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Cite as: Mousa, M.; Özbilgin, M. F. & Szczepańska-Woszczyna, K. (2025) Returning to Work After Divorce: Gendered Experiences of Street-Level Bureaucrats in Egypt, ***Public Administration and Development***

Returning to Work After Divorce: Gendered Experiences of Street-Level Bureaucrats in Egypt

Abstract

This study adopts a phenomenon-based approach and conducts two rounds of interviews with 40 street-level bureaucrats in the Egyptian public sector to explore the experiences of divorced female and male bureaucrats returning to work after divorce, as well as the impact of divorce on their use of discretionary powers. The interview analysis reveals that divorced female bureaucrats experience verbal and sexual harassment, judgment regarding their appearance, and limited interactions with colleagues. These women express a need for additional leave, higher financial compensation, and a relatively low interest in managerial positions. In contrast, divorced male bureaucrats primarily express concerns about the need for greater financial support, given their obligation to allocate 30% of their salaries to support their ex-wives and children. The findings also affirm that divorce has a marginal impact on the work performance of street-level bureaucrats.

Keywords: returning to work, street-level bureaucrats, divorce, event systems theory, social stigma theory

1. Introduction

Divorce is an increasingly common yet extreme event with serious repercussions among married individuals (Saeed et al., 2022). Divorce as a marital outcome often stems from a poor choice of life partner, poor financial planning, an obvious gap in education levels or the discovery after getting married of different moral values (Gilber & Brik, 2020). People sometimes seek divorce due to the intervention of an in-law relative or due to a lack of sexual compatibility (John et al., 2018). Globally, in 2022, based on the available marriage and divorce data, the divorce rate stood at 1.6 per 1,000 people. While data for 2023 is still pending for many countries, an analysis of figures from 56 nations indicates that the global average crude divorce rate was approximately 1.8 per 1,000 people in 2023. In some countries such as Maldives, Kazakhstan, Belarus, and China, the divorce rate is above 2.5; in countries such as India, Vietnam, Sri Lanka, and Peru, the divorce rate is below 0.3. In Egypt, the divorce rate stands at 1.8, the global average (Divorce.com, 2024).

Regarding women, divorce restructures many of their sociocultural practices (Clements et al., 2004). For instance, after divorce, women tend to engage in fewer social gatherings and have a greater tendency to stay at home (Andre et al., 2019). Reportedly, life after a divorce is more challenging for women than for men (Andre et al., 2019). According to Saeed et al. (2022), studies on divorced working women, while growing, are very few. Divorce causes trauma for couples (or at least one member of the couple) (Ragins, 2008). Moreover, it challenges traditional familial norms (Lawson & Satt, 2016). In addition, divorce brings negative prejudice, rejection, and the social exclusion of divorced women, particularly in traditionally conservative societies (Saeed et al., 2022; Mousa, 2024). In organisational contexts, announcing a divorce might impact one's relationship with colleagues and result in backbiting and gossip (Pachankis, 2007). Many authors (Surgevil & Akyol, 2011; Ozturk & Tatli, 2015) have perceived divorce as a demographic change

that might result in workplace discrimination, negative prejudice or marginalization for the divorcee. This is why divorced individuals tend to hide their divorce, even for a period of time, or choose to inform only certain colleagues (Clair et al., 2005; Ozturk & Tatli, 2015).

Like many other professionals, many street-level bureaucrats experience divorce. They are the frontline employees working in public organizations, municipalities, and ministries who must interact with large numbers of citizens daily while meeting their demands (Lipsky, 1980; Brodkin, 2012; Dadze-Arthur & Mörth, 2021; Mousa et al., 2025). Such street-level bureaucrats possess discretionary power through which they can smoothly manage the peaceful relationship between government services and members of the public (Fleming, 2019; Vedung, 2015; Fernandez & Faisal, 2024). Moreover, it is through this discretionary power that street bureaucrats can decide whom to serve and how (Lipsky, 1980; Raaphorst, 2018; Hendriks et al., 2024). According to Gade and Wilkins (2013) and Jilke and Tummers (2018), guaranteeing street bureaucrats a rational level of discretionary power is a necessity, given their otherwise lack of resources as public employees. However, it is worth highlighting that the scope of discretionary power varies across countries and contexts (Tummers & Bekkers, 2014). For instance, the discretionary power of many street-level bureaucrats in Egypt is marginal in comparison with that granted to their counterparts in developed Western countries (Choi & Yeongiun, 2025; Mousa et al., 2025a, b). Additionally, the use of such discretionary power is frequently shaped by psychological (emotions, attitudes towards clients, relationships with colleagues) and demographic (gender, age, marital status) factors (Bradbury & Kellough, 2007; Vedung, 2015; Mousa et al., 2024; Mousa, 2024). This is why the fair implementation of discretionary power is mostly non-existent in the majority of public contexts (Lau & Redlawsk, 2001). Instead, it is mostly subject to the professional judgement and personal interests of the bureaucrats (Hupe & Buffat, 2014).

In the Egyptian context, divorce has become an undeniable reality (Hafez, 2024). For instance, in 2022, the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics revealed that a new marriage occurred in Egypt every 30 seconds and a new divorce every 2 minutes (Alarabiya, 2022). The same agency reported that the number of marriage contracts reached 961,220 in 2023, compared to 929,428 in 2022, an increase of 3.4%, while the number of divorces reached 265,606 cases in 2023, compared to 269,834 in 2022, a decrease of 1.6% (Adel, 2024). Due to the evident increase in divorce (Abdelazeez, 2024) and the limited studies of street-level bureaucrats in Egypt (Mousa, 2025), the authors have sought to examine the experiences of returning to work after divorce among street-level bureaucrats who have experienced divorce; therefore, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

1- What are the main workplace challenges facing street-level bureaucrats after divorce?

2- To what extent does divorce influence street-level bureaucrats' use of discretionary power and why?

This is the first study to address the main challenges facing divorcee bureaucrats in a little-known non-Western, male-dominated context, the Egyptian public sector. In doing so, the authors explore whether the public sector in Egypt tailors and implements inclusion policies to support divorcee staff. Moreover, we seek to compare the main difficulties facing divorced female and male bureaucrats. Hence, the authors highlight the gendered experience of the return to work after a divorce and whether divorce might influence how street-level bureaucrats use discretionary power and their readiness to continue serving the public. This might drive administrations of public units to rethink whether the current discretionary power granted to street-level bureaucrats is necessary, even after facing such a major personal event as a divorce.

2. Literature review

2.1 Divorce, returning to work, and event systems theory

Divorce is a significant and challenging life event experienced by married individuals (Saeed et al., 2022). It not only impacts personal lives but also disrupts the mechanisms through which individuals fulfil their professional responsibilities (Andre et al., 2019). Despite the emotional toll of divorce, individuals are often required to return to work and resume their job-related activities (Saeed et al., 2022). This is because employment serves as a primary means for individuals to meet their basic needs, such as food, shelter, and clothing (Harvey-Krefting, 1985). Furthermore, work is characterized as both paid and unpaid physical and/or mental activity that sustains an individual and their family (Dickie, 2003). Employment also provides individuals with a sense of dignity, self-confidence, self-esteem, a sense of being needed, financial security, and social engagement (Roelen et al., 2011).

According to Stone (2003), Jakobsen (2004), Crooks et al. (2009), Soeker (2011), Asaba et al. (2021b), and Cross et al. (2023), significant personal experiences can influence an individual's mood, routines, identity, adaptability, self-esteem, and sense of meaning—all of which are crucial components of positive mental health. This is one reason why many employers periodically update or refresh workplace norms to accommodate the evolving needs of their staff (Holmlund et al., 2018). Moreover, employers must ensure the physical and mental readiness of employees returning to work following a prolonged absence or after experiencing a major life event (e.g., becoming a parent, recovering from physical injury, facing serious illness, or undergoing a divorce) (Shaw et al., 2002; Jakobsen, 2009). Providing adequate organizational support is essential in facilitating the reintegration of employees into the workforce after such events (Asaba et al., 2023).

The Event Systems Theory (Kulichyova et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2023) posits that an individual's job performance cannot be separated from significant personal events. In other words, an employee's cognitions and emotions are profoundly influenced by major life events (Liu et al., 2023). Consequently, a major personal event, such as divorce, can affect an individual's work routines, behaviors, and overall continuity in the workplace. Employees should be provided with a supportive work environment, as outlined in the eighth goal of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (Asaba et al., 2023). To achieve this, employers must consider the complex phases, events, responsibilities, and relationships with various stakeholders (e.g., colleagues, clients, managers, suppliers, and social actors) that employees navigate when returning to work after a significant life event, such as divorce (Young et al., 2005; Asaba et al., 2023). Notably, much of the existing research on return-to-work policies has focused on individuals' acceptance, readiness, experiences, and coping mechanisms following serious illness (e.g., cancer, brain injury) or injury. However, the specific challenges faced by employees returning to work after divorce remain underexplored (De Boer et al., 2009; Chan et al., 2009; Kalfa et al., 2019).

2.2 Divorce, social stigma theory and the Egyptian context

The eighth goal of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasizes gender equality (United Nations Development Programme, 2008). Despite global efforts, gender inequality remains a persistent challenge, particularly affecting women, who continue to face limited social support, marginal recognition within organizations, and underrepresentation in senior leadership positions (Ely et al., 2011; Zeinali et al., 2021; Khader et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2025). According to the World Economic Forum (2021), only 27% of senior leadership roles worldwide are held by women. Complementing the SDGs, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) serves as a comprehensive international

legal framework mandating signatory nation to eliminate discrimination against women and girls across all spheres of life while promoting equal rights. Adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1979, CEDAW has been ratified by 189 countries as of February 2025 (United Nations, n.d.).

In many Middle Eastern countries, including Egypt, the empowerment of women is often framed within broader narratives of sociopolitical reform (Mousa, 2024; Mousa et al., 2024; Mousa & Arslan, 2025). In the Egyptian context, for instance, recent reforms have included the introduction of a 25% quota for women's representation in parliamentary seats (Ragheb, 2023). However, despite these legislative advances, structural and social challenges persist—particularly for divorced women. Divorce is often the result of diminished trust between partners, recurring conflict, abuse, or infidelity (Clements et al., 2004). Empirical studies have consistently shown that women experience a reduction in social connectedness post-divorce (Kitson & Morgan, 1990), along with declines in mental well-being (Carr, 2015) and increased psychological distress (Simon & Marcussen, 1999).

Goffman's (1963) theory of social stigma posits that individuals may experience devaluation, exclusion, or discrimination within both social and organizational settings based on attributes such as religion, nationality, gender, race, ethnicity, or changes in demographic status. This stigma can significantly undermine an individual's self-esteem, confidence, and interpersonal relationships (Link & Phelan, 2013). Within organizational cultures, discriminatory attitudes may be unintentionally embedded, reinforcing unequal treatment of marginalized groups (Bos et al., 2013). In Egypt, divorced women are often perceived as having failed in their personal lives, a stigma that is frequently extended to their professional competence. Shehata (2017) confirms that divorced women in Egyptian society are commonly stigmatized, although their responses to such

stigma vary. According to Meisenbach (2010), individuals typically cope with perceived stigma through strategies such as acceptance, avoidance, externalizing blame, or minimizing the perceived offensiveness of their condition.

In conservative cultures, like the Egyptian one, women lose more than men after their divorce (Shehata, 2017). In Egypt, following a divorce, fathers generally do not have custody of their children or are responsible for their daily care. Instead, they are typically granted weekly visitation rights in accordance with the country's visitation laws. Furthermore, fathers are required to contribute 30% of their income toward the maintenance of both their minor children and ex-spouse (Abdelazeez, 2024). The context of the public sector is fascinating for divorced women, as women who were either divorced or widowed were most likely to be employed in the public sector (Hendy, 2021). Right after their divorce, women in the Egyptian context mostly encounter a lack of financial stability (Abdelazeez, 2024). Divorced women often must rely on themselves after their divorce (Shehata, 2017). The situation becomes worse for non-working women. Moreover, it becomes even worse for non-working divorced women with children (Abdelazzez, 2024). This new situation leads women to feel a struggle and stigmatizing social concern regarding whether they can manage the burdens of life alone, whether they harm themselves and their children (if there) with this divorce decision, and whether they feel ready to return to their ex-husbands (Shehata, 2017).

Such stigmatizing questions negatively affect the psychological well-being and mental health of women divorcees (Abdelazeez, 2024). Moreover, the main struggle divorced women in Egypt face remains as to how they may obtain custody of their children and secure their financial rights from their ex-husbands (Ahmed, 2021). The period needed for judiciary rulings of divorced women's alimony might reach two years (Hafez, 2024). In those two years, divorced women sometimes do

not find a source of income (Ahmed, 2021). Hence, single mothers in Egypt suffer more than others after increased living costs (Ahmed, 2021). It is worth highlighting that in 2024, the government in Egypt established a family syndicate to fund divorced women and their children during the period of judiciary rulings (Hafez, 2024). Moreover, the government has funded it with five billion Egyptian pounds to guarantee rapid support for non-working single mothers in Egypt (Hafez, 2024). However, no recent studies have addressed the effectiveness of establishing this family syndicate, as it was developed only a few months ago. The absence of support mechanisms for women divorcees who return to work makes them an interesting group to study in terms of post-divorce adjustment, social stigmatization, and workplace vulnerability.

3. Research design

3.1 Sampling and procedures

We adopted a phenomenon-based approach, representing a mechanism of addressing novel, ambiguous, and previously undiscovered organizational phenomena (return to work after divorce in this case) (Doh, 2015). To adopt this approach, management scholars use one or two existing theories to build a ground for the phenomenon they explore (Mees-Buss et al., 2020). In the present study, we used both event systems and social stigma theories to ensure a ground/basis for what divorced street-level bureaucrats might encounter when returning to work after divorce. Specifically, the event systems theory helps the authors to understand how workplace behavior may (or may not) be affected by a significant personal event, while the social stigma theory assists in elaborating how a change in marital status sometimes leads to a person's exclusion. Hence, the phenomenon-based approach is explorative and usually starts with developing a fit between a new phenomenon (mainly occurring in an unknown context, the Egyptian public sector in this case)

and existing theories (Hambrick, 2007; Flick, 2009). Moreover, and like other types of qualitative research (e.g., ethnographic studies, case studies, etc.), the research problem is created by authors, given their knowledge, experience, and observation, and they mainly depend on semi-structured interviews to find a solution for the problem they have.

The lead author commenced data collection in September 2024 using a purposive sampling strategy aimed at identifying currently employed street-level bureaucrats across various ministries in Egypt. Initial efforts involved searching LinkedIn for eligible participants; however, this approach proved largely ineffective due to the limited online presence of Egyptian public sector employees. To overcome this limitation and leveraging his positionality as a researcher of Egyptian origin with substantial contextual expertise, the lead author adopted a snowball sampling technique. He reached out to two personal acquaintances working as public school teachers affiliated with the Ministry of Education, who subsequently assisted in recruiting 18 divorced women bureaucrats. These women, all employed either as teachers or administrative staff (excluding managerial positions) within the Ministry of Education, met the study's predefined inclusion criteria. Specifically, participants were required to be employed in a public sector organization, have a minimum of three years' work experience following their divorce, and be parents to at least one child. This combination of purposive and snowball sampling ensured the selection of respondents who were well-positioned to provide meaningful insights into the phenomenon under investigation—namely, the return-to-work experiences of divorced public sector employees in Egypt.

The study unfolded in two distinct phases of semi-structured interviews. The first phase was conducted in October 2024 and involved interviews with the aforementioned 20 divorced women bureaucrats, recruited through the combined sampling approach. The second phase followed in

November 2024 and targeted divorced male bureaucrats, who were identified through referrals from the female participants interviewed in the first phase. This yielded an additional 20 participants, all of whom were also employed within the Ministry of Education in Egypt in teaching or administrative roles. Notably, the use of purposive sampling in this context was guided by the framework outlined by Mousa et al. (2025), which emphasizes the importance of examining macro-level (e.g., institutional structures), organizational-level (e.g., workplace dynamics), and micro-level (e.g., individual and familial) factors when exploring complex social phenomena such as post-divorce professional reintegration. By adhering to these methodological principles, the study ensured both the relevance and depth of its empirical sample, ultimately facilitating a nuanced understanding of gendered experiences of bureaucratic employment in the aftermath of divorce within the Egyptian public sector.

The lead author used the interview guide developed by Mousa (2024) when addressing the return to work of women bureaucrats after pregnancy and delivery of their babies. Moreover, the authors refreshed, to some extent, the interview questions. It is worth highlighting that in qualitative research, researchers recruit respondents who are relevant to add value and information regarding the phenomenon under investigation. Hence, in qualitative research, researchers don't care about the statistical representation of their sample (Flick, 2009). The following is the main demographic characteristics of the respondents interviewed. Admittedly, the lead author explained all respondents the main objective of the present study. Moreover, and in line with the generally accepted ethical guidelines of conducting interviews, all authors were assured their anonymity, and they were advised to skip any sensitive interview question. The interviews were conducted in Arabic. Moreover, both the lead author and a professional translator translated the transcript from Arabic to English. The duration of each interview ranged from 30 to 50 minutes. In the first stage

of interviews, the lead author reached the saturation point after 18 interviews while in the second stage, the saturation point reached at the interview 14.

3.2 Data analysis

This is an exploratory study (Yin, 2003), and hence, the authors should conclude by creating a model, generating new information, or developing a theory. It is worth highlighting that addressing street-level bureaucrats' return to work after divorce represents a serious attempt to fill in a gap in management and public administration literature by focusing on a genuinely unexplored context (Mousa, 2024). The authors followed deductive reasoning by starting from Even systems theory (Kulichyova et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2023), which explains how major personal events might affect one's cognitions and performance, then they moved to understand the social stigma theory (Goffman, 1963), which describes how a change in a demographic characteristic (divorce in this case) might cause exclusion and discrimination against its holder.

The authors manually analyzed their data using the six steps of Braun and Clarke (2012). Hence, they started with a separate read of the transcription to familiarize themselves with the collected data. This aligns with Alvesson and Karreman (2011), who consider respondents' answers the key to understanding the investigated organizational phenomenon. Second, the authors adopted open coding procedures by identifying the most repetitive words voiced by respondents (Lune & Berg, 2016). In this stage, the authors noted discrimination, sexual harassment, verbal harassment, undesirable words, job performance, client relations, relations with colleagues, and accepting work hours. Specifically, they tried to form a meaning or an idea about the main challenges divorced bureaucrats face. Third, the authors gathered the identified keywords in three sub-themes. This is known as implementing the axial coding (Matteucci & Gnoth, 2017). In this stage, they constituted

the following three sub-themes: work relations, work arrangements, and work empowerment challenges. Fourth, they developed selective coding by excluding the less essential keywords identified (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Fifth, the authors compared their findings, and the data gathered through the interviews and asked a few respondents to assess their main findings. Finally, the authors reported that.

To enhance the reliability of their data, the authors carefully designed their semi-structured interview based on the study of Mousa (2024) after re-structuring them to fit divorced bureaucrats, not pregnant ones. Moreover, they triangulated their interviews through examining some policy documents and previous studies on the status of working women and street bureaucrats in the Egyptian context in addition to a separate reading of their transcriptions (Turner et al., 2017). This helped them to ensure the consistency between respondents' answers and our constituted themes (Bispo Júnior, 2022). It is worth highlighting that the separate reading of the transcripts enhances the internal validity of the collected data (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Moreover, comparing the constituted findings with those of previous studies on the status of women in culturally constrained contexts helped the authors to discover any socially desirable answers (Nelson, 2017).

4. Findings

The present study's authors seek to identify the main workplace challenges facing street-level bureaucrats after divorce and the extent to which divorce might influence those bureaucrats' use of the discretionary power granted to them. The following are the detailed answers of the two main research questions.

4.1 What are the main challenges facing divorced street-level bureaucrats?

4.1.1 Work relations

4.1.1.1 Verbal and sexual harassment

All addressed divorced women bureaucrats agreed that they usually encounter unstopping verbal harassment from their male colleagues. Moreover, they sometimes face verbal abuse from their women non-divorced colleagues.

> *I get very annoyed with my male colleagues. At least half of them tried to show care and affection after my divorce. I don't know why everyone believes they are Brad Pitt, and my divorce allows him to show it. R2*

> *My female colleagues assume a voluntary task: finding me a groom. Every one of them tells me to get married so that I can escape from what people say. For them, divorce is a crime I committed. R12*

The matter is different with divorced men bureaucrats who agreed that they sometimes find verbal compliments from colleagues. Specifically, non-divorced women and male colleagues offer the divorced man his bride. The divorced man bureaucrat finds that offer interesting or funny.

> *I like the interest of my male and female colleagues and their attempt to find me a suitable wife. I appreciate their solidarity. R21*

12 of the addressed women bureaucrats confirm that they mostly face a sort of sexual harassment from their colleagues, managers, and clients who neglect those women's feelings and their society's cultural norms.

I and other divorced women are exposed daily to sexual harassment and lustful looks from male colleagues, managers, and clients who know that I am divorced. R8

A divorced woman employee who works in the public sector is a prey everyone is waiting for. There is no longer any respect for socio-cultural traditions. R13

Divorced men never complain about sexual harassment. They only receive marriage offers based on the nominations of men and women colleagues. The addressed male respondents explained that they live in a male-dominated society. Therefore, they rarely face sexual harassment, even if women become more daring and demanding of their rights.

No man is harassed in Egypt. Only women are exposed to this. In Egypt, men have their status and respect. R30

4.1.1.2 The focus on a divorced person's appearance

The addressed divorced bureaucrats indicated that they receive focus, scrutiny, and follow-up on their looks, appearance, and style of clothes from male colleagues. For example, if they wear light colors, they are accused of trying to attract attention, and when they wear black clothes, they are accused of being depressed because of the divorce.

My male colleagues focus on my appearance, movements, clothing, and emotions. R17

After the divorce, I was watched by all my colleagues. If I wear light clothes, my colleagues accuse me of trying to seduce someone and find a groom. If I wear dark clothes, they accuse me of depression result of divorce. What should I do then? R19

On the contrary, addressed men denied any exposure to scrutiny and appearance.

No one cares about my clothes or my emotions. I am a man, and they should accept me as I am. We were raised on that. R23

4.1.1.3 Relations with colleagues and clients

The addressed women bureaucrats explained that they tend to isolate themselves and limit their social relationships with colleagues after divorce. By doing so, they avoid any embarrassment or accusation from their colleagues of attempting to find a husband or destroy the couple's relationship. Consequently, they distance themselves from rumors and accusations.

I never go too far in talking and smiling with colleagues to avoid gossip. I am divorced, and there is a low view of divorced women in Egypt. R6

My divorce forces me to limit my relationships so that my female colleagues do not accuse me of trying to attract their husbands' attention. R15

Divorced men explained that divorce does not affect their relationships with both women and male colleagues. Divorce harms only women, in their opinion.

The divorce hasn't affected my work relationships. I am a man, and everyone may go through divorce and remarriage. Divorce is not a crime in my point of view. R29

In dealing with clients, the women bureaucrats voiced that they seriously serve clients and with a little smile to avoid harassment or accusations.

I do not engage in personal conversations with clients to avoid rumors, and harassment. I just adhere to my job duties. R5

The addressed divorced men bureaucrats highlighted that divorce grants them more space to flexibly and freely deal with clients without being nervous about familial problems and commitments. Specifically, after divorce, bureaucrats tend to simplify matters and be humorous.

After the divorce, I became more comfortable speaking with clients. household duties or disagreements with my wife always bothered me. So, my life became more fun and calmer. R32

4.1.2 Work arrangements

4.1.2.1 Tendency to find more off days

Half of the addressed divorced bureaucrats expressed their need for more vacations and days off after the divorce. They even pointed out their readiness to work from home, if there is a possibility, to take care of their children and house duties.

After the divorce, I urgently need vacations to continue helping my children with their studies. I play the role of a father and mother. R10

I hope there is availability for divorced women to work from home so that they can find time for children and avoid harassment in the work environment. R14

Divorced male bureaucrats voiced that more days off are relevant for rest, sleep, and hiking since they don't have familial obligations.

If there is a chance for vacation, I won't mind. I will only use them to sleep, rest, or go for a walk. R35

4.1.2.2 Care about financial rewards

All addressed women bureaucrats asserted a need for more money after their divorce more than before. They highlighted that they care about their children, and the financial support they get from their ex-husbands is not high. Hence, they seek more financial rewards and incentives.

I alone face the high cost of living, the high tuition fees of my children, and their father's small financial contribution. There is no more need for financial rewards and incentives. R4

My salary is no longer sufficient with the high cost of living. The father of my children does not contribute much after the divorce. I need every pound I get from my work. R9

The addressed divorced men bureaucrats also assured a need for more money since they send a part of their salaries to their ex-wives as alimony and childcare, as the law, religion, and society stipulate.

> *I pay a third of my salary to my ex-wife and children. I need constant financial rewards, but my work does not provide that. R25*

4.1.3 Work empowerment

4.1.3.1 Utilizing training opportunities

Half of the addressed women bureaucrats indicated that, whether before or after divorce, they do not try to participate in training workshops or learning seminars voluntarily. They only attend if the training is mandatory. Otherwise, they prefer going home and spending time with their children.

> *After the divorce, I devote all my time to my children. Just participate in the mandatory training. R11*

> *Training in public institutions is not useful and rarely occurs. My children take my time, and I prioritize them. R14*

Divorced male bureaucrats are more willing to engage in training opportunities after their divorce. They all agreed that they have time and minimal familial responsibilities, and thus, they can actively develop their competencies.

After my divorce, I find more time to develop my capabilities. After the divorce, I focus on my work to find an opportunity to succeed and try to prove myself. R27

4.1.3.2 Accepting to take over managerial responsibilities

After their divorce, half of the women interviewed expressed reluctance to accept administrative positions because they don't have the time and energy to deal with excessive work duties.

After the divorce, I no longer consider being promoted or bearing administrative burdens. I just want to focus on my kids. R1

I accept to assume an administrative position after the divorce, but without enduring more stress, difficulties, and headaches so that I can continue caring about myself and my children. R3

In contrast, all addressed men bureaucrats expressed their desire to assume administrative positions, not only because they have time, but to show their abilities to build a successful career journey after divorce.

After the divorce, I feel a compelling desire to take over managerial responsibility so that I will not be said to have failed in my social and professional life. R24

4.2 To what extent does the experience of divorce influence bureaucrats' use of discretionary power?

As heard in the conducted interviews, divorce has a marginal effect on bureaucrats' use of power. This comes as a result of the following two factors.

4.2.1 Clients have no relations with bureaucrats' divorce

All addressed respondents highlighted that divorce is a personal choice and, hence, clients should not be affected.

> *My divorce came as a result of a clash with my ex-husband. So, why should I make clients (citizens) suffer!? R18*

> *I seek to hear positive recognition and prayers from my clients. My divorce is completely a personal matter. R36*

4.2.2 Bureaucrats' subjection to supervision and inspection

In the Egyptian context, street-level bureaucrats have marginal discretionary power (Mousa, 2024). Hence, their general managers regularly review, follow, and evaluate their performance. Moreover, clients' complaints might cause work troubles and/or punishments of the addressed bureaucrats.

> *I need every pound I receive from my work. Complaints of citizens might lead managers to deduct from my salary. I try my best to avoid this. R7*

> *The performance of all public employees in Egypt, including street-level bureaucrats, is followed by many supervisors and managers. I seek to avoid blame and poor assessment. R 22*

The following table summarizes the key findings of the present study.

Table 2 (authors' own work): Post-divorce work challenges and the use of discretionary power

	Woman	Man
Post-divorce work challenges	▪ Workplace verbal and sexual harassment, ▪ Follow-up on their looks and clothes, ▪ Limited relations with colleagues, ▪ Need for off days, ▪ More care about financial rewards, ▪ Avoidance of training opportunities and ▪ Low desire of managerial positions.	▪ A need for more financial rewards/returns/bonuses
Divorce and Discretionary Power	▪ Marginal Influence of Divorce on Divorced women Bureaucrats' Use of Discretionary Power	▪ Marginal Influence of Divorce on Divorced men Bureaucrats' Use of Discretionary Power

5. Discussion

This paper fills a gap in diversity management and public administration literature in which empirical qualitative studies on street-level bureaucrats' return to work after divorce are rare. The present study comes as a response to Mousa (2024), who calls for more studies on street bureaucrats' return to work after grand personal events, particularly in the context of non-Western countries. By addressing a culturally constrained male-dominated context, the Egyptian one, the authors of this study discovered the main challenges faced by divorced bureaucrats in the Egyptian public context.

The authors of the present study have identified the following three categories of factors: work relations (verbal and sexual harassment, focus on divorced persons' appearance, relations with colleagues and clients), work arrangements (tendency to find more off days, more care about financial rewards) and work empowerment (utilizing training opportunities, accepting managerial positions) and considered them as a basis for discovering the main challenges facing divorced women bureaucrats and their men colleagues.

Given the present study's findings and in line with Andre et al. (2019) and Saeed et al. (2022), divorced women bureaucrats face more challenges than their male counterparts. Specifically, the authors of the present paper explore that divorced women bureaucrats encounter and suffer from workplace verbal and sexual harassment, follow-up on their looks and clothes, limited relations with colleagues, need for off days, more care about financial rewards, avoidance of training opportunities and low desire of managerial positions. In contrast, their divorced male colleagues only complain about their need for more financial rewards/returns/bonuses as they pay 30% of their salaries to their ex-wives and children. Hence, divorced women bureaucrats suffer a lot in comparison with their divorced male colleagues.

Furthermore, the authors of this study have found a marginal influence of divorce on divorced bureaucrats' use of their granted discretionary power. Regardless of their gender, all addressed men and women divorced bureaucrats highlight that clients have no relations with their divorce and hence, they should be satisfied. Additionally, street-level bureaucrats in the Egyptian context are subject to regular inspection and supervision, and they do their best to avoid any complaints from clients. The following are the main theoretical contributions and practical implications.

5.1 Theoretical contributions

The first theoretical contribution lies in exploring that despite ensuring employees a decent work environment is one of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (Asaba et al., 2023), public sector organizations and ministries in Egypt don't secure divorced women bureaucrats a set of policies limiting their exposure to verbal and sexual harassment in their work contexts. The findings elaborate that divorced women bureaucrats complain about verbal harassment, even from colleagues, and uninvited comments on their look and clothing style. The second theoretical contribution is discovering that after divorce, both divorced men and women bureaucrats lack financial stability.

The third theoretical contribution is disagreement with event systems theory (Kulichyova et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2023). This theory entails that grand personal events affect one's work norms, routines, and behavior. This is not the case in the present study, as the findings here affirm a marginal influence of divorce on street-level bureaucrats' work performance. Such marginal influence also doesn't come in line with many authors (e.g., Bradbury & Kellough, 2007; Vedung, 2015; Mousa et al., 2023) who indicate that street bureaucrats' use of such discretionary power is frequently shaped by their demographic (gender, age, marital status) characteristics. Accordingly,

the effect of major/personal events on one's work performance varies across employees and contexts.

The fourth theoretical contribution is to the social stigma theory (Goffman, 1963) that the change of marital status (divorce in this case) is an antecedent of employees' exclusion and exposure to negative cultural bias. The authors of this study explore the tendency of divorced women to limit their social relations with colleagues to avoid second-class treatment and some shameful accusations. We outline in Table xx below the theoretical extension we offer through this study.

Table 3 (authors' own work): Themes and theoretical extensions

Central Themes from Findings	Theoretical Extension Based on Literature
Work Relations (Verbal and Sexual Harassment)	Extending Social Stigma Theory (Goffman, 1963) to account for gendered workplace harassment post-divorce in public administration.
Work Relations (Focus on Divorced Person's Appearance)	Applying Social Stigma Theory (Goffman, 1963) to analyse how appearance-based scrutiny post-divorce reinforces workplace discrimination.
Work Relations (Relations with Colleagues and Clients)	Linking Social Stigma Theory (Goffman, 1963) to workplace exclusion mechanisms and self-imposed social distancing among divorced employees.
Work Arrangements (Tendency to Find More Days Off)	Expanding Event Systems Theory (Liu et al., 2023) to explore how major life events like divorce shape employees' work-life balance strategies.

Work Arrangements (Greater Interest in Financial Rewards)	Applying Social Stigma Theory (Goffman, 1963) to financial insecurity post-divorce as a driver for increased financial motivation.
Work Empowerment (Utilising Training Opportunities)	Critiquing Event Systems Theory (Kulichyova et al., 2022) by demonstrating how divorced women disengage from training due to caregiving burdens.
Work Empowerment (Accepting Managerial Positions)	Using Event Systems Theory (Liu et al., 2023) to analyse gendered differences in post-divorce career ambition and leadership acceptance.
Marginal Influence of Divorce on Discretionary Power	Challenging Event Systems Theory (Mousa et al., 2025) by showing that strict supervision limits the discretionary power of street-level bureaucrats, regardless of personal circumstances.

5.2 Practical implications

Given the findings of the present study, the authors of this paper first propose that the administration of public sector organizations and ministries in Egypt organize regular visits to psychiatrists for divorced bureaucrats to help them overcome the negative influence of divorce on their personal and work lives. Divorced women bureaucrats can individually do this to ensure positive mental health after their divorce. In the Egyptian context, integrating mental health services within public sector health benefits could make this feasible (Mousa & Samara, 2022a, b), especially as awareness around mental health support is gradually increasing in the country.

Second, the authors propose that women bureaucrats exercise more pressure on their workplace and ask for more flexible work arrangements. This might entail ensuring that divorced women have the right to work from home on some days. Given the growing trend of remote work in Egypt, particularly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, implementing such arrangements in the public sector could be a realistic and beneficial step (Mousa et al., 2024).

Third, the authors also ask the divorced women bureaucrats and their employers to consider the availability of digital training for divorced women instead of requiring in-person attendance. This could stimulate divorced women bureaucrats to engage in training opportunities more actively. With Egypt's ongoing push toward digitalization, many public sector ministries already offer digital training, which makes the expansion of such programs to accommodate divorced women both practical and achievable.

Fourth, public sector organizations and ministries in Egypt should ensure the implementation of anti-sexual and verbal harassment policies in their work units. This necessitates reviewing the current policies, refreshing them, and undertaking responsible and compelling adoption. The Egyptian government has made progress in addressing workplace harassment, and strengthening these policies within public sector organizations is feasible with proper enforcement and ongoing commitment from leadership.

Fifth, divorced women bureaucrats should exercise pressure on their employers to launch a media campaign through which different clients can understand that divorced bureaucrats are superheroes who act as both fathers and mothers for their children. Moreover, the campaign should also reveal that divorce is not a crime, but a choice one might be forced to adopt. Hence, devaluing divorced women should no longer continue. While such a campaign may face cultural challenges, increasing

support for women's rights in Egypt, along with collaboration from government and non-governmental organizations, can make this campaign a valuable and viable initiative for changing public perceptions.

6. Conclusion, limitations, and future research

The authors of the present paper find out the experience of street-level bureaucrats in return to work after divorce. In doing so, they used both event systems and social stigma theories. Moreover, given the authors' analysis of the conducted interviews, they discovered many challenges faced by women bureaucrats after their divorce while their divorced male colleagues suffer only from the lack of financial stability. Despite its originality, the present paper has the following limitations. The authors focused only on divorced street-level bureaucrats without considering the opinions of their managers, who might elaborate on how they support their divorced employees. This might hinder the authors' ability to constitute a detailed picture on the main challenges facing street bureaucrats and how their employer helps them to implement coping strategies. Moreover, concentrating only on ministries and public sector organizations while neglecting private sector ones might limit the authors' attempt to generalize the findings since little is known about the experience of divorced employees in the private sector. Interested scholars might consider addressing the same research questions in organizations for future research. Moreover, future researchers can assess how divorced women bureaucrats cope with after-divorce challenges in their work context. Lastly, some scholars might address how to tailor and implement organizational inclusion in supporting divorced working women in the public sector.

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Table 1(authors' own work): respondents' and interviews' information

N	**Sex**	**Age**	**Years after divorce**	**Job**	**Duration of the interview**
1	F	32	3	Administrator	31

2	F	34	3	Administrator	30
3	F	35	3	Administrator	35
4	F	33	4	Teacher	35
5	F	37	3	Administrator	35
6	F	42	4	Teacher	40
7	F	44	4	Teacher	40
8	F	36	3	Teacher	42
9	F	33	3	Teacher	40
10	F	34	3	Administrator	40
11	F	38	4	Administrator	36
12	F	36	4	Teacher	36
13	F	38	4	Teacher	50

14	F	43	4	Teacher	46
15	F	41	4	Administrator	40
16	F	38	4	Administrator	40
17	F	40	6	Teacher	40
18	F	40	3	Teacher	30
19	F	39	5	Administrator	32
20	F	45	5	Administrator	32
21	M	38	3	Administrator	32
22	M	37	3	Administrator	33
23	M	38	3	Administrator	33
24	M	36	4	Administrator	32
25	M	40	4	Teacher	33

26	M	40	4	Teacher	40
27	M	44	3	Administrator	40
28	M	44	3	Administrator	31
29	M	42	4	Administrator	32
30	M	44	4	Administrator	32
31	M	44	4	Teacher	32
32	M	41	4	Administrator	33
33	M	45	4	Teacher	33
34	M	42	3	Teacher	33
35	M	42	3	Administrator	35
36	M	42	3	Administrator	35
37	M	43	3	Teacher	35

38	M	44	6	Teacher	31
39	M	44	5	Teacher	31
40	M	44	6	Teacher	31

Data Availability Statement:

This study draws on qualitative data collected through interviews with street-level bureaucrats (teachers and administrators) employed by the Egyptian Ministry of Education. Due to the sensitive nature of the research and confidentiality agreements with participants, the data are not publicly available. Participants did not provide consent for their interview transcripts to be shared beyond the research team.