



## Divorce and Female Entrepreneurship: Between Source of Motivation and Societal Constraints

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### Abstract

This article investigates the relationship between divorce and female entrepreneurship in Algeria, focusing on divorced women operating in the handicraft sector in the wilaya of Tizi-Ouzou. While divorce is typically framed as a private or legal event, this study conceptualizes it as a structural rupture with profound social, economic, symbolic, and identity consequences. Drawing on qualitative interviews conducted in 2025 with ten divorced women entrepreneurs, the research examines how divorce functions simultaneously as a catalyst for economic initiative and as a mechanism reinforcing structural inequalities. Anchored in a socio-constructivist feminist framework and informed by Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence, intersectionality theory, feminist economics, and embeddedness theory, the article analyzes how gendered habitus, social stigma, limited social capital, and institutional norms shape entrepreneurial trajectories. Findings demonstrate that female entrepreneurship in this context is primarily necessity-driven, emerging as a survival strategy following economic vulnerability and weak institutional support in addition to the pressure of society. However, entrepreneurial practices remain embedded within systems of male domination, moral surveillance, and restricted mobility. The study argues that divorced women's entrepreneurship constitutes a paradoxical space: a site of resilience and partial emancipation that simultaneously reproduces gender hierarchies. By integrating marital status into entrepreneurship studies, the article contributes to sociological debates on gendered economic agency in post-divorce contexts.

**Keywords:** divorce, female entrepreneurship, symbolic violence, necessity entrepreneurship, gender norms, social capital, resilience, Algeria

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### Introduction

Over the past decade, Algeria has witnessed a significant rise in divorce rates. According to national statistics, the divorce rate increased from 20.9% in 2019 to 33.5% in 2023. This demographic evolution reflects not merely changing marital dynamics but broader transformations in gender relations, economic expectations, and individual autonomy.

Divorce represents more than a dissolution of marriage; it constitutes a reconfiguration of social belonging. As Yacine (2023) suggests, marriage binds individuals within socially sanctioned networks of reciprocity and legitimacy. Divorce disrupts these bonds, producing what may be termed a "symbolic displacement" of women from their socially recognized position.

In societies where marriage remains a central organizing institution of gendered identity, divorce destabilizes women's economic security and symbolic capital. The assumption that marriage ensures

material protection persists, even as women increasingly participate in economic life. Divorce thus exposes the fragility of gendered economic arrangements.

This article explores how divorced women navigate economic survival through entrepreneurship. It addresses three central research questions:

1. How does divorce restructure women's economic opportunities and constraints?
2. To what extent does entrepreneurship function as a pathway to emancipation?
3. How do social norms and symbolic violence shape post-divorce entrepreneurial trajectories?

## **Theoretical Positioning**

### **1. Gendered Economic Structures and Feminist Economics**

Feminist economics emphasizes that market participation is shaped by unpaid reproductive labor and gendered divisions of work (Folbre, 2001). Women's economic engagement cannot be separated from care-giving responsibilities.

In Algeria, marriage traditionally structures women's access to economic resources. Divorce disrupts this structure, compelling women to seek independent income while remaining responsible for childcare. Thus, their entrepreneurial decisions occur within dual burdens: economic necessity and maternal obligation.

### **2. Symbolic Violence and the Gendered Habitus**

Bourdieu's (1998) concept of symbolic violence provides a lens to understand how domination operates invisibly. Divorced women often internalize social judgments, perceiving themselves as morally scrutinized.

Habitus shapes not only aspirations but also perceptions of legitimate ambition. Women may self-limit business expansion to avoid social criticism. Thus, structural domination is reproduced through internalized norms.

### **3. Intersectionality and Marital Status as Analytical Category**

Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) demonstrates how multiple axes of inequality intersect. In this study, marital status operates as a crucial but underexplored axis. Divorced women in rural Kabyle areas experience compounded marginalization: gendered expectations; limited education, rural social surveillance and maternal responsibilities. Marital status thus functions as a structuring dimension of economic opportunity.

### **4. Embeddedness and Social Capital**

Entrepreneurship research underscores the importance of networks (Granovetter, 1985; Coleman, 1988). However, divorced women's networks are often restricted to family and local clients. Bonding social capital (close-knit ties) is present, but bridging capital (connections to broader markets) is limited. This restricts innovation and growth.

### **5. Necessity vs. Opportunity Entrepreneurship**

Entrepreneurship theory distinguishes between opportunity-driven and necessity-driven entrepreneurship (Tessier-Dargent, 2014). The women interviewed overwhelmingly fall into the latter category. However, this binary oversimplifies reality. Divorce-generated entrepreneurship blends constraint with agency. It represents reactive agency, action under structural pressure.

## **Methodological Reflexivity**

This qualitative study is based on ten semi-structured interviews conducted in 2025. While the sample size is limited, qualitative depth allows exploration of subjective meanings. The Kabyle context is significant. Historically analyzed by Bourdieu (1972), Kabyle society is structured by strong kinship

norms and honor codes. The researcher's positionality and familiarity with the local context facilitated trust but also required reflexivity to avoid normative assumptions. Limitations include small sample size, sectoral homogeneity (handicrafts) and regional specificity. Future comparative research should include urban settings such as Algiers or Oran.

### **Findings and Extended Analysis**

#### **Divorce as Structural Rupture**

Divorce produced immediate financial instability. Eight out of ten women lacked consistent child support. Entrepreneurship became an urgent necessity. Divorce also disrupted symbolic belonging. Several participants described feeling "watched" or "judged." Economic activity became a means of restoring dignity.

#### **Entrepreneurship as Gendered Continuity**

Business activities extended domestic competencies (sewing, baking). This reflects continuity rather than rupture in gendered roles. Such continuity reduces social resistance but limits diversification into higher-profit sectors.

#### **Mobility, Surveillance, and Spatial Constraints**

Mobility restrictions illustrate how spatial norms regulate female autonomy. Women avoided distant wholesale markets due to fear of gossip. Spatial constraint functions as economic constraint. Geography becomes gendered.

#### **Risk Aversion and Post-Divorce Identity**

Risk-taking is socially coded as masculine. Divorced women expressed preference for stability over expansion. Experiencing marital breakdown may intensify desire for predictability. Entrepreneurship thus becomes conservative rather than innovative.

#### **Stigma and Market Penalties**

Five women reported losing clients due to stigma. Divorce becomes economically penalized.

This dynamic resembles Goffman's (1963) concept of spoiled identity. Social distrust translates into market exclusion.

#### **Comparative and Global Perspectives**

Globally, research in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia shows similar patterns of necessity-driven female entrepreneurship following marital dissolution (Field et al., 2010).

However, North African contexts combine Islamic legal frameworks, extended kinship systems, and rural honor norms, producing distinctive pressures.

Comparative Maghreb research could examine Tunisia or Morocco to assess variations in legal enforcement of child support and their economic implications.

#### **Policy Recommendations**

**1. Targeted Microcredit Programs:** From a sociological perspective, targeted microcredit programs should not be conceived primarily as financial tools, but as instruments capable of intervening in gendered structures of resource distribution. Access to credit is socially regulated and embedded in networks of trust, legitimacy, and symbolic capital. Divorced women, as shown in this study, experience a deterioration of symbolic legitimacy following marital rupture, which affects their perceived credibility in financial institutions. A targeted program would therefore function as institutional recognition of their social status as autonomous subjects, counterbalancing the delegitimizing effects of divorce. In this sense, credit becomes a medium through which the state symbolically affirms women's right to economic participation independent of marital affiliation.

Moreover, such programs could operate as mechanisms of social reclassification. By creating eligibility criteria explicitly inclusive of divorced women, institutions challenge the implicit norm that economic security is mediated by male guardianship. The sociological significance lies less in the amount of capital provided than in the transformation of institutional discourse surrounding women's dependency. When credit structures acknowledge divorce as a socially produced vulnerability rather than an individual failure, they contribute to shifting the normative boundaries that define women's economic citizenship.

**2. Legal Enforcement of Child Support:** The enforcement of child support obligations must be analyzed sociologically as a matter of institutional accountability and gendered power redistribution. In contexts where divorced women bear primary care-giving responsibilities, the absence of effective enforcement mechanisms reinforces patriarchal arrangements that naturalize male economic disengagement after divorce. Weak enforcement signals institutional tolerance of gendered asymmetry. Strengthening enforcement would therefore constitute not merely a legal reform, but a reassertion of state authority in regulating familial responsibility beyond marital continuity.

Furthermore, consistent enforcement carries symbolic implications for gender norms. It communicates that fatherhood is a continuing social obligation rather than a voluntary role contingent on marital stability. This shift contributes to redefining masculinity in relational and accountable terms. From a sociological standpoint, child support enforcement participates in restructuring the moral economy of divorce by redistributing responsibility and challenging the cultural assumption that post-divorce vulnerability is primarily a female burden. It thus intervenes in the reproduction of gendered dependency.

**3. Business Incubators for Divorced Women:** Business incubators, when framed sociologically, can be understood as collective spaces of social re-legitimation rather than mere entrepreneurial accelerators. Divorced women often experience social isolation and symbolic marginalization, which limit their access to diverse social networks. Creating dedicated institutional spaces fosters the production of bridging social capital and disrupts patterns of confinement within kinship-based circles. These spaces would function as arenas where alternative identities—entrepreneur, craftswoman, professional—can be collectively constructed and socially validated. Importantly, incubators can serve as sites of consciousness formation. Through peer interaction and shared narratives, women may reinterpret divorce not solely as stigma but as a moment of redefinition. Such collective environments counteract the internalization of symbolic violence by enabling women to articulate experiences of constraint as structurally produced rather than individually caused. The sociological value of incubators therefore lies in their capacity to transform subjective dispositions (*habitus*) through new forms of social interaction and recognition.

**4. Digital Market Access Training:** Digital training programs should be conceptualized as interventions into spatial and social hierarchies. The study demonstrates that women's mobility is constrained by moral surveillance and reputational risk. Physical presence in public commercial spaces may expose divorced women to scrutiny. Digital platforms, however, create alternative arenas of interaction where economic exchange is partially decoupled from bodily presence. Sociologically, this represents a transformation in the spatial organization of gender norms.

At the same time, digital competence facilitates entry into broader symbolic communities beyond the immediate locality. Participation in online networks can dilute the weight of localized stigma by diversifying audiences and social recognition. However, digital inclusion must be accompanied by critical awareness of new forms of surveillance and gendered online harassment. Thus, digital training should be framed not simply as skill acquisition but as empowerment within evolving social fields. It enables women to renegotiate the boundaries between private and public spheres that historically regulate female respectability.

**5. Community Anti-Stigma Campaigns:** Anti-stigma initiatives are central from a sociological perspective because they target the symbolic foundations of inequality. The findings reveal that divorce produces what can be described as a spoiled social identity, affecting women's reputation, trustworthiness, and moral standing. Such stigma operates as a mechanism of informal social control,

limiting mobility and economic interaction. Community campaigns, therefore, intervene directly in the symbolic order that sustains gender hierarchies.

These initiatives should aim to transform collective representations of divorce, shifting from narratives of moral failure to understandings of social complexity and individual dignity. Engagement with local associations, educators, and religious actors can facilitate normative change by embedding alternative discourses within respected institutions. Symbolic transformation is slow and contested, yet it is crucial: without challenging the cultural codes that frame divorced women as socially suspect, structural reforms may remain fragile. Sociologically, anti-stigma campaigns address the cultural reproduction of domination at its root.

Structural change requires institutional intervention. Taken together, these five recommendations should not be interpreted as isolated technical measures, but as interconnected interventions into the gendered social order that structures divorced women's vulnerability. Targeted credit programs, effective child support enforcement, collective incubator spaces, digital inclusion initiatives, and anti-stigma campaigns each operate at different levels of the social structure; economic institutions, legal authority, network formation, spatial organization, and symbolic representation. Sociologically, their coherence lies in their shared capacity to disrupt the reproduction of gendered dependency that divorce often intensifies. Rather than treating divorced women's entrepreneurship as an individual adaptation to hardship, these measures reframe it as a socially embedded practice shaped by institutional arrangements and cultural norms. By addressing material precarity alongside symbolic delegitimization, they intervene simultaneously in objective conditions and subjective dispositions. Ultimately, the aim is not simply to facilitate business activity, but to transform the social relations that confine divorced women to survival-oriented trajectories. Sustainable change requires reconfiguring the normative, legal, and institutional frameworks that define women's economic citizenship, so that entrepreneurship becomes a space of recognized agency rather than a compensatory response to structural exclusion

### **Theoretical Contributions**

This article contributes by introducing marital status as a structuring variable in entrepreneurship studies. It demonstrates how symbolic violence operates economically, reframing thus necessity entrepreneurship as reactive agency under gendered domination. It challenges celebratory narratives of female entrepreneurship that ignore structural inequality.

### **Conclusion**

Divorce functions as both rupture and catalyst. It pushes women toward economic initiative while embedding them in intensified structural constraints. Female entrepreneurship in this context is neither purely emancipatory nor purely reproductive. It is a negotiated space of constrained autonomy. Understanding women's economic agency requires situating it within systems of symbolic violence, social control, and institutional asymmetry. Future longitudinal research should explore whether entrepreneurial identity strengthens over time or remains survival-oriented.

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