



Research Article

Impact of Divorce on Children's Rights: An Analysis

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17122810>

Abstract

Divorce is the most devastating event in the life of a woman. In India, only women are treated as the sole victims of such events, which is not true. But the reality is something different, which shows negligence on the part of the children. In the present Indian legal system, children are treated as affected parties only in custody issues. Researcher in this paper reveals how divorce is affecting the children's well-being, along with their several rights. The paper discusses that the impact of divorce on children violates his/her *human rights*, i.e., *the right to an adequate standard of living*, as after divorce, they are deprived of the parent union that non-divorced parents' children enjoy. Divorced parents' children have to live with the socio-economic status of lone parenthood, which results in various problems like behaviour difficulty, psychological maladjustment in school, delinquent behaviour, anger issues, and engagement in illegal sexual activities etc. This paper finds that divorced parents' children are deprived of their legal rights and responsibilities. The Present Legal system is immaterial towards the *children's right to choices* in case of custody and visitation. When they attain the age of majority, the selection of a parent is not of their choice, and children have to live with others' choices for their whole life. There are many other children's rights, such as the *right to education, residence, medical care, inheritance*, etc. In disability cases, children need full responsibility, which is upon the parents. Are they actually getting their right in their fullest? If they are not getting their rights, is there any remedy available to them? In order to protect their rights, is there any mechanism or law present in the Indian legal system? Researcher suggests that Divorced parents' children constitute their own special category. Therefore, there is a need for a separate law to protect the rights of such children and establish a check on their responsibilities.

Manuscript Information

- ISSN No: 2583-7397
- Received: 19-08-2025
- Accepted: 06-09-2025
- Published: 15-09-2025
- IJCRM:4(5); 2025: 79-85
- ©2025, All Rights Reserved
- Plagiarism Checked: Yes
- Peer Review Process: Yes

How to Cite this Article

Chauhan M, Verma A. Impact of Divorce on Children's Rights: An Analysis. Int J Contemp Res Multidiscip. 2025;4(5):79-85.

Access this Article Online



www.multiarticlesjournal.com

KEYWORDS: Divorce, Children, Rights, Indian Legal System.

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the life-altering events in society is divorce, which not only has an impact on the spouses but also affects their offspring. Nowadays, society is disrupted by divorce. Divorce resulted in the dissolution of the family institution. The permanent relationship of children with their family becomes weak throughout their whole life. Due to this there is a decline in the quality of life of children in major institutions, such as family institutions and schools.

In certain aspects, such as custody, alimony, and property, our present legal system is more focused on the rights and responsibilities of the couples. But there is less concern about the impact of divorce on children, which is not only limited to the custody issues, but also includes many other aspects, such as long-term effects.¹, emotional², psychological, socio-economic well-being.³

Statement of the problem

In India, during the divorce proceedings, courts are more focused on the women as the affected party, while in the case of children, the reality is different. The judiciary is treating them as the secondary affected party and only in cases of custody attempt to act in the direction of the children. For applying the principle of

"best interests of the child" is followed by the Indian Courts. But towards other emotional and psychological needs of children, the still system shows limited concern. Children suffering are beyond the custody issues, like instability in their emotions, challenges in overall development, financial instability, etc. After parent separation, the present legal framework is not sound to protect their rights completely, especially *the right to an adequate standard of living*, which is a HUMAN RIGHT, the *right to choice* in case of custody arrangements, education, medical, residence, and socio-economic and psychological well-being.

2. OBJECTIVES

From a legal perspective, researchers discuss the impact of divorce on children in terms of their rights, along with several other rights. The paper addresses the status of our Indian legal system for children's rights through their provisions after and at the time of parents' separation. Even the loopholes in the

existing laws for the protection of children's rights are also discussed, along with their failure. In order to meet the specific needs of such children, the paper proposes a separate legal framework.

Scope

Children who are affected by the divorce in India are the main focus of this study, and their rights under existing laws, as per the different religions existing in India. The study tries to find out the adequacy of the legal framework in India in light of the international standards.

3. IMPACT OF DIVORCE ON CHILDREN

The effects of divorce on the children have been seen with both short-term and long-term effects. As per the different parameters, its effects on each child are different. Every child has his/her own experience, depending on the nature of conflicts b/w the parents, the child's age, support mechanism after the parents' divorce, etc, out of all, some children have faced common problems.

Behavioral and Psychological problems

After a parent separation, there are higher chances of experiencing psychological illness and behavioural issues in the children. Numerous studies prove that such children have depression, anger issues, suicidal thoughts, engaged in sexual activities before marriage, delinquent behaviour, and psychological maladjustment issues.⁴ Psychological problems also include feelings of unhappiness and loneliness, low levels of confidence, depression, sleeping disturbances, and low self-esteem.⁵ All such things resulted in instability and in the dissolution of family structure.

Socio-economic problem

From an economic perspective, the economic status of the family declines after the divorce.⁶ After a divorce, a single-parent family structure comes into existence, especially in the case of the mother. She had limited financial resources. Gender gap in the financial capacity as a consequence of divorce was one consistent finding.⁷ From a social perspective, social stigma also impacts their children in the form of trust issues, insecurities, poor academic performance, etc. All these factors ultimately have an effect on the standard of living, fail to pursue their own choice of academic career, and are devoid of extracurricular activities. Even the facilities regarding health

¹ Fatma Betl Aktas and Sefa Bulut, The Short and Long Term Effects of Divorce on Children Mental Health and their Relationships with their Parents, Clinical Research in Psychology, Vol 4, Issue 2, pages 15-18, 2022, available at:

<https://api.asclepiusopen.com/storage/articles/crp/volume4-issue2/crp-4203.pdf>

² Muskan Sethi, Impact of Divorce on Child's Emotional Development, International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews, Vol 3, no 11, pp 187-190, November 2022, available at: <https://ijrpr.com/uploads/V3ISSUE11/IJRPR7700.pdf>

³ Prof. Dr. Vijender Kumar, Impact of Divorce on Children : A Socio-Economic and Legal Study, NALSAR Law Review 9, Vol. 6 : No.1, 2011, available at: <http://www.commonlii.org/in/journals/NALSARLawRw/2011/9.html>

⁴ Natalie Maximets, The Long Term Psychological Effects of Divorce on Children, Mediate.com (July 30, 2021), available at: www.mediate.com/the-long-term-psychological-effects-of-divorce-on-children/.

⁵ Adaora Isabella Odis, Effects of Divorce on Women and Children, Texila International Journal of Public Health, March, 2021, available at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/350844867>

⁶ Id, at 4.

⁷ Dimitri Mortelmans, Economic Consequences of Divorce: A Review, Part of Parental Life Courses after Separation and Divorce in Europe by the Michaela Kreyenfeld & Heike Trappe, vol 12, Germany 2020, available at: https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-44575-1_2

care and nutrition are widely affected by the socio-economic status.

Educational Disruptions

Due to parental separation, children's academic performance is significantly affected.⁸ Such children either don't concentrate on their studies or face failure. Due to the shifting of the residence after the parents' divorce, children are less focused on their studies. Frequently, relocating to a new environment and some new schools resulted in disturbing the school routine.

Long-term Emotional and Social Problems

Divorce has long-term effects on the children of divorced parents, such as trust issues, commitment problems in future relationships, failure to form strong and secure bonds with anyone, fear of abandonment, etc. When they grow, children fail in their intimate relationships because of bad experiences in life.

4. LEGAL RIGHTS OF CHILDREN IN INDIA

There are various consequences of divorce, and for all of them, the law cannot become the remedial mechanism. A human relationship that is harmonious in nature cannot be compelled by the law. At the time of divorce proceedings, while discussing the custody of the child, the law ensures that no one forcibly overrides the interest of the child.⁹ Worldwide, the Legal systems of various countries are based on the principle of the best interest of the child. However, at the time of proceedings, the children's rights are not directly viewed, even in the case of custody. Every aspect of custody matters depends upon the disputes that arise b/w both spouses. In India, after parent separation, child rights are governed by the existing religious personal laws with limited provisions. The concepts governed are custody, guardianship, and maintenance.

Overview of Indian Legal Provisions

In Indian perspectives, various laws address children's rights, though they do not directly deal with divorce. Under our Grundnorm, FR guarantees various rights such as education,¹⁰ Protection from exploitation.¹¹ Some other laws, such as JJ¹² Act and POCSO¹³ Acts also provide protection, but they do not directly deal with divorced children's rights.

Custody Laws in India

There are a number of legal provisions regarding custody cases as per the existing different religions in India. For the Concept of custody, several laws such as HMGA¹⁴ For Hindus, the Indian Divorce Act, 1869, and the Guardian and Wards Act, 1890, for Christians and muslims, governed by their personal laws based on such laws, the custody of a child is decided. Along with these laws, India's legal system also follows the universal guiding principles, i.e., the best interests of the child. Custody is either with the one parent or the mother, along with the right of visitation of the non-custodial parent, based on the above laws and principles granted by the Indian courts. However, the choices of children are still immaterial in matters of custody.

Significantly, the custody laws are silent upon the children's emotional, psychological, and socio-economic needs, with the main focus of such laws only on where the child will live after parent separation. In recognizing the rights of divorced parent-child during or after divorce, the Indian system is lacking because of its gaps. For instance, the standard of living of a child is only decided by the maintenance order awarded by the court, which is directly dealt with the custodial parent, not the child. Basically, a maintenance order is also immaterial to the expenses of the child for his/her standard of living. These provisions are not specifically dealt with coping mechanisms required for psychological support, like counseling or therapy.¹⁵

5. THE RIGHT TO AN ADEQUATE STANDARD OF LIVING

Legally, Indian courts are awarding the maintenance order to the custodial parent for providing an adequate standard of living by fulfilling their basic needs. To fulfill the basic needs of children, a legal obligation upon the custodial parent is imposed by some laws, such as HAMA.¹⁶ and Section 125¹⁷ Of (CrPC). The amount of maintenance is not sufficient to fulfill the basic needs like food, clothing, shelter, education, permanent residence, medical care, and nutrition. In the case of a single-parent-headed family (mother) who has limited financial means, she faces more challenges.¹⁸ Ultimately, this resulted in a decline in the standard of living. Sometimes, children's economic condition becomes worse when there is a failure or delay in the payment of the maintenance order installment by the father.

⁸ Fiona Steele, Wendy Sigle-Rushton, and Oystein Kracdal, Consequences of Family Disruption on Children's Educational Outcomes in Norway, V.46(3), 553-574, August, 2009, available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2831341/>

⁹ Lawerying The Child: Principles Of Representation In Custody And Visitation Disputes Arising From Divorce, Vol. 87 Yale Law Journal No.6,1126-1190, May 1978

¹⁰ Art. 21-A of the Constitution of India, 1950.

¹¹ Art. 21-A of the Constitution of India, 1950.

¹² Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015

¹³ The Protection of Children from Sexual Offenses (POCSO) Act, 2012

¹⁴ Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act, 1956

¹⁵ Hansen, Rosenberg, and Cramer, page-6, 1994, available at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2456&context=grp>, states that Counseling can be defined as a process concerned with an individual's optimum development and well-being, both personally and in relation to the larger society.

¹⁶ Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act, 1956

¹⁷ The Criminal Procedure Code, 1973

¹⁸ Biblarz, T. J., & Gottainer, G., Family structure and children's success: A comparison of widowed and divorced single-mother families, Journal of Marriage and Family, National Council on Family Relations, 2000, Available at : <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2000.00533.x>

India is a signatory to the UNCRC.¹⁹ This provides “Right to an Adequate Standard of living”²⁰ For every child under Art. 27. Standard of living includes shelter, food, housing, and healthcare.²¹ In terms of the material needs of children, conventions talk about the equal responsibility of both parents towards children, regardless of their marital status. However, shortcomings are present in the Indian legal system in cases of insufficient maintenance or non-enforcement.

Despite having the legal provision of maintenance, there is a failure in providing the same standard of living to divorced parents' children as to non-divorced parents' children by the Indian legal system. Even the social values of the divorced parents are less compared to those of the non-divorced parents' children.²² Our system failed in the socio-economic impact of divorce, as well as in ensuring the same opportunities for children in fields of education, extracurricular activities, and healthcare. Therefore, there is a violation of their fundamental right, which is also a human right under both domestic and international law.

6. PSYCHOLOGICAL AND EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING

Specifically in the case of children, divorce not only has a legal aspect but also emotional and psychological aspects. The psychological and emotional impact of divorce is overlooked by the Indian courts, as their primary focus is on custody and maintenance matters.

Emotional Stability for Children

For the growth of a child, they need a stable and happy environment. But the devastating event of divorce fails to provide stability and brings abandonment, insecurity, etc. The disappearance of the ideal family structure from the lives of divorced parents' children leads to long-term effects, which are anxiety, depression, and behavioral problems. To mitigate these mental problems, the mandatory adoption of some coping mechanism is required, such as parenting with an expert. After a divorce, parents should spend some time with children as per their hobbies, confront the children with the divorce, and explain how hard it is to address their intellectual energy, etc.²³

¹⁹ The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Children, 1989

²⁰ Art. 27 of UNCRC, 1989

²¹ Art. 24 of UNCRC, 1989, states that States parties recognize the right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health and to facilities for the treatment of illness and rehabilitation of health.

²² Hakan Sahin, Comparison of value acquisitions of children of divorced and non-divorced parents, Educational Research and Reviews, Vol. 15(9), pp. 587-596, September 2020, available at: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1274347.pdf>

²³ Bhaswat Prakash, Impact on Child Psychology due to Divorce in Indian Perception, Academic Journal of Politics and Public Administration, Volume 1 Issue 1, January 31 2024, available at: <https://juniperpublishers.com/acjpp/pdf/ACJPP.MS.ID.555554.pdf>

Mandate of Psychological Support

Explicitly, no law in India addresses the children's emotional and psychological needs. Determining the living arrangement for the children after the parent separation is the utmost priority of custody laws. These laws do not provide a framework for the emotional support of children after a parent's divorce. For the psychological support, such as counseling and therapy, for such children, there is no mandate provided by the Indian courts, unlike some countries. In spite of this, some courts, at their discretion, recommend counseling in emotional distress cases. But there were no proper guidelines for dealing with it. This creates a gap between the present laws and the protection of the rights of children, as well as their emotional well-being.

Ensuring Psychological Well-being by the Courts

In a limited sense, the Indian courts are attempting to cater to the psychological impact of divorce. Because of a prolonged court battle, the worst emotional distress is faced by the children in the case of a high-conflict divorce matter. As a remedial mechanism in case of emotional distress, psychologists or counselors are appointed by the courts in their authority. Yet these resources are not being utilized due to a lack of judicial awareness regarding emotional well-being. During legal proceedings, children are forced to choose between both parents, which is not the sole decision and ultimately has a worse impact on their emotions. Children start fighting with the inner mind conflict regarding the choice of a parent, which increases the emotional burden.

Without any specific law dealing with the well-being and rights of children, after parents' separation, children faced failure in coping with emotional disturbances.

7. CUSTODY AND THE RIGHT TO CHOOSE

Legal Principles for deciding the custody of a child in India

“Best interests of the child” is a legal principle followed by the Indian courts for deciding the custody of divorced parents' children. Often, the custody is granted to one parent by the court, to provide that environment which fosters the growth of the child, and the other parent is awarded the visitation rights. Various factors are responsible for the determination of this principle, such as gender, child age, gender, emotional ties with the parents, and the parents' financial stability.²⁴

For Indian courts, preference for children below the age of twelve years in matters of custody is immaterial. For childhood development, custody of children below the age of five years is granted to the mother by the court, as maternal care is essential. Once one attains a certain age, i.e., twelve, courts start considering their choices, but this remains secondary. Primarily, the court considered its own assessment of doing the best for the child.²⁵

²⁴ Supra note 4

²⁵ Global Angle Sonali Abhang, Guardianship and Custody Laws in India- Suggested Reforms, IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science, Volume 20, Issue 7, Ver. VI, page39-58, July 2015 available at: <https://www.iosrjournals.org/iosr-jhss/papers/Vol20-issue7/Version-6/G020763958.pdf>

Issues Regarding Children's Autonomy and Choice in Custody Decisions

Children have limited autonomy in expressing their choice regarding their custody in India. Even when the divorced parent's children attained the age of majority, they still do not exercise his/her right to choice. There is a general presumption that either the selection of a parent by the children is under the influence of the other parent, or the selection is not in the child's best interest. This often creates the feeling of frustration in the children, not strong enough to make a decision, his/her no right over their future.

During custody proceedings, children are likely to suffer psychologically and emotionally if they are not heard by the courts. Due to a lack of autonomy, at the international level, there is also a violation of the right under Article 12²⁶ Of UNCRC.

If we understand the things worldwide, some Western countries are moving towards a child-centric approach.²⁷ Give recognition to the child's autonomy in custody cases. In such a legal system, in order to protect the children's interests, advocates and guardians for children are appointed by the courts. Therefore, the views of the children are heard and taken into consideration as represented by such appointed advocates and guardians.

Due to the overprotective attitude of the Indian Legal system, a general presumption has been followed that children are not capable of forming their own decisions. It suppresses the self-determination of children and limits their role in custody cases. Therefore, there is a requirement for some reforms in the Indian Legal system by increasing the voice of children in custody cases. This can include:

- i. To get access to the inner feelings of children, courts mandatorily conduct the interviews for all age groups of divorced parents.
- ii. Requirement of appointment of independent child advocates and guardians to represent their views. So, the views can be heard and considered in the proceedings.
- iii. Encourage meditation techniques for parents, as the adversarial nature of proceedings can create frustration in the minds of children while choosing the parent for custody.
- iv. Counseling sessions should compulsorily be followed by the courts in custody matters for protecting the emotional and psychological well-being.

²⁶ Article 12 of UNCRC states that every child has the right to express their views, feelings, and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously. This principle recognises children and young people as actors in their own lives and applies at all times throughout a child's life.

²⁷ Ingunn Onarheim Johnsen, Astrid Synnove Litland, Inger Kristennson Hallstrom, Living in Two Worlds – Children's Experiences After Their Parents' Divorce – A Qualitative Study, *Journal of Pediatric Nursing*, Vol. 43, November-December, 2018, available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0882596318301568>

8. NEED OF SPECIFIC LAW FOR CHILDREN OF DIVORCED PARENTS

New challenges are coming in the path of divorced parent and their children, which are not addressed by the Indian legal system. Despite having various laws as per existing religion in India regarding the maintenance, custody, and protection, it still fails to cater to the psychological, emotional, and socio-economic well-being of the children after parent separation. Because of this, such children are forming a distinct category in society. Therefore, a new specialized legal framework that exhaustively deals with the full rights and needs of the divorced parents' children is required.

Basic element of the Legal framework

Some basic elements for the legal framework are as follows:

1. Increment in the amount of Maintenance order and Child Support:

Maintenance order should be directly dealt with the children's needs and provided in an adequate amount. The amount must be calculated based on education opportunities, healthcare services, and extracurricular activities. The law should also be strict towards noncustodial parents for fulfilling their financial obligations.

2. Emotional and Psychological Support:

As long-term effects of divorce are seen on children, the new law should mandate that the courts follow the psychological evaluations and counseling or therapy during proceedings. So, the emotional support helps in coping with changes that occur after parents' divorce in the lives of children.

3. Right to Participation in Custody Decisions:

The new law should have provisions for the right of participation in custody decisions and even for visitation rights. So that children's preferences can be taken into consideration, and such preferences are taken into consideration based on their age and maturity.

4. Mediation and Counseling Services:

The new law should contain provisions regarding the meditation and counseling techniques for parents and children, both after divorce, as the adversarial nature of proceedings can create frustration in the minds of children while choosing the parent for custody.

5. Enforcement Mechanisms:

This law should have a strict enforcement mechanism for ensuring the well-being of children. Even the appointment of some social workers and welfare officers is done under this law to monitor the effective implementation of the provision effectively implement or not.

9. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the legal perspective, in this paper, the impact of divorce is explored by the researcher, pointing out the lacuna in the existing Indian legal system, which fails to protect the rights of divorced parents' children. Due to the shortcomings in the legal framework, such children faced challenges in emotional, psychological, and socio-economic aspects. Despite having legal provisions regarding the maintenance and custody matters,

divorced parents' children fail to get an adequate standard of living, which is a human right, right of choice in custody, as per their interest, not pursuing their career, etc. Therefore, the Indian system needs to adopt a child-centric approach like Western countries under the guidelines of international conventions. Last but not least, a separate specialized legal framework is required to protect the full rights and responsibilities of divorced parents and their children.

Recommendations

- i. After divorce, psychological support should be provided to the children to cope with emotional disturbances. Such a thing should be ensured by the courts in the form of counseling.
- ii. Strict penalties should be incurred for non-compliance with the maintenance order. Therefore, for ensuring the children's financial stability.
- iii. Children's choices should be considered in the custody matters, and also provide legal assistance by appointing separate independent advocates to represent them.

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