes and compliance with legal norms, overlooking the personal meanings participants construct during mediation. By integrating insights from sociology, Islamic legal studies, and gender research, this study builds upon prior work while shifting the focus toward the subjective dimensions of participants' experiences. Such a perspective enables a deeper understanding of mediation as not merely a procedural tool but as a personal and cultural negotiation.

To address these gaps, this study employs an interpretative hermeneutic phenomenological approach, which seeks to uncover the essence of women's lived experiences in divorce mediation. This method allows for an in-depth exploration of how participants perceive, interpret, and navigate their roles within the mediation process. By adopting this approach, the study responds directly to the key questions raised in the Knowledge Gap: how Muslim women experience mediation emotionally and spiritually, how they negotiate personal agency alongside cultural and religious expectations, and how perceived power dynamics shape their sense of fairness. Hermeneutic phenomenology provides the interpretive lens necessary to capture these dimensions while preserving the authenticity of participants' voices.

This article is structured into several sections to ensure clarity and coherence. The Introduction provides the conceptual and social context for the study, positioning the phenomenon within the broader literature (Gemilang et al., 2023). The Method section outlines the phenomenological framework, participant selection, data collection, and analytic procedures. The Results section presents the thematic findings supported by participants' narratives, followed by the Discussion, which connects these findings to theoretical insights and practical implications. Finally, the Conclusion summarizes the study's contributions, highlighting its relevance to scholarship in Islamic family law, mediation practices, and gendered experiences in religious legal systems.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

A qualitative research design grounded in phenomenology was employed to explore the lived experiences of Muslim women during divorce mediation at Islamic Religious Courts (Fenton & Baxter, 2016; Murphy & Dingwall, 2017). This approach was selected due to its focus on understanding the subjective meanings of participants' experiences rather than testing predefined hypotheses. Phenomenology provides an in-depth examination of the essence of individual

perceptions and allows researchers to capture the richness of personal narratives in their natural context.

An interpretative hermeneutic phenomenology inspired by Heidegger's philosophical framework was applied. This orientation emphasizes not only describing participants' experiences but also interpreting the underlying meanings within their social, cultural, and religious contexts. This design was considered appropriate to illuminate the complexities of mediation processes from the perspectives of Muslim women, particularly within the framework of Islamic family law.

Participants

Participants consisted of Muslim women who had undergone divorce mediation at Islamic Religious Courts in Indonesia within the last two years (Daly, 2007; Longhofer et al., 2012). Purposive sampling was used to identify individuals who possessed direct, relevant experiences with the phenomenon under investigation. Inclusion criteria required participants to:

1. Be Muslim women aged between 25 and 45 years;
2. Have participated in at least one formal divorce mediation session;
3. Be willing to share personal experiences in a reflective and confidential manner.

Exclusion criteria included individuals who:

- a. Had not completed the mediation process;
- b. Were involved in ongoing litigation that might influence their narratives.

A total of 12 participants were involved in the study. The group consisted entirely of women, with an average age of 34.7 years. The majority were housewives (58%), followed by civil servants (25%) and private-sector employees (17%). Demographic diversity among participants enriched the depth and contextual understanding of the findings.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted between March and May 2025. A carefully designed interview protocol guided the process, focusing on participants' emotional, spiritual, and social experiences during mediation (Carreiras & Castro, 2012; Iosifides, 2016). Open-ended questions were used to encourage participants to share detailed narratives, while follow-up prompts facilitated deeper exploration of emerging themes.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face in private rooms within the Islamic Religious Court facilities or, when requested, at neutral locations selected by participants. Each session lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was conducted in a supportive environment to ensure participant comfort and psychological safety.

All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent, and detailed field notes were taken to capture contextual information, including nonverbal expressions and situational dynamics. Transcripts were produced verbatim to preserve the authenticity of participants' voices.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using hermeneutic phenomenological analysis, which integrates description and interpretation to uncover the essence of participants' lived experiences (Hillman & Radel, 2018; Migdal, 2018). The analysis followed a systematic, iterative process involving several steps:

- **Immersion in the Data** Verbatim transcripts were read repeatedly to gain a holistic understanding.
- **Identification of Meaning Units** Significant statements reflecting essential experiences were highlighted and coded.
- **Clustering into Themes** Codes were organized into higher-order categories to identify recurring patterns across participants.
- **Hermeneutic Interpretation** Themes were interpreted within the broader cultural and religious context to derive deeper meanings.

- **Synthesis of Essential Structures** The final step integrated the themes into a coherent narrative that captured the shared essence of the phenomenon.

NVivo 14 qualitative analysis software was used to assist in data management and thematic organization (Lutz & Knox, 2014; McNabb, 2015). However, thematic synthesis and interpretation were driven by a comprehensive reading of the data rather than software-based automation.

RESULTS

Emotional Ambivalence During the Mediation Process

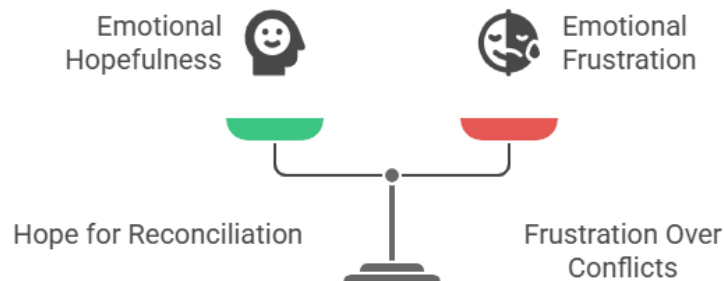
Participants expressed mixed emotional responses when undergoing divorce mediation, ranging from hope for reconciliation to deep frustration over unresolved conflicts. This emotional ambivalence emerged as one of the strongest patterns identified in the data.

“I came to the mediation session hoping we could fix our marriage, but when I saw my husband’s attitude, I felt more broken inside.” (Participant 3)

The findings reveal that divorce mediation often creates an emotionally charged environment where women face dilemmas between preserving family unity and protecting personal well-being. Most participants reported feeling pressured by social and familial expectations, which intensified their inner conflicts.

This theme highlights the complex intersection between legal procedures and personal emotional struggles, demonstrating how mediation becomes more than just a legal process it is also an emotional negotiation.

Balancing Hope and Frustration in Divorce Mediation



Negotiating Religious Values and Personal Rights

A recurring theme across participants was the struggle to balance religious obligations with personal rights within the context of Islamic family law. Many participants felt constrained by prevailing interpretations of syariah while simultaneously seeking justice and dignity.

“I respect Islamic law, but sometimes I feel my voice as a woman is not fully heard in the process.” (Participant 7)

While participants acknowledged the mediators’ efforts to provide solutions grounded in Islamic principles, they also emphasized the need for greater recognition of women’s agency. Some reported feeling that the mediation process prioritized preserving the marriage rather than addressing structural inequalities in decision-making.

This finding suggests a need to critically examine how religious norms, cultural expectations, and legal interpretations shape women’s lived experiences in divorce-related contexts.

Spiritual Resilience and Coping Strategies

Despite experiencing emotional distress, participants demonstrated significant spiritual resilience. Many described relying on personal faith and religious practices as a source of strength to navigate the mediation process.

“When the situation felt overwhelming, I prayed constantly, asking Allah for guidance. It gave me peace even when I couldn’t control the outcome.” (Participant 5)

For most participants, spirituality served as both a coping mechanism and a source of empowerment. Engaging in prayer, Qur’anic reflection, and communal support within their religious networks helped them maintain emotional stability and accept outcomes with *tawakkul* (trust in God’s will).

This theme underscores the central role of spirituality in shaping women’s perceptions, resilience, and decision-making during emotionally challenging circumstances.

Perceived Power Dynamics and Mediation Outcomes

Another significant finding relates to participants’ perceptions of authority within the mediation setting. Several women reported feeling marginalized, particularly when mediators appeared to favor husbands’ perspectives or emphasized reconciliation without fully addressing their concerns.

“It felt like the mediator listened to him more than to me. My feelings were treated as less important.” (Participant 2)

This imbalance influenced how participants evaluated the fairness of the process and its outcomes. While some expressed satisfaction when their voices were validated, others felt the mediation failed to deliver justice, leading them to pursue formal litigation instead.

This theme highlights the importance of incorporating a gender-sensitive approach in Islamic divorce mediation to ensure equitable participation for both parties.

DISCUSSION

Summary of Key Findings

This study revealed that Muslim women undergoing divorce mediation at Islamic Religious Courts experienced a complex interplay of emotional vulnerability, spiritual resilience, and perceived power dynamics within the mediation process. These findings directly address the central research question by uncovering how participants interpret and construct meaning around their lived experiences of divorce mediation within the context of Islamic family law.

Contribution of Findings to the Research Questions

The findings provide significant insights into the subjective dimensions of divorce mediation and offer direct answers to the guiding research questions presented in the Introduction. First, the results demonstrate that participants experienced emotional ambivalence, oscillating between hope for reconciliation and frustration over unresolved conflicts. Second, the data highlight participants’ negotiation between religious obligations and personal rights, showing how they actively balance faith-based norms with their agency and dignity. Third, the study illuminates the role of spiritual resilience, as participants relied on religious practices such as prayer and reflection to manage emotional distress. Finally, the findings reveal participants’ perceptions of power asymmetries within the mediation process, especially when they felt their voices were undervalued compared to their spouses.

By interpreting these insights phenomenologically, the study contributes uniquely to understanding the essence of women’s lived realities in mediation. Unlike prior procedural and legal analyses, this research emphasizes meaning-making, showing that mediation is experienced not merely as a formal resolution mechanism but as a deeply personal, emotional, and spiritual journey.

This contribution enriches the broader discourse on Islamic family law and mediation practices by placing women's voices and perspectives at the center of analysis.

Relationship to Previous Literature and Theoretical Frameworks

The findings both support and extend prior scholarship on divorce mediation in Islamic contexts. Consistent with Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., (2023), this study affirms that mediation serves as a cultural and legal mechanism aimed at reconciliation, yet it goes further by demonstrating how participants interpret these processes through their emotional and spiritual lenses. Similarly, the findings align with Alfiander, (2022), who highlighted the importance of gendered experiences within Islamic family law, while offering richer detail on how women construct personal meaning amid religious, cultural, and institutional expectations.

Moreover, the study addresses gaps identified in Mukhlis, (2025b), who argued that existing research often neglects the subjective and existential dimensions of mediation. By adopting a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, this study provides deeper insight into the interpretive processes shaping women's experiences, revealing how personal narratives are embedded within broader social, cultural, and religious contexts. These findings also resonate with Heidegger's interpretive phenomenology, where meaning is understood as arising from individuals' situatedness within a lifeworld shaped by norms, traditions, and relationships.

This integrative perspective positions the study within ongoing debates in Islamic legal scholarship and qualitative research, demonstrating that women's experiences during mediation cannot be reduced to procedural outcomes but must be understood as meaning-making processes situated at the intersection of law, faith, and gender identity.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study hold significant theoretical, practical, and socio-cultural implications. From a theoretical perspective, the study enriches the understanding of divorce mediation by highlighting the subjective dimensions of women's experiences, moving beyond procedural and institutional frameworks toward a deeper exploration of meaning-making. By revealing how participants interpret mediation through emotional vulnerability, spiritual resilience, and perceptions of fairness, the study provides a phenomenological lens for examining Islamic family law practices.

In practical terms, these insights are highly relevant for mediators, policymakers, and practitioners within Islamic Religious Courts. Recognizing women's diverse experiences underscores the need for gender-sensitive mediation frameworks that respect personal agency while aligning with religious and cultural values. Furthermore, by illuminating participants' reliance on spiritual practices as coping mechanisms, the findings suggest that incorporating holistic support systems including psychological counseling and faith-based guidance could improve mediation outcomes.

On a broader socio-cultural level, this study highlights how divorce mediation functions as more than a legal procedure; it represents a negotiation of identity, autonomy, and justice within a religious and communal context. As such, these findings have implications not only for improving mediation practices in Indonesia but also for enriching global discussions on gender equity and legal pluralism within Islamic societies.

Study Limitations

While the study offers important contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged to contextualize its findings (Zainuddin & Filzah, 2022). First, the sample size was limited to 12 participants within specific Islamic Religious Courts in Indonesia, which may restrict the transferability of results to broader populations or different cultural contexts. Second, the study relied on self-reported narratives, which, while central to phenomenological inquiry, may introduce recall bias or personal interpretation that shapes participants' accounts.

Additionally, the study focused exclusively on women's experiences, meaning that the perspectives of other stakeholders such as husbands, mediators, or judges were not captured.

Including multiple viewpoints in future research could provide a more holistic understanding of mediation dynamics. Finally, as with all phenomenological studies, the findings are not intended to be generalized statistically but to illuminate meaning within a specific cultural and legal framework.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

Building on these findings, future studies could explore several key directions to deepen understanding of divorce mediation experiences. Comparative studies across different regions or legal systems could reveal how cultural and institutional variations influence women's interpretations of mediation. Additionally, incorporating perspectives from mediators, judges, and male participants would provide a multi-layered view of the negotiation processes involved.

Further research could also integrate longitudinal designs to examine how participants' interpretations and coping strategies evolve over time, especially when navigating post-divorce transitions. Finally, future studies might draw on intersectional frameworks to explore how factors such as education, socioeconomic status, and religious adherence intersect with women's lived experiences, thus enriching the theoretical foundations of mediation research within Islamic contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of Muslim women during divorce mediation at Islamic Religious Courts, addressing the need to understand how they interpret emotional, spiritual, and social dimensions within the process. The findings reveal four central themes: emotional ambivalence, negotiation of religious values and personal rights, spiritual resilience, and perceived power dynamics within mediation. These insights contribute to filling critical gaps in existing literature, which often focused on procedural outcomes rather than participants' subjective meaning-making. By adopting a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, the study highlights the importance of centering women's voices to better inform culturally sensitive and gender-responsive mediation practices. The results also provide a foundation for developing holistic support systems that integrate legal, emotional, and spiritual dimensions. Future research may expand these findings by including multiple stakeholder perspectives and exploring cross-cultural comparisons to enrich the understanding of mediation experiences in diverse Islamic contexts.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest related to the design, implementation, analysis, or publication of this study. All procedures were conducted independently, and no financial, personal, or institutional relationships influenced the findings or interpretations presented in this article.

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