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Behind closed doors: Exploring Islamic family counsellors' perspectives on marital conflict and divorce in Negeri Sembilan

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The rising divorce rates among Muslim couples in Malaysia, particularly in Negeri Sembilan, highlight the urgent need to explore the root causes of marital breakdown from the perspective of religious marriage counsellors. This study aimed to examine the views of Islamic Family Advisory Officers (Pegawai Khidmat Nasihat/Runding Cara Keluarga Islam) on current trends in marital conflict and whether poor sexual intimacy is perceived as a contributing factor. **Materials and Methods:** A qualitative research design was employed using semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 13 Islamic Family Counsellors from five districts in Negeri Sembilan. Participants were recruited via purposive sampling with assistance from the Family Law Division, Negeri Sembilan Islamic Religious Affairs Department (JHEAINS). Interviews were conducted online in Bahasa Malaysia, recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Manual thematic analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework. Data saturation was reached by the 13th interview. Ethical approval was obtained from the Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia Human Research Ethics Committee (USIM/JKEP/2024-306), and official permission was granted by JHEAINS. **Results:** Five major themes emerged: (1) challenges in sexual intimacy, (2) ineffective communication, (3) neglect and confusion over marital roles, (4) third-party and digital & social media interference, and (5) weak religious and spiritual grounding. Participants reported that sexual dissatisfaction was a recurring concern among couples, though often unspoken due to cultural taboos. This dissatisfaction was commonly linked with emotional neglect and poor communication. Participants also observed that a lack of clarity in marital roles and responsibilities especially among younger couples, led to misunderstandings and long-term resentment. Third-party interference, such as from in-laws or extramarital involvement, as well as digital & social media distractions, were seen as escalating underlying issues. Notably, most participants viewed spiritual weakness and a lack of religious practice as root causes of marital instability, suggesting that couples with strong faith and shared spiritual routines showed greater emotional resilience and marital harmony. These findings reveal the complex interplay between unspoken intimacy issues, emotional communication, modern societal pressures, and spiritual disconnect. **Conclusion:** The study highlights the importance of integrating culturally sensitive, faith-based elements into marriage counselling services. Counsellors require training and tools to address taboo topics such as sexual dissatisfaction and emotional neglect. Incorporating structured discussions on communication, sexual well-being, and spirituality within both pre- and post-marital programmes may help reduce the divorce rate and strengthen family institutions in Muslim communities.

Keywords: Sexual dissatisfaction, communication breakdown, spirituality, marital roles, divorce, Islamic counselling