

# Motivations for revenge and retaliation after divorce in Palestine

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## Abstract

In a society where family and social values are deeply intertwined, divorce is not only a legal matter but also a significant social event, often resulting in open conflicts and retaliatory actions. Previous research has highlighted the lack of comprehensive studies on post-divorce dynamics in Palestine, making this investigation crucial for understanding the nuanced factors behind retaliatory behaviors. This study explores the dynamics of post-divorce retaliatory behaviors in Palestinian society, focusing on the cultural, social, and legal factors that contribute to these behaviors. Through a qualitative exploratory design, structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample including twelve judges, lawyers, religious leaders, and divorced individuals. Key findings indicate that all ten participants believed post-divorce retaliatory actions are common in Palestine, particularly in custody and financial disputes. Both male and female divorcees use financial or legal tactics, while females often experience social retaliation. The presence of children significantly escalates retaliatory behavior.

**Keywords:** Custody Disputes, Emotional Abuse, Exploitation of Children, Financial Disputes, Post-Divorce Retaliation, Revenge

## Introduction

Revenge is commonly defined as an aggressive behavioral response by an individual or group based on a perceived injustice, directed toward the person identified as the cause of the harm [1]. For revenge to occur, the individual must not only perceive harm but also view it as intentional rather than accidental [2]. This explains the strong relationship between anger and revenge, with anger frequently serving as a reliable predictor of vengeful behaviors [3]. Although studies have linked revenge to traits within the dark personality triad, particularly narcissism [4], the specific motivations for seeking revenge after divorce—especially in non-Western and conflict-affected settings—remain insufficiently understood.

From a mental health perspective, revenge-related cognitions and behaviors are closely associated with emotional dysregulation, psychological distress, and prolonged interpersonal conflict, making them relevant to global discussions on mental well-being and social sustainability. In this sense, revenge is not only a behavioral response but also a mental health outcome shaped by broader social, legal, and structural conditions.

Palestine, comprising the West Bank and Gaza Strip, is home to approximately 2.9 million people, with 80% to 99% of the population identifying as Muslim, and continues to experience prolonged national insecurity, marginalization, forced evictions, and arbitrary arrests [5,6]. Such structural and political stressors have been widely recognized as major determinants of mental health, aligning this context with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). In this setting, divorce is governed by a hybrid legal framework that integrates Islamic legal principles (Sharia and fiqh) with local statutory reforms, including the amended Jordanian Personal Status Law (1976) in the West Bank and the adapted Egyptian Family Law (1954) in Gaza [7].

Divorce procedures include a waiting period (iddah), during which financial responsibilities and restrictions on remarriage are observed. Palestinian courts often balance these provisions with the higher objectives of Sharia (maqasid al-Sharia) to maintain equity, although cultural norms and patriarchal practices continue to influence the practical application of these laws [8,9]. In this context, divorce may act as a psychological stressor that triggers acts of revenge, particularly when disputes arise over property, child custody, or perceived injustices during the dissolution process. These dynamics are directly relevant to SDG 5 (Gender Equality), as revenge-driven behaviors may reinforce gendered power imbalances and contribute to emotional harm, harassment, and coercive control following marital separation.

Tensions often arise between traditional Islamic jurisprudence—particularly unilateral talaq for men—and contemporary social norms, enforcement practices, and lived realities of divorce. Marriage and divorce patterns in Palestine and the West Bank highlight regional differences in frequency and timing, with registered marriages totaling 43,430 nationwide in 2023 and 24,263 in the West Bank, and crude marriage rates of 8.1 per 1,000 people nationwide versus 7.6 in the West Bank [10]. In this socio-legal context, the interaction between Sharia-based family law, civil judicial procedures, and deeply rooted cultural expectations surrounding gender roles, honor, and family reputation shapes how individuals navigate marital conflict and post-divorce relationships. Such interactions have important implications for mental health equity and access to justice, further linking this study to SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions).

These overlapping influences may create conditions in which revenge is perceived as a means of restoring equity or asserting power after separation. Recent judicial reforms reflect ongoing efforts to adapt legal processes to contemporary needs while balancing religious and local traditions, highlighting the unique socio-legal landscape of divorce in Palestine and its intersection with motivations for revenge [7,11,12]. Understanding these local dynamics is critical, as much of the existing research on revenge—particularly in post-divorce contexts—has been conducted in North American or Western European settings, limiting its applicability to conflict-affected societies.

Debates surrounding the functionality of revenge suggest that it rarely provides lasting psychological relief or meaningful personal benefit [1,13-15]. Revenge motivations often stem from perceived relational injustices, such as unilateral separation or loss of parental influence, leading to indirect forms of retaliation through shared children [16]. The intensity of revenge tends to increase when the perceived aggressor is emotionally close, particularly in intimate relationships [17]. These patterns indicate how unresolved psychological distress can undermine individual well-being and social cohesion, both of which are central concerns of Agenda 2030.

Revenge-related behaviors may include judicial harassment, gossip, verbal aggression, and coercive practices such as stalking [18]. Individuals often seek validation from social networks, framing revenge as morally justified or socially sanctioned [19]. In honor-based cultures, legal and social systems may implicitly tolerate male-on-female aggression within these dynamics [20]. Revenge varies depending on whether it is enacted individually or collectively [21], and while it is often constrained by power asymmetries, in many cases the avenger retains greater structural or social power [22].

Revenge operates through both cognitive and emotional pathways, manifesting as either a calculated “cold” response or an impulsive “hot” reaction driven by intense affect [23,13]. These processes shape blame attribution and intensify retributive desires [24]. According to the comparative suffering hypothesis, individuals seek to impose harm equivalent to their own suffering to restore emotional balance [25]. While revenge may temporarily enhance feelings of empowerment and agency [26,27], evidence suggests that such outcomes are often short-lived and may perpetuate cycles of psychological distress, interpersonal conflict, and social instability—

outcomes that stand in direct tension with the mental health and peace-oriented objectives of the SDGs.

## **Literature review**

Marriage in Arab societies, including Palestine, is considered a sacred bond deeply rooted in religious, social, and moral values [28,29]. From this perspective, divorce in Palestine is viewed as an undesirable phenomenon, even though it is permitted under Islamic law (Sharia) and regulated by national family statutes, which provide procedures for dissolving marital relationships that can no longer be sustained [30]. Divorce is frequently perceived as a failure, an irresponsible act, and a departure from deeply rooted cultural and religious norms [31]. Nonetheless, Islamic teachings emphasize mediation as the initial approach when couples contemplate divorce, encouraging resolution before dissolution [28].

In 2022, Palestine recorded 43,430 marriages, with 55.9% in the West Bank and 44.1% in Gaza, alongside 9,564 divorces, of which 55.4% occurred in the West Bank and 44.6% in Gaza [10]. Divorce rates have remained relatively stable over the past decade, fluctuating between 1.5 and 1.9 per 1,000 people: nationally rising from 1.5 in 2010 to 1.8 in 2016, peaking at 1.9 in 2021, and slightly declining to 1.8 in 2023. The West Bank followed a similar trend, beginning at 1.3 in 2010, reaching 1.9 in 2017, and fluctuating between 1.5 and 1.8 thereafter [10].

Divorce in Palestine is influenced by a combination of social, cultural, and economic factors. One significant cause is the experience of physical violence within marriage, as documented by [32–34]. The intrusion of extended family members into marital affairs, leading to a lack of privacy and autonomy, is another critical factor [35]. Economic and age mismatches between spouses further contribute to marital instability; additionally, issues such as spousal infidelity, prolonged absence of a partner [35], and adherence to rigid gender roles often lead to marital dissatisfaction and eventual separation. Other reported causes include lifestyle differences, incompatibility, and women's discontent with their husband's personality and behavior [36]. Poor living conditions exacerbate marital challenges, while a lack of spousal support and instances of domestic abuse also play a significant role in driving divorce [37].

Research in Middle Eastern contexts highlights that divorce is not only a legal and social event but also one that deeply affects individual well-being and marital satisfaction. Studies in Türkiye show that the impact of divorce on happiness and distress varies depending on the broader social context, with divorce often proving more painful in environments where stigma and patriarchal expectations are stronger [38,39]. Similarly, research in the Gulf suggests that gender shapes marital happiness, with men often reporting higher levels of satisfaction than women, reflecting persistent inequalities in expectations and lived experiences within marriage [40]. These findings underscore how cultural and structural contexts influence both marital stability and post-divorce well-being. In Palestine, such dynamics intersect with the pervasive risk of violence against women, as women who initiate divorce often face heightened retaliation, stigma, and coercive control from spouses and extended families.

## **Rationale**

Although divorce is often assumed to mark the formal end of a conflict or disagreement between spouses [41], in many cases, it becomes the starting point for a new series of tensions and conflicts that manifest in various forms of retaliatory behaviors [16]. These behaviors lead to serious psychological and social repercussions for the divorced couples themselves, their children, and even the broader society [42,43].

Despite extensive research on the cultural perceptions, causes, and consequences of divorce in Palestine [44,45], limited attention has been given to the post-divorce phase, particularly the dynamics of revenge and retaliatory behaviors. Understanding the motivations behind these actions and their implications for individuals, families, and society remains an underexplored area. In Palestinian society, where family and social values are deeply intertwined, and where relatives and extended family members significantly influence family decisions, marital separation becomes even more complex and challenging [12, 44,45]. Post-divorce, numerous issues arise between former spouses who once shared a life together. We hypothesize that these issues go beyond the legal separation and often escalate into open conflicts characterized by various forms of retaliatory behaviors. Moreover, the motivations behind these retaliatory behaviors vary between personal and social factors.

The importance of studying this phenomenon is heightened by the lack of sufficient research that systematically and comprehensively addresses post-divorce retaliatory behaviors in Palestinian society. Investigating these behaviors and their underlying causes helps uncover the cultural, social, and economic factors that drive spouses to adopt retaliatory practices. This, in turn, can inform the development of legal and social recommendations aimed at reducing conflicts and providing support to affected families, ensuring a peaceful separation that preserves the dignity of all parties and safeguards the well-being of the children.

## **2. Materials & methods**

### **2.1. Research design**

The researcher adopted a qualitative exploratory study to examine the dynamics of retaliation and revenge in the post-divorce period for Palestinians using structured interviews. The necessity of consistency and comparability across responses justifies the use of structured interviews in this study. Because structured interviews adhere to a preset set of questions, every participant is guaranteed to be asked the same questions in the same sequence. By doing this, disparities in data collection are reduced, resulting in a consistent dataset that makes response comparison and aggregation easier. Because it lessens interviewer bias and guarantees that all pertinent subjects are covered consistently, this approach is especially well-suited for examining beliefs and experiences. Additionally, by offering a precise framework for participants to share their experiences, structured interviews improve the validity and reliability of the results.

### **2.2. Sampling method and size**

In this qualitative exploratory study on the post-divorce phase, particularly the dynamics of revenge and retaliatory behaviors, we examined the motivations behind these actions in Palestine. To capture diverse perspectives, a purposive sampling technique was employed to ensure that various subgroups within the population were adequately represented, thereby enhancing the diversity and comprehensiveness of the sample. The population included Palestinian judges, lawyers, religious leaders, and divorced couples, with a purposive sampling technique to ensure representation across diverse subgroups. The sample size was determined based on research objectives, diversity needs, and practical constraints. The final sample consisted of 10 participants, reflecting diverse demographic and experiential attributes, including two judges, two lawyers, two



religious leaders, two female divorcees, and two male divorcees reflecting various demographic attributes as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants

| Participant category      | N  | Description & Justification  |
|---------------------------|----|--|
| Judges                    | 2  | A family court, male judge who has presided over divorce cases for more than ten years.<br>- A family female judge who has only been in office for two years.  |
| Lawyers                   | 2  | A family law and divorce litigation female specialist with over twelve years of experience offers knowledge of the legal issues divorced people face as well as situations involving retaliatory actions.<br>- A young male lawyer (less than three years' experience) who has recently dealt with changing divorce cases guarantees knowledge of contemporary social and cultural changes impacting post-divorce conflicts. |
| Religious leaders (Imams) | 2  | A senior religious figure (imam or Islamic scholar) who regularly offers families religious advice on divorce and reconciliation as well as counseling during marital conflicts.<br>- A university female assistant professor who teaches Islamic jurisprudence; she has worked with younger couples and has insights into how religious advice is changing in today's divorces.   |
| Female Divorcees          | 2  | A woman who has been divorced for less than a year offers insights into the emotional and social retaliatory behaviors that occur right after a divorce.<br>- A woman who has been divorced for over seven years considers the long-term effects of social stigma and retaliatory dynamics.  |
| Male Divorcees            | 2  | A man who has been divorced for less than six months talks about his experiences with practical and emotional retaliation right after the divorce.<br>- A man who has been divorced for more than five years can shed light on how social pressures affected him and whether his retaliatory behaviors changed or disappeared over time.   |
| Total                     | 10 |  |

### 2.3. Reflexivity and author positionality

As authors, we acknowledge that our backgrounds, beliefs, and experiences may have influenced this research. One author is affiliated with a local university in the West Bank (AN-Najah National

University), while the other is based at Al-Qasemi Academic College of Education, Faculty of Sharia and Islamic Studies, Baqa al-Gharbiyye, Israel. This positionality facilitated access to participants, including judges, lawyers, and university professors, but could also introduce potential biases in interpreting data due to shared institutional and cultural contexts. The authors' academic and professional backgrounds in Cultural Studies, Political Sciences, and Islamic Studies have shaped their understanding of marriage and divorce practices and their associated social dynamics. The motivation for this research stems from a commitment to shedding light on underrepresented issues, such as post-divorce conflicts and underlying motivations. To mitigate potential biases, structured interview techniques were employed to ensure consistency in data collection, and both authors were involved in inter-coder reliability checks throughout the research process. These steps helped critically examine the influence of the researchers on the study and ensured the authenticity of participants' experiences.

#### **2.4. Data collection approach**

This qualitative exploratory study will use structured interviews with closed-ended questions, involving participants in person and over the phone. The questions raised during the interviews included:

1. In Palestine, how often do people engage in retaliatory actions after getting divorce?
2. Who is the primary perpetrator of retaliatory actions: the male or the female?
3. Does the presence of children escalate post-divorce retaliatory behaviors?
4. What are the common retaliatory behaviors among couples after divorce in Palestine?
5. What factors drive these behaviors?

To accommodate participant preferences and logistical constraints, participants were offered two options—either in-person or telephone interviews—and were allowed to select their preferred mode. This strategy enhanced participation rates and ensured a representative sample. Notably, despite these options, the researcher ultimately conducted each interview in person to maintain consistency and data quality."

#### **2.5. Data analysis strategies**

With the participants' permission, the interviews were audio recorded for precision and in-depth examination. In order to capture the subtleties of the conversations and give a thorough account of

each session, the researcher transcribed the recordings verbatim, including spoken words and non-verbal cues.

To get acquainted with the data, the researcher started by carefully going through the transcriptions. He then represented important ideas or concepts by manually coding passages of the text. After that, the codes were categorized into more general themes that identified important trends in the data. These themes, which represent the viewpoints and experiences of the participants, were inferred from the data inductively. To make sure they appropriately reflected the data, the identified themes were examined and improved. Every theme was given a clear name and description, along with information about how it relates to the research question and quotes from the data that serve as examples. Writing a thorough report outlining the themes and bolstering them with quotes from the interviews was the last step.

## **2.5. Reliability and Validity**

To enhance the study's trustworthiness, several strategies were employed. Peer debriefing involved discussions with two colleagues not directly involved in the research, providing external checks on data interpretation. Triangulation was used to cross-verify interview data with field notes and relevant literature. Although formal inter-coder reliability statistics (e.g., Cohen's kappa) were not calculated, coding consistency was supported through repeated checks and collaborative discussion with a co-researcher on a portion of the transcriptions, resolving discrepancies as they arose.

## **3. Results**

### **3.1. Results of frequency of post-divorce retaliatory behavior**

The first question raised was "In Palestine, how often do people engage in retaliatory actions after getting divorced?" Participants all indicated their belief that retaliatory actions in divorce cases were extremely common. These actions were regularly described by judges as routine, particularly in cases involving custody and financial disputes. A judge who has been in office for more than ten years said, "Many cases involve attempts to punish the other party through prolonged legal battles." Lawyers also confirmed this trend. One female lawyer put it, "Those in need often seek ways to seek revenge whether through financial claims or spreading damaging rumors." Religious leaders acknowledged the strong social norms surrounding divorce, with a senior imam commenting, "Families often push divorced individuals to defend their honor." These norms

reflect cultural and religious expectations rather than acts of retaliation. Divorcees also reported intentional retaliatory behaviors: female participants noted, "He spread rumors about me and tried to turn my children against me," while male participants admitted, "I wanted to hurt my ex-wife the way I felt hurt." These examples illustrate the distinction between societal pressures and deliberate post-divorce revenge.

### **3.2. Results of perpetrators of post-divorce retaliatory behaviors**

When examining who initiates revenge in post-divorce situations, both males and females can engage in retaliatory actions, but the motives and methods often differ. Judges and lawyers noted that retaliatory behaviors are often initiated by both parties, but men tend to use financial or legal means to exact revenge. One male judge shared, "Retaliatory actions are very common... many cases involve disputes over property or financial support, where one party seeks to 'punish' the other." One female lawyer mentioned, "Retaliatory actions are a regular feature... clients often come to me seeking ways to 'get back' at their ex-spouse, whether through custody battles or financial claims." Nevertheless, religious leaders, while disapproving of retaliation, attributed the phenomenon to families; a senior imam remarked, families often encourage divorced individuals to uphold their honor, reflecting cultural and social expectations; however, these pressures are distinct from retaliatory actions taken by the individuals themselves.

For the divorced couples, female divorcees claimed that they experience significant social retaliation, often initiated by their ex-husbands or his family. One female divorcee shared, "Right after my divorce, I experienced constant retaliation from my ex-husband and his family. They spread rumors about me and tried to turn my children against me." On the other hand, male divorcees often seek revenge due to perceived mistreatment by their ex-wives or her family. One male divorcee said, "I withheld financial support and tried to limit her access to our children. Many men I know do the same."

From these insights, it appears that males tend to initiate revenge more directly—especially through financial or legal actions—while females often become the target of retaliatory behaviors, particularly in the form of social ostracism or rumors. However, both genders experience and enact revenge in different ways and contexts.

### 3.3. Results of the presence of children in escalating post-divorce retaliatory behaviors

The presence of children in divorce cases often escalates retaliatory actions, with both men and women using children as leverage in various ways. Judges and Lawyers both observed that custody disputes are a common arena for retaliation. Judges noted that women often face social retaliation, while men may use financial or legal leverage, particularly when children are involved. Lawyers confirmed this trend, with one remarking that clients frequently seek ways to "get back" at their ex-spouse through custody battles. Religious Leaders also recognized the role of children in retaliatory behaviors. A senior imam highlighted that families pressuring divorced individuals to defend their honor often lead to using children as a means of retaliation. This is supported by a female assistant professor in Islamic jurisprudence, who acknowledged the prevalence of retaliation involving children in culturally charged divorce cases.

Female Divorcees shared personal experiences where their ex-husbands used children to harm or control them. One female divorcee recounted, " He would often refuse to allow me to see the children unless I complied with his demands." This illustrates how children are sometimes manipulated to serve as tools for social and emotional retaliation. Male Divorcees also acknowledged using children as a form of revenge, with one male divorcee explaining how he withheld financial support and attempted to limit his ex-wife's access to their children as a means of retaliation.

### 3.4. Results of Forms of post-divorce retaliatory behaviors

Thematic analysis identified key forms of post-divorce retaliation, summarized in Table 2. These include exploitation of children, financial disputes, defamation, emotional abuse, legal exploitation, and personal life interference. The following section outlines "how many participants describe the relevant behaviors" and "percentages of the five participant groups that mentioned them."

Table 2

Prevalence and Types of Post-Divorce Retaliatory Behaviors

| Retaliatory behavior | Description | N | % |
|----------------------|-------------|---|---|
|----------------------|-------------|---|---|

|  |   |    |      |
|--|---|----|------|
| <b>Exploitation of Children</b>          | Using children to harm the ex-spouse emotionally, financially, or socially. | 10 | 100% |
| <b>Financial Disputes</b>                | Using financial tactics to exert pressure or deny rights.                   | 10 | 100% |
| <b>Defamation and Slandering</b>         | Tarnishing the ex-spouse's reputation through public or private actions.    | 6  | 60%  |
| <b>Emotional and Psychological Abuse</b> | Inflicting emotional harm to destabilize or control the ex-spouse.          | 6  | 60%  |
| <b>Exploitation of the Legal System</b>  | Misusing legal systems to harass or manipulate the ex-spouse.               | 4  | 40%  |
| <b>Interference in Personal Life</b>     | Hindering the ex-spouse's ability to move on or maintain stability.         | 4  | 40%  |

Based on the percentages provided in Table 2, all groups—judges, lawyers, religious leaders, male, and female divorcees—acknowledge the exploitation of children (100%) and financial disputes (100%) as prevalent forms of post-divorce retaliation. These forms of retaliation are universally recognized, regardless of the participants' professional or personal backgrounds. As one male judge noted, "Many cases involve disputes over property or financial support, where one party seeks to 'punish' the other." This reflects the common use of financial disputes as a tool for revenge. Female divorcees also highlighted the exploitation of children, with one sharing, "My ex-husband would use our children to relay negative messages about me, making them unwilling to spend time with me." These comments clearly illustrate that both financial and child-related conflicts are central to post-divorce retaliation.

Defamation and slandering, reported by 60% of participants (6 out of 10), were identified as significant forms of post-divorce retaliation. Judges, lawyers, and female divorcees are particularly likely to report defamation due to their unique roles in post-divorce conflicts. A female lawyer explained, "Retaliatory actions are a regular feature... clients often come to me seeking ways to 'get back' at their ex-spouse, whether through custody battles or financial claims." This highlights how defamation and slander are often leveraged as strategic tools in legal disputes. Female divorcees, especially in conservative societies like Palestine, are more vulnerable to reputational harm. One female divorcee recalled, "He spread rumors about me and tried to turn my children against me." This highlights the stigma that divorced women may face, particularly in societies where family honor is a significant concern. Conversely, within our sample, male divorcees were less likely to report defamation, focusing instead on financial or legal retaliation. Religious leaders in the sample, who disapprove of slander, maintained strong ethical positions, as one senior imam

noted: "Families often pressure divorced individuals to defend their honor, leading to actions like social ostracism or public shaming."

Emotional and psychological abuse was reported by six participants, particularly female divorcees who are more vocal about the immediate personal impact of emotional harm. One female divorcee shared, "It was emotional torture. He tried to make me feel worthless, using my past failures as a weapon." This direct experience emphasizes the emotional toll that divorce can take, particularly for women. Religious leaders, who frequently counsel individuals facing emotional trauma, noted that emotional abuse is widespread. One imam observed, "Divorce often brings significant emotional suffering, and many seek spiritual healing." Similarly, lawyers, who deal with divorce litigation, confirmed that emotional abuse is a key issue. A female lawyer remarked, "It's common for clients to come to us, not just for financial issues, but for the emotional aftermath that continues to affect them." These contributions reinforce the understanding that emotional abuse is a prevalent form of post-divorce retaliation, especially for women.

Exploitation of the legal system was reported by four of the ten participants, primarily judges and lawyers, who are directly involved in legal proceedings. Judges, like one male judge who noted, "It's common for one party to use legal procedures to prolong the conflict, hoping to wear down the other party," emphasized that the legal system is often used as a tool for harassment. Similarly, one lawyer commented, "Clients often use the legal system to intimidate their ex-spouse, even when there is no real case to be made." This suggests that legal manipulation is a common tactic, although not universally reported by all participants. Religious leaders and divorcees, who may be less familiar with legal procedures, are less likely to identify this behavior. As one female divorcee mentioned, "I don't know much about how the law works, but I felt like I was constantly being dragged into court."

Interference in personal life was reported by four participants, with female divorcees particularly vocal about the challenges in establishing new relationships. One female divorcee shared, "After my divorce, he kept trying to interfere with my personal life, spreading lies and trying to control my new relationships." This reflects how personal boundaries are often violated post-divorce, especially by ex-spouses who refuse to let go. Male divorcees also reported ongoing disruptions, with one male divorcee stating, "Even after years, I still face issues with my ex-wife interfering in

my relationships." These comments highlight how social interference remains a significant issue post-divorce. Judges and lawyers, who are more focused on formal legal disputes, were less likely to report these types of personal intrusions. Similarly, religious leaders emphasized their role in counseling and reconciliation, with one imam noting, "We try to help people heal spiritually, but we don't get involved in these personal matters as much." This further underscores the differing priorities and concerns among various groups involved in post-divorce dynamics.

This finding reflects the specific context of post-divorce interactions in Palestine, where cultural norms, legal restrictions, and the social environment may limit overt physical retaliation or stalking. Instead, ex-spouses often engage in non-physical forms of retaliation, such as emotional abuse, defamation, financial disputes, or manipulation of children and legal processes. These behaviors can be equally damaging and are more socially and legally feasible within the studied population, aligning with previous research emphasizing that post-divorce conflict frequently manifests in indirect or socially mediated forms rather than physical violence [38,46].

### 3.5. Results of Factors Driving Post-Divorce Retaliatory Behaviors

Post-divorce retaliatory behaviors among spouses in Palestine are influenced by a complex interplay of psychological, economic, cultural, and social factors. Based on participants' responses, these drivers can be categorized as shown in Table 3 below:

Table 3:

Factors Driving Post-Divorce Retaliatory Behaviors

| Factors                      | Description  | N  | %    |
|------------------------------|--|----|------|
| <b>Psychological Factors</b> | <b>Anger and Emotional Pain:</b> Spouses who feel betrayed or disappointed often experience intense anger and bitterness, prompting acts of revenge.       | 10 | 100% |
|                              | <b>Feelings of Rejection or Humiliation:</b> Some perceive divorce as an attack on their dignity, motivating them to retaliate to regain a sense of power. |    |      |
|                              | <b>Jealousy and Envy:</b> Seeing an ex-partner succeed in a new relationship or life situation can trigger jealousy, fueling retaliatory behaviors.        |    |      |
| <b>Economic Factors</b>      | <b>Financial Burden of Alimony:</b> Evading or refusing to pay alimony is often used as a pressure tactic.   | 10 | 100% |
|                              | <b>Property Disputes:</b> Conflicts over the division of shared assets can lead to hostile actions.  |    |      |



|                              |  |   |     |
|------------------------------|--|---|-----|
| <b>Social Factors</b>        | <b>General Economic Pressure:</b> Given Palestine's difficult economic conditions, some resort to financial revenge as a survival strategy or means to improve their living situation. |   |     |
|                              | <b>Family and Community Influence:</b> Interference by family members and relatives may escalate disputes rather than resolve them.  | 8 | 80% |
|                              | <b>Social Pressure:</b> The negative perception of divorced individuals in society may lead some to justify their actions or tarnish the reputation of their ex-spouse.                |   |     |
| <b>Legal Factors</b>         | <b>Reputation Preservation:</b> Fear of social scandal drives some to defame the other party as a way to justify the divorce.  |   |     |
|                              | <b>Ambiguity or Weak Enforcement of Laws:</b> The absence of strict legal procedures may escalate disputes and prolong retaliatory behaviors.  | 6 | 60% |
| <b>Cultural Factors</b>      | <b>Filing Malicious Lawsuits:</b> Some spouses exploit the legal system as a tool for revenge and coercion.  |   |     |
|                              | <b>Using Children as Leverage:</b> Inciting children against the other parent or denying communication as a form of revenge.   | 4 | 40% |
| <b>Child-Related Factors</b> | <b>Using Children as Leverage:</b> Inciting children against the other parent or denying communication as a form of revenge.   | 6 | 60% |
|                              | <b>Custody Manipulation:</b> Seeking custody not out of care for the child but as an economic or emotional pressure tactic.  |   |     |

The factors driving post-divorce retaliatory behaviors are multifaceted, with psychological, economic, social, legal, cultural, and child-related factors all playing crucial roles. As illustrated in the table above, the primary motivators for revenge stem from emotional pain, financial disputes, social pressures, legal vulnerabilities, and cultural norms, with significant child-related factors also contributing.

**Psychological Factors** were unanimously recognized by all ten participants as key drivers of post-divorce retaliation. Anger and emotional pain were often described as natural reactions to perceived betrayal or disappointment. One male divorcee noted, "After everything that happened, I was filled with anger. It was hard not to retaliate." Feelings of rejection or humiliation were also cited as common triggers, with a female divorcee sharing, "The divorce felt like an attack on my dignity. I wanted to get back at him to restore my sense of power." Jealousy and envy, particularly when an ex-spouse moves on to a new relationship or improved life situation, were also mentioned.

As one judge explained, "When you see your ex-partner succeeding, it's hard not to feel jealous, and that often leads to vengeful actions."

**Economic Factors** were equally identified as significant by all participants. Financial disputes, particularly over alimony and property division, were commonly used as pressure tactics in post-divorce conflicts. One lawyer explained, "Refusing to pay alimony or disputing asset division is a powerful tool for getting back at the other party." Economic pressure, amplified by Palestine's challenging economic situation, further exacerbated these tensions. A divorcee remarked, "I couldn't afford alimony, and that made the situation even worse. It's like using money to make someone suffer." For some, economic struggles led them to seek financial revenge as a means of survival or to improve their financial situation. One male divorcee shared, "I used the financial difficulties to get back at her, to make her suffer a bit like I was."

**Social Factors** were acknowledged by eight participants as crucial contributors to post-divorce retaliation. Family and community interference often escalated disputes. A judge shared, "Family involvement often complicates things. They take sides, and that intensifies the conflict." Social pressures, such as societal stigma against divorced individuals in Palestinian society, were also recognized as factors influencing retaliatory behaviors. One female divorcee stated, "The community blamed me for the divorce, so I tried to tarnish his reputation in return." Fear of social scandal often prompted individuals to defame their ex-spouse as a way to justify their actions. These findings are consistent with Uğur & Karakaş Aydınbakar (2024) [38], who emphasize that social context—including community attitudes and expectations—can intensify emotional reactions and shape post-divorce behaviors.

**Legal Factors** were identified by six participants, especially those with legal expertise, as contributing to post-divorce retaliatory behaviors. Ambiguity or weak enforcement of divorce laws often prolonged disputes and escalated tensions. One lawyer remarked, "The lack of clear legal procedures creates an environment where disputes can drag on, and people begin to exploit the system." Filing malicious lawsuits was also highlighted as a tool for revenge. A male divorcee shared, "I filed a case against her, not because I had a valid claim, but just to make her life harder."

**Cultural Factors** played a role in retaliation, particularly in the use of children as leverage or in custody manipulation. Four participants, including religious leaders and a judge, noted that these actions were often driven by cultural expectations surrounding honor and dignity. A religious leader explained, "In our culture, there's a lot of pressure to protect one's honor. This often leads to using children as a way to retaliate."

**Child-Related Factors** were also significant, with six participants noting how children were used as tools for retaliation. Inciting children against the other parent or denying them communication was reported as a common form of revenge. One female divorcee said, "I didn't let him see the children for a while because I was so angry at him." Custody manipulation was also identified as a common tactic. A lawyer described, "I've seen parents seek custody, not for the child's sake, but because it gives them power and control over the other parent." These child-related retaliatory actions were especially noted in cases where parents used children as emotional or financial leverage.

## 4. Discussion

This discussion situates the study's findings within the broader Agenda 2030 framework, demonstrating how post-divorce retaliatory behaviors intersect with mental health outcomes and multiple Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). By linking individual psychological distress to structural, legal, and socio-political conditions, the findings contribute to interdisciplinary debates on mental health as both an outcome and a driver of sustainable development.

### 4.1. Post-divorce retaliatory behaviors

The study findings show that retaliatory actions in divorce cases in Palestine are common, and participants believe that these behaviors are often triggered by unresolved conflicts or grievances. Studies such as [18,30, 46] support the claim that unresolved issues often lead to retaliatory behaviors. Both males and females engage in retaliation, though their motives and methods differ. Meler (2023) and Cohen and Savaya (2003) [32,36] suggest that men are more likely to use financial or legal means to retaliate after divorce, particularly when their masculinity or role as

providers is perceived to be threatened. Women, by contrast, are more vulnerable to social retaliation, including defamation and stigma, especially in traditional societies where family honor carries significant weight [33,37].

From a mental health perspective, these retaliatory behaviors function as maladaptive coping mechanisms in response to emotional distress, anger, and perceived injustice following marital dissolution. Rather than facilitating psychological recovery, such behaviors often prolong stress, intensify anxiety, and reinforce cycles of interpersonal harm, directly undermining SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being).

Familial pressures, particularly those linked to defending honor, play a significant role in motivating retaliatory actions [28,35]. These pressures are not merely cultural but operate as structural stressors that disproportionately affect women's mental health, reinforcing gendered inequalities relevant to SDG 5 (Gender Equality).

Moreover, the ongoing Israeli occupation and associated political instability exacerbate these pressures. By restricting economic growth, limiting access to resources, and generating high unemployment, the occupation creates chronic financial strain on Palestinian households. Families experience income insecurity, inability to meet basic needs, and limited prospects for long-term planning, which heightens interpersonal tensions and emotional distress. These conditions illustrate how structural violence and conflict amplify mental health vulnerabilities, highlighting the interdependence between SDG 3 (mental well-being), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions).

However, religious leaders may advocate reconciliation and emphasize ethical and spiritual approaches to conflict resolution rather than validating retaliatory actions [30]. Such perspectives point to the potential role of culturally grounded, community-based interventions in promoting psychological resilience and non-violent conflict resolution within sustainable development strategies.

## 4.2. Perpetrators of post-divorce retaliatory behaviors

The findings regarding who initiates retaliation in post-divorce situations align with and expand existing literature on divorce dynamics in Palestinian and Arab societies. Judges and lawyers reported that both men and women engage in retaliation, though through different methods. This supports [30], who found that men frequently resort to financial and legal means of revenge. The male judge's observations regarding disputes over property and financial support mirror [45,46] emphasis on financial conflict in post-divorce retaliation. Similarly, the female lawyer's account of legal retaliation through custody and financial claims aligns with Cohen and Savaya (2003) [36].

These patterns reveal the institutional dimensions of mental health, as prolonged legal disputes and judicial harassment generate sustained psychological stress, particularly for economically marginalized individuals and women. Such dynamics directly implicate SDG 16, as weakened access to fair and timely justice undermines psychological well-being and social trust.

Religious leaders attributed retaliatory behaviors to family pressure and honor-related expectations, consistent with cultural analyses by Goliaei et al. (2023) and Khalidi and Raba (2019) [28,35]. Female divorcees' experiences of social retaliation—especially defamation and child alienation—align with Khudair (2004) and Malik et al. (2024) [33,37], underscoring women's vulnerability to reputational harm. These gendered patterns reflect broader mental health inequities linked to SDG 5 and SDG 10, as women bear disproportionate emotional and social burdens following divorce.

The broader conflict environment further intensifies these dynamics. Economic instability, uncertainty, and cumulative psychological strain under occupation increase the likelihood of retaliatory behaviors among both men and women. This finding reinforces the argument that mental health cannot be separated from development conditions, as chronic insecurity directly shapes interpersonal conflict and emotional regulation.

### **4.3. Forms of post-divorce retaliatory behaviors**

The findings align with existing literature on post-divorce dynamics in Palestinian and Arab societies. Participants identified the exploitation of children and financial disputes as the most common forms of retaliation. Children are frequently used as tools for emotional leverage, exacerbating fear, anxiety, and social withdrawal [33,37]. These practices have serious intergenerational mental health consequences and extend beyond SDG 3 to SDG 4 (Quality Education), as psychological distress and family instability negatively affect children's school attendance, concentration, and academic performance.

Financial retaliation related to alimony or property disputes reflects both coercive strategies and survival responses in Palestine's constrained economic context [37,42]. Divorce often marks the continuation rather than the resolution of conflict, producing long-term psychological and social consequences [16,18,41,42,46]. These sustained stressors illustrate how unresolved family conflict undermines mental well-being and social stability, impeding progress toward sustainable development.

Defamation and slander, primarily reported by female divorcees, highlight the centrality of social reputation. Emotional and psychological abuse further underscores the immediate mental health toll of post-divorce retaliation, particularly for women. These findings emphasize the need for integrated mental health and legal protections within development agendas, rather than siloed interventions.

### **4.4. Factors driving post-divorce retaliatory behaviors**

The findings illustrate the multifaceted and context-dependent nature of post-divorce retaliation in Palestine. Cultural and religious norms stigmatizing divorce, economic hardship, family interference, and legal vulnerabilities collectively shape retaliatory motivations.

Together, these factors demonstrate how mental health inequities are produced through intersecting cultural, economic, and structural conditions, directly affecting progress toward SDG 3, SDG 5, SDG 10, and SDG 16.

Economic pressures provide both motive and means for retaliation, while legal manipulation highlights structural gaps requiring reform. Child-related retaliation reflects compounded vulnerability for both parents and children. These findings underscore the importance of addressing mental health as a cross-cutting development priority within Agenda 2030.

## **Conclusion**

This study investigates the dynamics and motivations behind post-divorce retaliatory behaviors in Palestinian society, focusing on the intertwined social, cultural, and familial factors that influence these actions. The research reveals that divorce often triggers unresolved conflicts, leading to prolonged retaliation between ex-spouses. Factors such as familial pressure, societal norms around honor, and economic challenges often contribute to these retaliatory behaviors. Both genders engage in post-divorce retaliation, with men exploiting financial and legal channels due to diminished masculinity or provider roles, while women face greater social retaliation due to stigmatization.

The presence of children often intensifies retaliatory behaviors, with disputes often centered on custody and child-related responsibilities. The exploitation of the legal system to prolong conflicts further complicates the challenges faced by divorced individuals. The study suggests the need for stronger legal frameworks to prevent abuses and protect the rights of both parties and their children.

Religious leaders as mediators offer an opportunity for conflict resolution, advocating for ethical and reconciliatory approaches. However, the findings also suggest the need for updated social and legal support mechanisms that align with evolving societal norms. The study fills a critical gap in understanding post-divorce retaliatory behaviors in Palestinian society, offering insights into socio-cultural and legal dynamics.

Overall, post-divorce retaliation in Palestine should be understood not only as a socio-legal phenomenon, but as a mental health and sustainable development issue. Addressing these dynamics requires integrated policies that combine mental health services, gender-sensitive legal reforms, and economic protections to foster resilience, equity, and long-term social well-being.

## **Limitations and Contributions**

This study is exploratory, and its findings cannot be generalized to the larger population. The small and context-specific sample limits the ability to draw broad conclusions about post-divorce dynamics across different regions and communities. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into the social and familial factors influencing post-divorce experiences, including retaliatory behaviors, reputational impacts, and ongoing social disruptions. By highlighting these patterns, the research contributes a nuanced understanding of how extended family involvement and cultural expectations shape post-divorce life.

Future research could build on these findings by including larger and more diverse samples, which would enable generalizability and allow for examination of regional and socioeconomic variations. Longitudinal studies could track post-divorce experiences over time, providing further insight into the evolution of social disruptions and retaliatory behaviors. Overall, this study offers a foundation for targeted interventions, policy development, and interdisciplinary research addressing the psychological, cultural, and legal dimensions of post-divorce conflict.

Importantly, this study offers a unique contribution by providing an in-depth exploration of post-divorce retaliatory behaviors in the Palestinian context, capturing both male and female perspectives. We highlight the study's distinct focus on the judicial and social dimensions of divorce through interviews with divorce trial judges, lawyers, and religious leaders, alongside female and male divorcees. By examining the interplay of familial interference, cultural expectations, and retaliatory dynamics, the research illuminates patterns that have been underexplored in prior literature and provides a foundation for targeted interventions, policy development, and future interdisciplinary research.

Key implications that can direct the creation of policies and social interventions are revealed by the study's findings. First, legislative reforms are necessary to stop post-divorce retaliation through the abuse of legal channels, including false allegations and protracted custody disputes. Second, the development of counseling services and social support networks is essential for assisting divorced people—especially women—in overcoming social and emotional obstacles.

### **Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI)**

This study utilized large language models (LLMs) to assist with translation, language editing, and referencing, ensuring clarity, coherence, and proper citation formatting for an Arabic-speaking sample.



## Declarations

**Ethics Approval:** Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of An-Najah National University (Approval No. Hum. Mar. 2024/25). The research involved minimal risk activities, specifically structured interviews with participants. The approval covered all aspects of participant recruitment, data collection, and analysis. All procedures were conducted in accordance with the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki.

## Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards for research involving human participants. All participants provided informed consent after being fully informed of the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. In addition, informed consent to publish anonymized data and descriptive information was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were assured that their responses and any demographic descriptions included in the publication would be fully anonymized and non-identifiable.

**Confidentiality Measures:** Participants' privacy was protected through anonymization, secure data storage, and restricted access to research materials, ensuring confidentiality throughout the study.

**Authors Contribution:** **OJ** conceived and designed the study, developed the research framework, conducted the interviews, and led the analysis and writing of the manuscript. **HA** contributed substantively to data interpretation and analysis, particularly by providing expertise in Islamic Sharia and women's studies, and assisted in refining the discussion and contextualization of the findings. Both authors reviewed, edited, and approved the final version of the manuscript.

**Availability of Data and Materials:** The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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**Competing interests:** The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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