



When Marriage Ends and Self Begins: Women's and Children's Narratives of Annulment

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ABSTRACT

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The experience of marital annulment involves profound loss and disruption, yet it may also create opportunities for healing, growth, and renewed agency. This narrative inquiry explored how women and their children made sense of life before, during, and after annulment. Specifically, it addressed two questions: (1) How do women understand and construct meaning from their annulment experience across time? and (2) How do children understand and make sense of their parents' annulment? Participants included six Filipino mothers and their adolescent children, yielding a total of twelve participants. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using narrative inquiry.

Four resonant threads emerged from the women's and children's narratives: (1) a lack of a differentiated sense of self rendered women vulnerable to culturally prescribed reasons for marriage; (2) a breakthrough occurred when women gained clarity about their personal and familial aspirations and reconciled these with their desired future; (3) renewed women chose to continue their healing journey alongside their children, modeling confidence, self-worth, and agency; and (4) sustained emotional growth for both mothers and children was fostered through open communication, mutual support, and shared healing practices.

Findings highlight the central role of self-differentiation in women's marital and post-marital experiences. Initially constrained by cultural expectations and relational fusion, the women gradually confronted identity erosion and shifted toward self-prioritization and self-fulfillment. Positive outcomes were facilitated by inner resources such as determination, acceptance, meaning-making, and the redirection of emotional energy toward productive endeavors. These processes enabled women to either enter more mature relationships or confidently remain single. Children, in turn, developed resilience and a redefined understanding of family continuity despite parental separation.

This study contributes to Philippine family studies by offering an in-depth account of the inner psychological and relational journeys of women and children navigating annulment, foregrounding healing, agency, and family transformation.

KEYWORDS:

annulment, self-differentiation, agency, inner resources

INTRODUCTION

Marriage has long been regarded as a lifelong, sacred, and monogamous commitment in the Philippines, shaped by Christian values and deeply embedded cultural expectations (Gultiano et al., 2009). Despite this ideal, marital dissolution has become increasingly visible as more couples experience relational breakdown. Although annulment remains the only legal means to dissolve a marriage—given the continued

absence of divorce in the country—its use remains limited due to financial, legal, and sociocultural barriers. For instance, annulment cases decreased from 7,760 in 2013 to 5,277 in 2023, reflecting both procedural constraints and the broader stigma attached to ending a marriage (Office of the Solicitor General, 2023). Current national debates, including the proposed Absolute Divorce Act (House Bill 9349), highlight shifting societal attitudes and the urgency of addressing marital dissolution as a contemporary family issue.

While marital breakdown affects both spouses, research consistently shows that women bear the greater emotional, social, and economic burden. Filipino women face strong

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cultural expectations to preserve the marriage at all costs (Aguilar, 1987, as cited in Constable, 2003), and those who pursue annulment often confront stigma, identity rupture, and feelings comparable to bereavement (Chant, 1997; Haffey & Cohen, 1992; Gregson & Ceynar, 2009). Despite this reality, scholarly work on annulment in the Philippines remains limited, typically focusing on psychological incapacity as a legal ground rather than the lived experiences of those undergoing the process.

To address this gap, the present study explores the experiences of women and their children before, during, and after the annulment process. It examines how they make sense of marital dissolution, navigate sociocultural pressures, and reconstruct their identities in the aftermath of separation. This research also reflects the author's personal advocacy as a solo mother who has undergone the annulment process, aiming to amplify the stories of women who continue to navigate its emotional and social complexities.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This review of related literature focuses on studies related to annulment in the Philippines, changes in women after marital dissolution, women's resources for recovery, and how adolescents are affected by divorce. It should be noted that while studies on divorce are frequently cited due to the lack of literature on annulment, these processes are not parallel to each other, despite their similarities.

Annulment in the Philippines

Since Malta legalized divorce in 2011, the Philippines—aside from the Vatican—remains the only country without a divorce law. Consequently, annulment is the sole legal remedy for dissolving marriages. This process, which renders a union void from its inception, is lengthy, complex, and financially prohibitive. Given the substantial legal costs involved, annulment remains largely inaccessible to Filipinos living below the poverty threshold, making it a viable option primarily for economically advantaged individuals (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2015, as cited in Abuso, 2015).

Research on annulment in the Philippines is limited and predominantly examines psychological incapacity as a ground for dissolution. Studies analyzing 100 cases indicate that psychological incapacity lacks a precise legal definition, resulting in wide judicial discretion informed by expert testimony and psychological evaluation (Avelino, 1995; Abuso, 2015; Sales, 1997). Commonly accepted indicators include vices, infidelity, violence, abandonment, financial irresponsibility, in-law conflict, jealousy, gender-related issues, insufficient emotional support, and other psychological deviations (Veloso, 1991, as cited in Medina, 2015). Women constitute the majority of petitioners (71%), and most filings occur among individuals aged 31 to 35, a period associated with greater capacity to reorganize life following dissolution. Cases involving children suggest that concerns for their well-being influence decisions to pursue

annulment. Evidence also indicates heightened vulnerability among women post-separation, including increased exposure to violence compared to widows, despite widowers reporting higher depression risk (Gultiano et al., 2009).

Annulment cases frequently involve diagnoses of personality disorders, prompting courts to rely on forensic psychological assessments grounded in DSM criteria (Arias, 2016). However, a recent Supreme Court ruling authored by Justice Marvic Leonen redefined psychological incapacity as a legal, rather than medical, concept, signaling a potential shift in how courts will evaluate annulment petitions (Buan, 2021).

Beyond psychological grounds, annulment has significant socio-economic implications. Findings show that formerly married individuals, especially women without prior employment, often face financial instability and shifts in living arrangements, frequently moving in with relatives after separation (Abuso, 2015).

Overall, existing scholarship remains sparse and largely descriptive, focusing on demographic patterns, legal grounds, and economic impacts. Prior studies provide limited attention to parenting practices, women's identity reconstruction, and the lived experiences of families navigating annulment—gaps that the present study seeks to address.

Divorce in Predominantly Catholic Countries

Research in predominantly Catholic countries underscores the complex interaction of religious doctrine, legal structures, and shifting social norms in shaping experiences of marital dissolution. In the Philippines—one of the last countries without a divorce law—annulment remains the primary legal pathway, though public support for divorce continues to rise (Aglam et al., 2024). Studies indicate that marital dissolution within Catholic contexts reshapes family relationships, influencing emotional bonds, communication patterns, and caregiving arrangements (Wasosa, 2025). Evidence from middle-income Catholic countries further suggests that pro-homemaker divorce policies may improve child welfare outcomes, including school enrollment (Heggeness, 2019).

Similar transitions are evident elsewhere. In Poland, traditional commitments to marital permanence have weakened under the influence of secularization and changing gender norms (Paprzycka et al., 2019). In Italy, legal and demographic analyses reveal evolving socioeconomic gradients in union instability and the emergence of new cultural responses to divorce that challenge historically deritualized norms (Cataldo et al., 2020; Arosio, 2023; Bastianelli et al., 2024). For Catholic women, divorce often entails spiritual tension, prompting individualized religious coping and, in some cases, the pursuit of Church annulments experienced as both emotionally taxing and spiritually restorative (McMahon, 2018).

Across Catholic-majority contexts, divorce is shaped by intersecting religious, cultural, legal, and

socioeconomic forces. While public attitudes increasingly challenge doctrinal ideals of marital permanence, women continue to navigate profound relational and moral transitions. These findings highlight the need for culturally responsive policies and pastoral approaches that acknowledge both Catholic tradition and women's lived experiences of marital dissolution.

Factors Leading to Marital Dissolution

Although the present study centers on annulment, the psychological processes surrounding marital separation remain relevant, as annulled women also experience the emotional and relational rupture characteristic of separation. Research demonstrates that marital dissolution has multifaceted consequences for women and children, encompassing emotional distress, social disruption, and economic instability. Women often undergo identity renegotiation, increased caregiving demands, and potential financial strain, while children may experience diminished stability and emotional security, affecting their developmental and relational trajectories.

A large-scale review of 1,339 documents using visual analytics showed that marital breakdown consistently produces adverse outcomes for household members, with women and children facing the most significant economic repercussions (Akpan et al., 2020). Qualitative accounts similarly underscore these challenges. Escareal-Go (2014) found that four Filipino corporate executives pursued separation due to infidelity and emotional or verbal abuse. Their narratives highlight that professional life became a source of affirmation, independence, and self-worth—needs unmet within their marriages. These women viewed separation or annulment as a healthier option than remaining in dysfunctional relationships, recognizing their capacity to raise their children independently or with familial support.

Together, these studies illustrate that marital dissolution is shaped by relational conflict, gendered expectations, and resource availability, with profound implications for women's well-being and family life.

Post Marital Dissolution Experience

Women face distinct challenges following divorce, many of which can negatively affect their psychological well-being. They are more likely to assume primary custody of children and experience task overload during the transition, with the first year after divorce often marked by intense emotional strain (Gähler, 2006). Despite these difficulties, several resources have been shown to support women's post-divorce adjustment. Socioeconomic and cognitive assets—such as higher education, financial security, and a strong sense of purpose—significantly enhance resilience, particularly for custodial mothers (Amato, 2010). Social support from family, friends, and community networks further buffers stress and promotes recovery (De Graaf & Kalmijn, 2006). Additionally, psychological and spiritual coping strategies, including therapy and religious involvement, help women

process grief, restore emotional stability, and rebuild their lives (Koenig, 2012). Collectively, these findings highlight the importance of multidimensional support systems in fostering women's well-being after marital dissolution.

Inner strength and relationship with God

Participants identified inner strength as a valuable resource in their recovery. The spiritual relationship with God was mentioned as a valuable resource to the women's recovery.

Social support

Social support plays a central role in women's adjustment following marital dissolution. Sakraida (2005) found that women rely on a range of interpersonal and formal resources, including therapy, support groups, and close confidants such as friends and family. Conversations with others—particularly those who shared similar experiences—emerged as the most common and meaningful coping strategy, helping alleviate negative emotions and foster emotional relief.

These findings are consistent with research showing that social support is a critical relational resource in post-divorce recovery. In a study of 120 women and 37 men, the majority identified strong social networks as pivotal for overcoming crisis and achieving psychological well-being, confirming the mediating role of support in adapting to life after marital dissolution (Kołodziej & Przybyła, 2016). Comparable patterns were observed among African American women, who emphasized both familial support and religious or spiritual involvement as essential components of their coping processes (Lawson & Satti, 2016).

Collectively, the literature demonstrates that robust social support—whether emotional, instrumental, or spiritual—significantly enhances resilience and facilitates healing in the aftermath of divorce.

Keeping busy with work

Further, it was that cited “keeping busy” was a coping strategy post-divorce. The same is true with another study wherein the experiences of separation and annulment of four (4) Filipino women Chief Executive Officers were explored. All four women were highly educated and economically empowered. However, all of them experienced domestic and marital challenges that led them to file for an annulment. In the four stories of these women, the common denominator for coping was their work. They all mentioned that it was work that they found their affirmation, independence, and self-worth, something that their troubled marriages could not or did not provide. It was highlighted that an empowered woman's way of coping is expressed through her work that gives her power while maintaining sanity. (Lawson & Satti, 2016); Escareal-Go, 2014)

Self-care

Not only is the support from social groups appreciated it is also extremely important in this phase to also do self-care as it is often a period of angst and loss. (Krumrei et al., 2007; Leonoff, 2015).

In summary, the studies revealed that women who go through divorce have different ways of coping from the pain and recovering. Most of the women coped by asking for professional help such as counseling, therapy, etc. or simply by being in a support group. It was also found out that the family played a major role in the recovery process of the women, while others busy themselves with work.

Adolescents and Parents' Marital Dissolution: Psychological Impacts, Coping and Resilience

Parental divorce, separation, or annulment often places adolescents in a position of "quiet suffering," as they are affected both directly and indirectly by marital disruption (Fagan, 2013). Research consistently shows that adolescents from divorced families report lower life satisfaction and poorer psychological health compared to peers from intact families (Cecen-Erogul & Dingiltepe, 2012). Marital dissolution has been linked to difficulties across social, emotional, and educational domains (Hess et al., 2012), including reduced well-being, impaired peer and dating relationships (Hage & Nosanow, 2000), and lower-quality romantic relationships in adulthood (Riggio & Weiser, 2008). Many adolescents also develop more negative attitudes toward marriage and long-term commitment (Garmendia & Yárnoz-Yaben, 2014).

Gender-specific effects have been documented. Daughters appear more vulnerable to disruptions in romantic competence, with research associating early paternal absence and parental divorce with later difficulties in intimacy and relationship stability (Goodnight et al., 2013; Shulman et al., 2012). Sons, by contrast, may exhibit problematic courtship behaviors, including increased aggression (Knox & Schacht, 2010). Academic performance also tends to decline following divorce, with adolescents showing lower achievement and reduced educational ambition compared to peers from continuously married families (Lauglo, 2008; Sun & Li, 2008; Zeratsion et al., 2015).

Risky behaviors constitute another area of concern. Adolescents from divorced families demonstrate higher likelihood of engaging in substance use both before and after the divorce, particularly alcohol and marijuana use (Arkes, 2014; Barrett & Turner, 2006). Maintaining positive paternal involvement appears to buffer some of these risks, particularly regarding alcohol misuse (Tomcikova et al., 2011). Parental divorce has also been associated with earlier sexual initiation, higher numbers of sexual partners, and increased pregnancy risk (Abma et al., 2004; Cavanagh et al., 2008; Donahue et al., 2010).

Despite these risks, not all adolescents experience negative outcomes. Some studies report no significant mental health difficulties, especially when divorce occurs during late adolescence (Zeratsion et al., 2013). Others highlight positive developmental gains, including enhanced maturity, empathy, and relational insight (Sever et al., 2007). Young adults in New Zealand similarly perceived their parents' separation as

beneficial, citing increased personal strength, independence, and improved family well-being (Cartwright, 2006).

In sum, the literature reveals mixed outcomes: while many adolescents experience declines in psychological well-being, academic performance, and relationship functioning, others demonstrate resilience and even personal growth. These divergent findings underscore the importance of contextual factors—such as parental conflict, quality of post-divorce relationships, and available support—in shaping adolescents' adjustment to marital dissolution.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The purpose of this study is to understand the challenges and growth opportunities of women and her children who went through the annulment process through the stories of their experiences. This research questions are the following:

1. How do women understand and make sense of her experience before, during, and after annulment?
2. How do the children understand and make sense of the annulment of their parents?

METHODS

The present study employed a qualitative research design utilizing narrative inquiry to examine the sensitive and complex life transition associated with marital annulment. Narrative inquiry was well suited to this investigation, as it prioritized participants' voices and situated their stories within broader familial and sociocultural contexts. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, which provided sufficient structure to address key research questions while allowing flexibility for participants to introduce unanticipated but meaningful insights. The study included six women and their six adolescent children, offering a multi-perspective account of the annulment experience.

DATA GATHERING PROCEDURE

Data were collected in two periods: April–June 2018 and April–June 2024.

During the first period, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with the women and their adolescent children to document their annulment experiences. A guiding question and interview protocol supported the conversations, but participants were encouraged to narrate freely. Consent was obtained from all participants, and assent was secured for minors. Confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the use of pseudonyms were explained. All participants agreed to audio recording.

Interviews were scheduled at participants' convenience and held individually in quiet, private locations to promote openness. Mothers were interviewed before their children, and each session lasted 60–90 minutes. Rapport was established through brief informal conversation, and each interview concluded with a short debriefing.

The second data-gathering period involved follow-up interviews with the same participants to determine whether

previously described insights and changes were sustained and to document their current psycho-emotional and family circumstances.

Data Analysis

The analysis proceeded through several stages. I began with repeated readings of the interview transcripts to develop familiarity with the data and identify significant excerpts. Initial codes were generated from recurring ideas, which were then grouped into broader categories and inductively developed into themes that captured both shared and divergent experiences. Using these themes, I “restored” participants’ accounts into coherent narratives organized around three temporal phases—before annulment, during annulment, and after annulment—following Ollerenshaw and Creswell’s (2000) narrative analytic approach. This restoring highlighted continuity, change, and meaning-making across time. The process allowed the women’s and children’s voices to be authentically represented and illuminated how they negotiated identity, relationships, and resilience within their cultural and relational contexts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on semi-structured interviews with six women and six of their children, this study identified four resonant threads that characterize their annulment experiences: “a lack of a sense of self made the woman vulnerable to succumb to traditional reasons to marry her spouse,” “the woman’s breakthrough occurred when she gained clarity about her own aspirations—both for herself and for her family—and reconciled these with her desired future.,” “the renewed woman chose to continue her healing journey alongside her children. Her restored confidence and sense of direction enabled them to recognize their own self-worth, value, and freedom to shape their desired futures,” and “the emotional growth of both the woman and her children was sustained through consistent open communication, mutual support, and shared healing practices.” Collectively, these threads trace the emotional and developmental trajectory of women and children as they move from surviving relational adversity to emerging stronger as individuals and as a family unit.

Discussion of Resonant Threads

Category A: A lack of a sense of self made the woman vulnerable to succumb to traditional reasons to marry her spouse

Across their stories, the women described how, long before their marriages began, they learned to silence parts of themselves. Low self-differentiation shaped their courtship narratives, making early warning signs difficult to name and fostering belief perseverance—holding on to initial impressions despite later contradictions (Ross et al., 2013, as cited in Torres-Ricafrente, 2022). These early choices unfolded within cultural scripts that emphasized being dutiful

daughters, preserving family harmony, and honoring parental expectations.

Their accounts echo research from male-dominated and collectivist settings, where women’s marriage decisions often reflect traditional motives—family duty, honor, and deference to elders—more than personal readiness (Chaudhuri, 2020; Guner et al., 2021; Jewkes et al., 2017; Rahman et al., 2024). In the Filipino context, conservatism and hierarchical family structures reinforced these narratives, particularly when parental pressure, adolescent pregnancy, or concerns about propriety shaped marriage as an obligation rather than a choice (Gibbs et al., 2021; Medina, 2015; Panganiban et al., 2023; UNICEF Philippines, 2022).

Values such as *katapatan* (loyalty), *kahihiyang* (propriety), and *masunurin* (obedience) appeared as lived expectations guiding the women’s decisions. Loyalty encouraged endurance, propriety demanded marriage in the face of pregnancy, and obedience framed parental directives as moral imperatives. Belief in *kapalaran* (fate) further softened critical evaluation by framing unions as destiny (Donnellan et al., 2015; Ji et al., 2001).

Together, these narrative threads show how the women’s early marital decisions were shaped less by autonomous choice and more by the cultural, familial, and relational stories they had long carried. These deeply rooted scripts contributed to relational vulnerabilities that later unfolded into annulment.

Category B: The woman’s breakthrough occurred when she gained clarity about her own aspirations—both for herself and for her family—and reconciled these with her desired future.

This resonant thread captures the women’s breakthrough as a gradual process that emerged through disillusionment and culminated in reflection and awakening. As dissatisfaction and internal conflict intensified, the women began questioning the unequal roles and responsibilities they carried, reflecting broader findings that women experience role strain when traditional gender norms conflict with contemporary family realities (Salvador & Alampay, 2020; Yusoff & Hadjar, 2021).

Initially, the women entered marriage with expectations of partnership and stability. Over time, however, financial instability, addiction, infidelity, emotional neglect, and abuse eroded these ideals, leading to disillusionment consistent with Niehuis et al.’s (2019) description of collapsed idealizations under chronic unmet expectations. Cultural and religious norms emphasizing female self-sacrifice and endurance further constrained their capacity to assert needs or renegotiate roles (Alampay & Jocson, 2020; Tenorio & Tuazon, 2021).

As spouses failed to meet marital and financial responsibilities, many women assumed dual roles as caregivers and breadwinners, a pattern widely observed in Filipino and Southeast Asian contexts (Cunanan & Curaming, 2023; Rahman et al., 2024). While this shift reflected

resilience, it also intensified awareness that partnership had been replaced by unilateral responsibility.

Disillusionment eventually gave way to reflection and awakening, as the cumulative costs of endurance became untenable. This turning point reflects Mezirow's (2000) disorienting dilemma and the emergence of McAdams' (2013) motivated agent, marking early movement toward differentiation as the women reclaimed agency and clarified their aspirations.

Although disillusionment does not universally lead to awakening—some women reinterpret hardship as moral or spiritual duty (Acuña & Vargas, 2020)—the women in this study demonstrated that clarity of aspiration enabled a shift from endurance to intentional life-shaping. Their breakthrough reflects the reclaiming of self-respect, autonomy, and emotional well-being within constraining cultural contexts.

Category C: The Renewed Woman Chose to Continue her Healing Journey Alongside her Children. Her Restored Confidence and Sense of Direction Enabled Them to Recognize their own Self-Worth, Value, and Freedom to Shape their Desired Futures

This resonant thread captures a post-separation transformation in which women moved beyond survival toward intentional renewal, marked by restored self-worth, agency, and relational purpose. Rather than framing annulment as an endpoint, the women understood it as a transitional rupture that enabled identity reconstruction and meaning-making. This trajectory aligns with scholarship on post-adversity growth, which emphasizes reclaiming authorship of one's life narrative as central to recovery from relational trauma (Tedeschi et al., 2018; Walsh, 2020).

Empirical studies show that women emerging from marital dissolution experience increased self-efficacy when they reinterpret their experiences through reflective meaning-making rather than self-blame, allowing identity to be reorganized around autonomy, competence, and purpose (Bennett et al., 2021; McLean et al., 2020). Consistent with these findings, renewal in this study unfolded not in isolation but within a relational context. Family systems research demonstrates that maternal healing following separation significantly shapes children's emotional adjustment, with emotionally regulated and self-reflective mothers fostering greater security and resilience (Westrupp et al., 2021; Walsh, 2020).

By choosing to heal alongside their children—through emotional openness, boundary-setting, and shared meaning-making—the women created relational spaces that supported mutual growth. Research on co-regulation and relational coping indicates that such practices enable children to process family disruption without internalizing blame, supporting healthier identity formation (Prime et al., 2020; Yoon et al., 2023). From a Bowenian perspective, the women's renewed clarity reflects increased differentiation of self, reducing anxiety transmission within the family system

and promoting healthier autonomy–connection balances (Titelman, 2014; Skowron et al., 2023).

At the same time, the literature cautions that renewal is not automatic. Structural constraints and unresolved trauma may limit women's capacity for restorative parenting, underscoring the need for intentional and supported healing processes (Lapierre, 2010; Rahman et al., 2024). Overall, this resonant thread positions renewal as a relational and intergenerational process through which women reclaimed agency while fostering their children's emotional growth, transforming post-annulment family life from rupture into resilience.

Category D: The Emotional Growth of Both the Woman and Her Children Was Sustained Through Consistent Open Communication, Mutual Support, And Shared Healing Practices

This resonant thread conceptualizes emotional growth after annulment as a relationally sustained process, anchored in open communication, mutual support, and intentional healing practices within the family system. Rather than occurring through individual recovery alone, emotional growth was maintained through everyday interactions that enabled mothers and children to express emotions, negotiate meaning, and rebuild trust. Family resilience research consistently identifies clear communication and shared meaning-making as central mechanisms through which families adapt to relational disruption (Walsh, 2020; Prime et al., 2020).

Empirical studies show that emotionally responsive caregiving and developmentally appropriate dialogue protect children navigating parental separation, supporting emotional regulation and relational security (Westrupp et al., 2021; Yoon et al., 2023). In such contexts, communication functions as a regulatory process, allowing families to co-construct coherent narratives of loss and continuity. Mutual support further reframed annulment as a shared challenge rather than an individual burden, aligning with relational coping research showing that collaborative coping enhances psychological stability and reduces isolation (Morris et al., 2017; Ungar, 2021). For mothers, healing alongside their children reduced self-blame, while for children, observing maternal emotional regulation modeled adaptive coping and reinforced security.

However, the literature cautions that open communication is not uniformly beneficial. In high-conflict or poorly bounded family systems, excessive or unstructured disclosure may burden children with adult emotional responsibilities, increasing distress rather than alleviating it (Lapierre, 2010; Pellón et al., 2024). Structural constraints such as economic precarity and limited social support may also limit families' capacity to sustain intentional healing practices despite awareness and motivation (UN Women, 2023; Rahman et al., 2024).

Overall, this resonant thread demonstrates that emotional growth following annulment is most sustainable when

communication is emotionally honest yet contained, support is reciprocal, and healing is intentionally shared. Emotional growth thus emerged not as an automatic outcome of marital dissolution, but as an actively maintained relational achievement shaped by family dynamics and broader structural conditions.

CONCLUSION

Following annulment, women and children demonstrated notable adaptive outcomes. Marital dissolution did not diminish maternal functioning; rather, women reported increased intentionality in self-care and parenting. Maternal resilience emerged as a key factor supporting children's acceptance of separation and post-annulment adjustment.

In intimate relationships, most women retained openness to romantic connection, though remarriage was rare. Participants described redefined views of partnership that prioritized emotional safety, autonomy, and mutual respect over marital status. Several formed same-sex relationships, while others chose to remain single, reflecting increased relational clarity and boundary-setting.

Children adopted more discerning views of romantic relationships, viewing marriage as optional rather than obligatory. Most prioritized personal development, with only a minority engaged in committed relationships.

Professionally, women reported significant career advancement and increased economic independence, contributing to restored identity and self-worth. As maternal stability increased, children demonstrated strong academic engagement, framing educational effort as reciprocity for maternal sacrifice.

Overall, findings suggest that annulment, while disruptive, was associated with post-separation growth characterized by enhanced agency, relational discernment, and adaptive family functioning.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For Future Research: Future research is needed to further examine the lived experiences of individuals who undergo the annulment process in the Philippines, particularly given the country's unique legal and cultural context. Subsequent studies may deepen this inquiry by exploring how other Filipino cultural values—such as the patriarchal structure of family systems and gendered expectations within marriage—influence marital dynamics and decisions to pursue annulment. In particular, research examining why Filipino women are more likely than men to initiate annulment proceedings may yield important insights into power relations, caregiving burdens, and gendered access to agency within marriage. Such investigations would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of annulment as both a legal process and a socio-cultural experience.

For Future Actions: The findings of this study have important implications for policy and legal reform in the Philippine context, where annulment remains the primary

legal mechanism for marital dissolution. By foregrounding the lived experiences of women and children, this research highlights the need to reconceptualize annulment not merely as a legal remedy but as a complex psychosocial and family transition requiring comprehensive, gender-responsive, and child-centered interventions

Psychosocial Support: Findings indicate that annulment is a psychologically and relationally complex family transition rather than a purely legal event. Courts may therefore institutionalize access to counseling or psychosocial services before, during, and after annulment to support emotional adjustment for women and children.

Child-Centered Annulment Policies: Children's narratives highlight the need for greater legal attention to their emotional and developmental well-being. Annulment procedures should integrate child-focused assessments and psychosocial supports to ensure continuity of care, stability, and emotional security.

Broader Recognition of Marital Harm: Current annulment standards narrowly emphasize psychological incapacity, often pathologizing individual spouses. Legal reform may broaden recognition of relational harm—such as chronic neglect, addiction, and violence—to better reflect lived marital realities.

Implications for Divorce Law Reform: The study's findings of post-separation resilience and family adaptation challenge assumptions that marital dissolution inevitably harms families. These insights can inform divorce law discourse by framing legal dissolution as a protective mechanism in unsafe or inequitable marriages.

Interdisciplinary Training and Collaboration: Effective annulment practice requires collaboration between legal, psychological, and social service professionals. Policies promoting interdisciplinary training can enhance trauma-informed, family-centered, and culturally responsive legal processes.

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