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## The National Divorce Prevention and Reduction Program and its complications: goals, service model, challenges, and future path

Behzad Damari <sup>1</sup> , Alireza Heidari <sup>2\*</sup> , Habibullah Masoudi Farid <sup>3</sup> , Arezou Zokaei <sup>3</sup> 

1. Department of Governance and Health, Neuroscience Research Institute, Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran

2. Health Management, and Social Development Research Center, Golestan University of Medical Sciences, Gorgan, Iran

3. Social Deputy, Welfare Organization, Tehran, Iran

Correspondence: Alireza Heidari, Assistant Professor of Health Policy, Health Management and Social Development Research Center, Golestan University of Medical Sciences, Gorgan, Iran; Tel: +981732558400; Email: [alirezaheidari7@gmail.com](mailto:alirezaheidari7@gmail.com)

### Abstract

**Background:** Divorce is the legal dissolution of marriage and the legal cancellation of duties and responsibilities of marriage between couples, which has been growing recently in Iran. Preventing and decreasing divorce and its complications are among the programs of the welfare organization. The present study aimed to explain the goals, service model, challenges, and solutions for the improvement of this program.

**Methods:** A qualitative study was conducted in 2016 and selected 31 managers and experts from departments of the welfare organization in provinces of Iran, 21 members of public mediators and beneficiary organizations, and 6 senior managers and senior experts from the social deputy of the welfare organization using the purposive sampling method. Data were collected by three methods, documentary analysis, focus group discussion, and in-depth individual interview, and were analyzed using content analysis.

**Results:** The divorce prevention and reduction program was designed in three stages, before marriage, during divorce, and after divorce. The challenges of the program included multi-work with the involved organizations, insufficient information by the mass media, mental exhaustion of couples and insisting on divorce, the lack of a coherent program in the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution (SCCR), the lack of human resources, insufficient financial credits, and couples' unwillingness to consult after judicial registration. The suggested solutions to improve the program include coordination with the comprehensive plan of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, eliminating inter-organizational multi-work in the welfare organization, increasing financial credits, creating electronic files for applicant couples, following up on the status of children within the divorce process, developing a divorce reduction protocol based on new approaches to family therapy, implementation of educational programs, mandatory counseling before marriage, and approval and amendment of some judicial laws.

**Conclusion:** Despite the growing trend of divorce in society and the implementation of the divorce prevention and reduction program in the welfare organization, this program is facing personal, organizational, and national challenges. It is useful to use strategies to modify the goal and structure, measures to finance and improve the service mechanism, attract cooperation, and obtain permits to improve the current status.

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### Highlights:

#### What is current knowledge?

Preventing and decreasing divorce and its complications are among the programs of the welfare organization.

#### What is new here?

Despite the growing trend of divorce in society and the implementation of the divorce prevention and reduction program in the welfare organization, this program is facing personal, organizational, and national challenges. It is useful to use strategies to modify the goal and structure, measures to finance and improve the service mechanism, attract cooperation, and obtain permits to improve the current status.

### Introduction

Marriage as a necessary sacred relationship is emphasized by Islam (1), but nowadays, men and women easily decide to break the family regardless of its importance and function due to a lack of thought in its creation as soon as problems arise, instead of finding a solution for problems (2). The divorce process usually starts when one or both spouses feel alienated from each other. Divorce is the legal dissolution of marriage between the parties (3). Experts believe that the divorce process often goes this way: minor differences, repetition of minor differences and then seriousness, separation or reluctance of one of the

spouses to the other party, long and repeated fights, couples' tiredness of fights and conflicts, emotional divorce, and legal divorce (4).

A look at the divorce status in Iran indicates that divorce in Iran has been growing in recent decades (5) and Iran ranks fourth in the world in terms of divorce statistics (6). The process of divorce has been increasing in the past years (7). Statistical findings indicate that the ratio of divorce to marriage increased from 12.5% in 2009 to 32.58% in 2019 (8). The most important effects of divorce include the feeling of loneliness and isolation, pessimism about the opposite sex and its generalization to all members of society, and the feeling of pity and compassion of the public to the divorced person (9). Divorced people have low levels of well-being, signs of helplessness, and weaker self-concepts (10).

Emotional problems initially appear more severe for men, but they are more continuous for women (11). Other negative consequences of divorce include a higher number of accidents leading to death, the increasing prevalence of physical diseases, suicide, violence, murder for couples, and the risk of depression and suicide (12). Children of divorced families also have higher emotional, behavioral, and educational problems than children of normal families (13).

In European and American countries, the causes of divorce include weakness in communication, financial problems, a lack of sense of responsibility, infidelity, betrayal, non-fulfillment of expectations, addiction, physical or mental sexual abuse, and lack of ability to solve problems (14). A domestic study mentioned the most important causes of divorce as follows: The lack of communication skills, mental diseases, intellectual immaturity, addiction, lack of responsibility, cultural

differences, the presence of rivals, economic problems, the involvement of acquaintances, and assailing (15).

The possibility of marriage deadlock and divorce can be controlled by analyzing and modifying dysfunctional relationships of couples. Furthermore, marital conflicts can be reduced and divorce can be prevented by changing and improving marital relations (16). The proposed family support bill considers establishing family counseling centers next to family courts with an approach to dealing with effective factors in divorce and its prevention, where the counselors include experts in different fields such as family studies, law, social work, law, and jurisprudence and fundamentals of Islamic Law (17). An organization called the Welfare Organization was established to prevent social harm and rehabilitate injured people in 1981 according to articles 29 and 31 of the Constitution (18). An important measure of this organization is to prevent the marital life collapse of individuals and families who suffer from a variety of disabilities and vulnerabilities owing to economic problems, and cultural and social anomalies (7). The present study aimed to explain the goals, service model, and challenges, and provide a solution to overcome the weaknesses and use effective strategies to improve the status of the divorce prevention and reduction program in the welfare organization of Iran.

## Methods

Mechanism, and the need to attract cooperation and obtain licenses. The present qualitative study was conducted in 2016 and examined participants, including 31 managers and experts from departments of the welfare organization in provinces of Iran, 21 members of public mediators and beneficiary organizations, and 6 senior staff managers and senior experts from the social deputy of the welfare organization in Iran. The inclusion criteria were as follows: Knowledge and experience in the target field and consent to participate in interviews and group discussions. Exclusion criteria were as follows: The non-consent to continue cooperating in the study, and the non-consent to record interviews and group discussions.

The triangulation approach was utilized by combining three methods, documentary analysis, focus group discussion, and in-depth individual interviews, to enhance the scientific accuracy of the findings and collect data. The study took the advantage of purposive sampling. Sampling continued until reaching data saturation and repetition of the findings in a way similar to qualitative studies.

## Documentary analysis

Domestic websites and databases were also searched in addition to face-to-face visits to Iran's welfare organization to collect the document. The main documents in the study included the intervention in the family plan, the executive instructions for the intervention in the family, the comprehensive reports of the intervention in the family plan, and the prevention and intervention plan to decrease divorce and its complications, as well as the divorce information form. The above-mentioned documents were analyzed using the content analysis method.

## Focus group discussions

An invitation was sent to the participants, including the managers and experts of departments of the welfare organization, public mediators, and stakeholder organizations, where the subject of the meeting, objectives, time, and place of meetings were specified, to conduct group discussions. The researcher used an interview guide which included the main questions about the plan goals, service delivery model, plan implementation challenges, and plan improvement strategies. Furthermore, four 2-2.5-hour focus group discussion sessions (n=12-14) were held where the participants expressed their opinions freely, and the session coordinator directed and moderated the discussion, and monitored the group dynamics. The saturation of data and lack of new data were the criteria for terminating the group discussion. The interviews were recorded by obtaining permission from the interviewees, assuring them to keep their information confidential and not publish their names. Notes were written during the conversation recording. The recorded content was transcribed after holding group discussions.

## In-depth individual interviews

Meeting times were set after coordinating in person or calling with the senior staff managers and senior experts of the welfare organization to conduct the interviews. The place, wherein the interviewees felt comfortable, was selected as the interview place. The research objective was fully explained to the participants before starting the interviews. The minimum and maximum duration of the study were 25 and 65 minutes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed by obtaining permission from the interviewees and assuring them about the data confidentiality. The transcription was performed in the nearest possible time interval. The obtained data was given to the participants and the correctness of the outcome was checked with them.

The reliable Lincoln and Guba criteria (credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability) were used to achieve the validity and reliability of the data (20-21).

The in-depth individual interviews and focus group discussions, data collection, and data analysis were performed simultaneously at both stages. The data analysis method included qualitative content analysis with a conventional approach.

The project was approved by the ethics committee of the university (IR.TUMS.VCR.REC.1397.509) to comply with the ethical principles. The research units participated in the study with full informed consent, no force was applied to continue participating in the study, the interviews were recorded after obtaining their consent, and they were assured that the data would be kept confidential for the researcher.

## Results

### 1- Goals of the program

The goals of the divorce prevention and reduction program were as follows: Identifying and assisting to solve the couples' problems to reduce stressors of family conflict, maintaining the cohesion of families at risk of divorce, building lasting bases, strengthening the advisory roles of experts for the child custody status and all relevant rules in case of divorce, and improving the quality of life after divorce.

### 2- The model of service

#### 2-1-Measures before divorce

Psychosocial intervention training in high school and marriage counseling centers, and family life training and counseling for couples in the first 5 years of life

#### 2-2- Measures during divorce

Acceptance of all couples applying for revocable divorce from family judicial complexes, specialized services for them, and referrals to receive social support from specialized divorce reduction teams and counseling centers and trained social work clinics.

### 3- Challenges

#### 3-1- Personal challenges

According to the experts, personal challenges include the couples' reaching the border of separation and divorce, the lateness of intervention to reduce divorce, psychological exhaustion of couples and insisting on divorce, couples' unwillingness to consult after judicial registration of cases, non-expert involvement of divorce applicants' lawyers and some judges during the counseling process, and the couples' non-cooperation in attending the sessions due to the uncontested divorce.

"The target group of the program often include couples who were clients of justice who lived in acute conditions and their status often decreased the effectiveness of interventions, and the intervention appeared not to be very timely and ineffective" (a provincial manager in the welfare organization, group discussion).

#### 3-2- Organizational challenges

Most of the experts consider the lack of human resources and absence of family counselors, lack of follow-up after discharge by justice service centers, insufficient financial credits of the welfare organization, and lack of judicial authority in determining the duties of children of divorce as organizational challenges.

"There are few employers in the centers but there are many clients. Furthermore, the trained personnel are frequently replaced in the centers" (an expert in charge of the provincial welfare organization, group discussion). "There are no real credits considered for controlling and reducing divorce. You want to have it as training experts, producing educational content, and intervention in the family are expensive" (a director general of the social deputy of the welfare organization in Iran, a personal interview).

#### 3-3- National challenges

Most participants reported the overlapping and multi work of organizations involved in the divorce reduction program, the lack of focus of the executive bodies of divorce on the problem, and seeking share from governmental and non-governmental organizations, the few radio and television programs to inform the public, and the lack of a coherent program in the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution as the national challenges.

"Divorce reduction has many custodians in Iran. The Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution has concluded that the welfare organization is the main custodian of divorce reduction. The Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Sports and Youth state that they are the main custodians. The Judicial system has come along with the welfare organization, it has established divorce centers. We have too much overlap and cannot have the necessary synergy." (a director general of the welfare organization, individual interview)

Table 1 presents the challenges of the divorce prevention and reduction program in Iran.

**Table 1: Challenges of the divorce prevention and reduction program in Iran**

| Level          | Challenges of the program  |
|----------------|--|
| Personal       | Couples' reaching the border of separation and divorce, the lateness of intervention to reduce divorce, psychological exhaustion of couples and insisting on divorce, couples' unwillingness to consult after judicial registration of cases, non-expert involvement of divorce applicants' lawyers and some judges during the counseling process, and the couples' non-cooperation in attending the sessions due to the uncontested divorce |
| Organizational | The lack of human resources and absence of family counselors, lack of follow-up after discharge by justice service centers, insufficient financial credits of the welfare organization, and the lack of judicial authority in determining the duties of children of divorce  |
| National       | The overlapping and multi work of organizations involved in the divorce reduction program, the lack of focus of the executive bodies of divorce on the problem, and seeking share from governmental and non-governmental organizations, the few radio and television programs to inform the public, and the lack of a coherent program in the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution   |

#### 4- The future path

Based on documentary analysis of and participants' opinions, solutions to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the divorce prevention and reduction program included the modification of the goal and structure, measures to finance and improve the service mechanism, and the need to attract cooperation and obtain licenses.

##### 4-1- Goal

Coordination with the macro plan which is developing by the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution and its national division of work.

##### 4-2- Structure

The intra-organizational multi-work in the welfare organization (including the division of primary to tertiary prevention duties between the prevention and social deputies), and the lack of coordination with the provincial counseling unit should be resolved.

##### 4-3- Provision of resources

**4-3-1-** Increasing financial credits for programs that empower families during divorce.

**4-3-2-** Preparation of a common statistical system for all bodies that work on divorce, and conducting scientific analyses and comparisons of statistics.

**4-3-3-** Creating electronic files for couples applying for divorce and their children, and continuous and regular follow-ups in different ways for planning and interventions according to conditions and requirements of the target group.

##### 4-4- Service mechanism

**4-4-1-** The name of divorce reduction should be changed to couple therapy, which changes the couple beliefs, to reduce the stigma.

**4-4-2-** A minimum tariff should be considered for family intervention sessions to reduce divorce in the public sector so that the service is considered valuable.

**4-4-3-** Following up on the status of children during and after divorce, and providing the necessary training to couples about the way of behaving with children and monitoring them, preventing child abuse, and defending children's rights.

**4-4-4-** Preparation of instructions for the complete assignment of the project to the non-governmental sector.

**4-4-5-** Using the capacity of rural welfare service complexes by deploying experts to prevent family disputes and generally divorce prevention in villages.

**4-4-6-** Developing a divorce reduction protocol based on new family therapy approaches.

##### 4-5- Support (cooperation and licenses)

**4-5-1-** Overlapping and multi-work with the judicial system between governmental and non-governmental institutions, as well as the weak relationship between the university and the executives should be resolved. The cooperation between the welfare organization and the Ministry of Education and other executives of the plan should be developed.

**4-5-2-** Implementing educational programs (films, documentaries, and inviting experts) via the radio and television.

**4-5-3-** Mandatory pre-marriage counseling and obtaining a pre-marriage life skills certificate by the deputy of prevention.

**4-5-4-** Taking the advantage of the model and the protocol for improving the family's mental health, consisting of psychologists, social workers, legal experts, psychiatrists, family therapists, and couple therapists in a favorable space away from the judicial environment to provide specialized services and interventions to families involved in acute family disputes. (The development of mental health services by the Ministry of Health and Medical Education is essential).

**4-5-5-** Inclusion of divorce prevention content in textbooks, especially in high schools.

**4-5-6-** Approving and amending some judicial laws to protect the family.

**4-5-7-** Developing the use of legal counseling (bar association and the judicial system).

**4-5-8-** Seeking support from the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution for a coherent and purposeful look at divorce.

**4-5-9-** Feasibility of financial support for families in the first 5 years of life using insurance services.

**4-5-10-** Consulting services must have insurance coverage.

**4-5-11-** Judicial registration should be done after psychological counseling.

## Discussion

The divorce prevention and reduction program were designed to identify and help couples solve problems before marriage, during, and after divorce. The research results indicated the personal, organizational, and national challenges for the program's progression. It is suggested to modify the goal and structure, improve the financing of the service mechanism, attract cooperation, and obtain licenses to solve the challenges.

The divorce prevention and reduction program were designed in three stages, before marriage, during divorce, and after divorce. The communication skills training program for spouses could reduce conflict among couples applying for divorce (22). The therapeutic approach of counseling is effective in reducing divorce, and couple therapists can use this model in working with couples to increase the couples' intimacy (23). In this regard, teaching life skills to divorce applicants who visited the family courts of Tabriz was significantly effective in increasing their marital satisfaction (24). Raisee et al. reported that holding face-to-face and group life skills training sessions with an emphasis on problems of children of divorce was effective in increasing children's mental health (25). Therefore, couple therapy training is an effective way to increase psychological well-being among incompatible couples and applicants of divorce, considering their social and cultural status (26) and the young generation's non-familiarity with the skills necessary to have healthy relationships and the correct manners of a compatible joint life with the native culture of Iranian families, including communication and emotional skills, job skills, skills in facing economic crises, nervous stress, and failures make crisis for young couples' marital life (5).

Based on the research results, insufficient inter-sectoral cooperation and multi-work are some challenges of this program. Various studies have reported insufficient inter-sectoral cooperation to implement the program (27-29). The Ministry of Sports and Youth, the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution, the judicial system, and the Ministry of Health cooperate in the field of divorce. Even though social harms have a very complex nature, all issues should not be demanded from the same institution, but the welfare organization operates strategically and expertly in this field (30). Multi-work and overlapping in this field lead to a waste of resources and a lack of social support targeting. It pushes all resources and facilities to one side and leads to a lack of wide coverage and lack of efficiency (31). Despite the establishment of the "National Committee to Control and Reduce Divorce" in the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, a challenge was the lack of a coherent plan to reduce divorce in this institution. Planning by focusing on organizational goals, and determining appropriate strategies and methods to achieve organizational goals increases the probability of achieving goals through the regulation of activities. Furthermore, planning with the correct allocation of resources and preventing multi-work leads to the correct use of organizational resources (32). Lack of manpower was a challenge in implementing the program. The most important factors, which can prevent the implementation of appropriate human distribution strategies, include insufficient capital and financial support and its concentration at the strategic and headquarters level, and inappropriate allocation of capital to the first line of care, lack of appropriate information about patients, ineffective organizational structures such as the lack of competence, skills, and training among employees, restrictive rules, and the lack of effective leaders and managers at micro levels (33-35). Inadequate financial credit was another challenge in implementing the program. According to the report of the Majlis Research Center, the credits for the social harm sector decreased by 9.8% for the next year's budget, but credits related to the reduction of divorce increased in the budget bill of 2020 (36). This increase was considered insufficient by experts to advance the program probably due to the disproportion of the volume of the problem with the credit or the lack of full allocation of the credit.

Based on the research results, the necessary coordination should be done with the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, and the division of labor should be done to improve the effectiveness of the divorce prevention and reduction program at the national level. Furthermore, financial credits should increase for programs that empower families during divorce. A common statistical system should be created for all organs, electronic files should be created for couples applying for divorce and their children, and children's status should be followed up during and after divorce, and the necessary training should be provided to couples in this regard. Since the first step in changing people's behavior about an issue is to have awareness about it (37-39), it is suggested to implement educational programs via radio and television and make pre-marriage

counseling mandatory, include information about divorce prevention in textbooks, especially at high schools, and approve and amend some judicial laws to support the family to advance the programs. Educational and counseling interventions are suggested in various studies to prevent and reduce divorce. Ghotbi et al. classified this training into two categories: pre-marriage and post-marriage training (40). In this regard, the mass media can attract couples to counseling centers to resolve their serious conflicts by producing attractive and informative programs before the family disputes of couples reach the highest severe state (41).

The present study was conducted with a qualitative approach with few samples that were purposefully selected, thereby limiting the possibility of generalizing the research findings even though the triangulation method was used in the research and it was sought to consider the maximum diversity of samples at the national and provincial level. Future studies are suggested using the stakeholders' opinions in other executive bodies, as well as humanities faculty members. Future studies can also prioritize these challenges and their implementation solutions in quantitative studies.

## Conclusion

Despite the increasing trend of divorce in society and the implementation of the divorce prevention and reduction program in the welfare organization, this program was facing personal, organizational, and national challenges. It is useful to use strategies to modify the goal and structure, measures to finance and improve the service mechanism, attract cooperation, and obtain permits to improve the current status.

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## Ethical statement

The project was approved by the ethics committee of the university (IR.TUMS.VCR.REC.1397.509) to comply with the ethical principles.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

## Author contributions

All authors equally contributed to preparing this article.

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