

KoID'mama Daka

Silent Voices: The Needs
of Divorced Women in the
Orthodox Community

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 ORTHODOX UNION
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Acharon acharon chaviv, we thank the women who shared their experiences, thoughts, and feelings in this survey. We were humbled by their openness and insights, and we hope this report does justice to their trust in us. Our gratitude notwithstanding, the authors of this report take full responsibility for its contents.

Overview and Summary

This report contains a systematic assessment of the needs of divorced women in the Orthodox Jewish community in the United States and Canada.

Findings of this study are based on survey data gathered from 525 members of Sister to Sister, a nonprofit organization that provides resources and a support network to divorced women in the Orthodox community. A description of the sample and its representativeness can be found in Appendix A on page 21, and a complete methodology can be found in Appendix B on page 22.

Key findings of the study:

- Virtually all of the women reported high levels of **marital conflict** prior to divorce. The most common areas of open disagreement between couples were counseling or mental health treatment, money, and intimacy. Many of the women also experienced **intimate partner violence**, including 44% who were physically hurt by their husbands. See page 6.
- The women are **economically vulnerable**: half have household incomes below \$35,000 per year, and 63% are receiving **government assistance**. Only three in five of the women could pay for a \$400 emergency expense without taking on debt. See page 8.
- Most of the women had children with their ex-husbands, and the women carry most of the **burden of childcare**. Fully 43% of the mothers have their children with them every night of the year. This burden is made heavier by substantial **post-divorce conflict** with their ex-husbands and a very high prevalence of special needs among the children. The mothers of boys struggle to provide their **sons** with the religious experiences and education that are traditionally the responsibility of the father. The strain takes a toll on children, and two-thirds of the mothers are seeking mental health services for their children. See page 9.
- Living in the Jewish community post-divorce brings many challenges. Many of the women feel **lonely** and **stigmatized**, and they lack social support. While some are satisfied with the support they receive from rabbis, many also **lack confidence** in Jewish institutions, especially the beis din. Lack of confidence in Jewish institutions is associated with feeling distant from G-d. See page 12.
- Two-thirds of the women feel ready to **marry again**, but they struggle to find a husband. Many want **better tools** and more support in finding a shidduch. See page 16.

Divorced women have varied and complex needs. The women who participated in the survey are seeking mental health services, financial help, parenting support, legal assistance, and help finding a shidduch. They believe that the community at large should create a more formal infrastructure for education about divorce and domestic violence, and for supporting divorced women. Perhaps most of all, they want communal leaders to understand how lonely they feel and to address the stigma around divorce, so they can feel connected to their Jewish communities.

This study of divorced women is in no way meant to dismiss the struggles of single men and women, divorced men, widows, and widowers in the Orthodox community. Communal need is deep and wide. The authors hope this study will serve as a model for future needs assessments focusing on other populations.

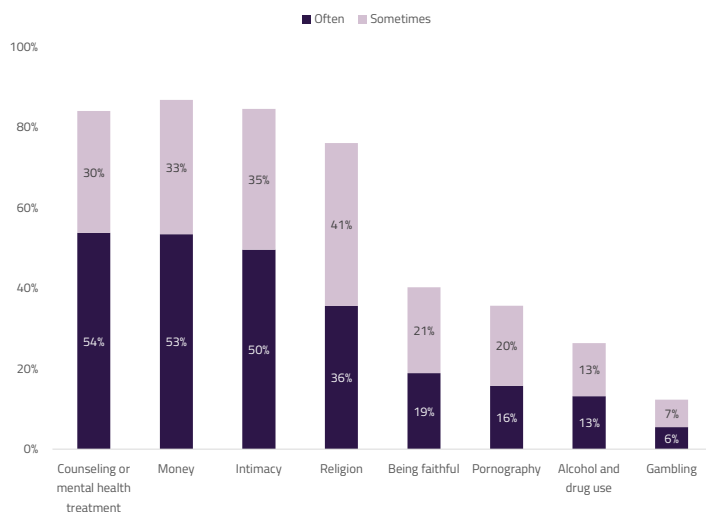
Experience of Marriage

Virtually all of the women reported high levels of **marital conflict** prior to divorce. The most common areas of open disagreement between couples were counseling or mental health treatment, money, and intimacy. Many of the women also experienced **intimate partner violence**, including 44% who were physically hurt by their husbands.

Marital Conflict

Most of the women experienced high levels of conflict during their marriages. The three most common areas of open disagreement with their ex-husbands were counseling or mental health treatment, money, and intimacy. See Figure 1 below. There were no significant, substantive differences in these three areas of disagreement between women who described themselves as Chassidish, Litvish, Modern Orthodox, or any other affiliation.

Figure 1. Nature and frequency of arguments.



It is unknown whether conflict over counseling or mental health treatment was related to the mental health of the wife or husband, or to marital counselling. In the general population, psychological problems such as antisocial personality traits, neurotic personalities, or a tendency to depression are a risk factor for divorce.¹ Poverty is also a risk factor for divorce in the general population, while intimacy is much less so.¹

In the general population, infertility decreases marriage quality and increases the risk of divorce.² Of the women surveyed, 17% dealt with infertility during their marriage, either undergoing fertility testing or using assisted reproductive technology (e.g., IVF) to help them become pregnant. Of that 17%, half (48%) said that they had open disagreements with their ex-husband about these medical services.

Patterns of divorce in religious communities

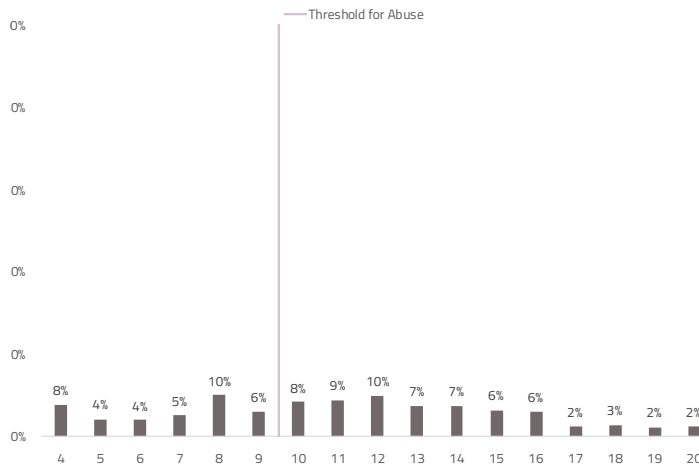
Most religious traditions hold that family relationships, particularly marriage and childrearing, are essential to a good life.³ Marriages between religious men and woman are far less likely to end in divorce than marriages between irreligious men and women. When divorce occurs, it usually reflects a very high level of conflict and unhappiness.⁴ The experience of marriage described in this report is both unusual and severe.

Intimate Partner Violence

Intimate partner violence is abuse or aggression that occurs in a romantic relationship, including physical violence, sexual violence, stalking, and psychological aggression. Most of the women surveyed are survivors of intimate partner violence, including 44% who were physically hurt by their husbands.

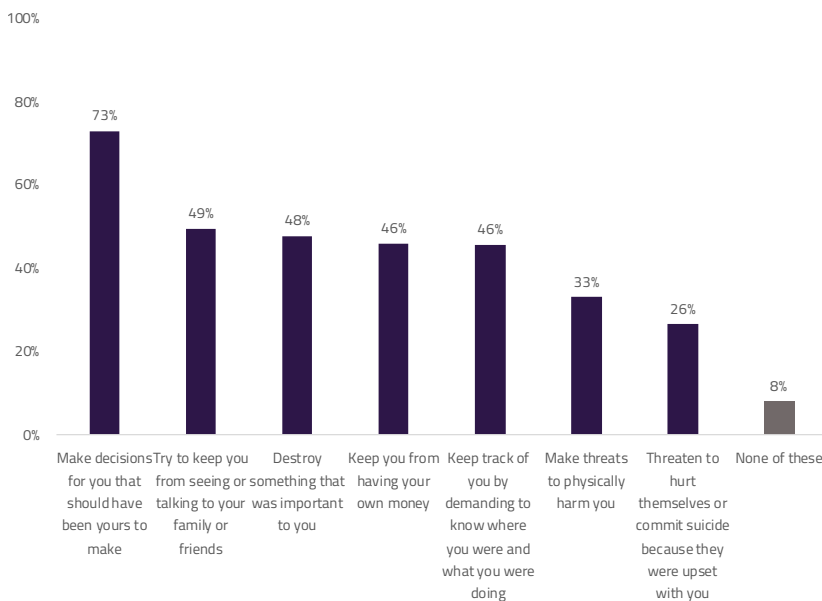
The HITS (hurt, insult, threatened, scream) screening tool assigns women a score between 4 and 20 based on whether and how often their ex-husbands physically hurt them, insulted or talked down to them, threatened them with harm, screamed or cursed at them, or forced them to do sexual acts that they were not comfortable with.⁵ Scores of 10 or greater are indicative of intimate partner violence; 63% of the women had scores of 10 or greater. See Figure 2 below.

Figure 2. Score on the HITS screener.



Coercive control is a prevalent type of psychological aggression—a pattern of behavior designed to exert power over a victim, often through intimidation or humiliation.⁶ Most of the women (92%) experienced some type of coercive control. See Figure 3 below.

Figure 3. Experiences of coercive control.



Length of Marriage

Among survey respondents, marriages lasted from less than a year to as many as 34 years, with the average length being 11.5 years. Average age at marriage was 22. There was no significant relationship between length of marriage and age at marriage—that is, the women did not divorce more quickly if they married at a younger age.

In this data set, women who married 20 or more years ago had longer marriages than women who married in more recent years. However, this finding is likely an artefact of the sample rather than a reflection of changing marriage patterns within the Orthodox community. Women who were married for a short duration many years ago are almost certainly less likely to seek help from Sister to Sister than women who divorced more recently. The only women who were married over 20 years ago that are likely to seek help from Sister to Sister are those who had longer marriages.

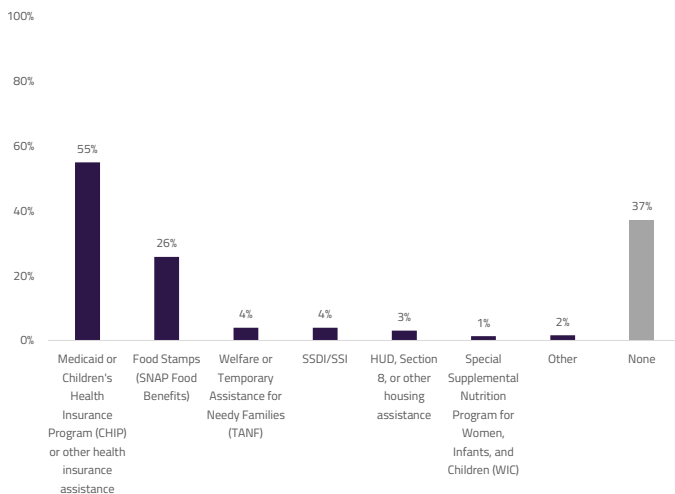
Economic Vulnerability

The women are economically vulnerable: half have household incomes below \$35,000 per year, and 63% are receiving government assistance. Only three in five of the women could pay for a \$400 emergency expense without taking on debt.

In the general population, divorce brings both short- and long-term declines in women's economic resources, including lower wealth accumulation and elevated poverty rates.⁷ The same is true for survey respondents: about one quarter listed finances as one of the biggest challenges (see sidebar).

Most of the women are employed, at least part-time. See Table 1 in the sidebar. Nevertheless, half (48%) the women have household incomes below \$35,000 per year.⁸ Further, fully 63% of the women are receiving government assistance, most often Medicaid or Food Stamps (SNAP Food Benefits).⁹ See Figure 5 below.

Figure 5. Government assistance (U.S. only).

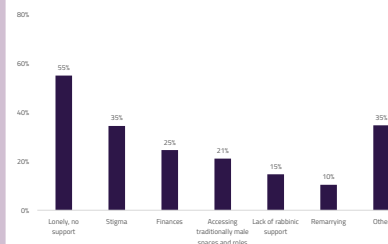


The Biggest Challenges

Survey respondents were asked an open-ended question to identify the biggest challenges of being a divorced woman in the Orthodox community (see Appendix B on page 22). The most frequent responses are shown in Figure 4, below.

Just over half of the responses identified feelings of loneliness and general lack of support as big challenges; 16% specifically mentioned being alone on shabbat and yom tov, and 4% felt they had no peers. About one third listed the stigma associated with divorce, with 7% mentioning how that stigma affected their children. Somewhat less often, responses listed financial struggles, difficulty accessing traditionally male spaces and roles, a lack of support from rabbis, and difficulties with re-marrying. All of these issues are addressed in the pages of this report.

Figure 4. Biggest challenges to divorced women in the Orthodox community.



Responses are not mutually exclusive.

Table 1. Employment status.

| | |
|--------------------|-------------|
| Employed full-time | 58% |
| Employed part-time | 31% |
| Not employed | 11% |
| Total | 100% |

The women were asked how they would pay for a \$400 emergency expense.¹⁵ Only three in five could pay the \$400 without taking on debt. Another one in five would incur credit card debt, and still others would not be able to pay that expense at all. See Table 2 in the side bar.

When asked to describe their financial situation, one quarter of the women said they didn't have enough to meet basic expenses, and about half said they were just meeting their basic expenses. See Table 3, in the sidebar.

Raising Children Post-Divorce

*Most of the women had children with their ex-husbands, and the women carry most of the **burden of childcare**. Fully 43% of the mothers have their children with them every night of the year. This burden is made heavier by substantial **post-divorce conflict** with their ex-husbands and a very high prevalence of special needs among the children. Mothers of boys struggle to provide their **sons** with the religious experiences and education that are traditionally the responsibility of the father. The strain takes a toll on children, and two-thirds of the mothers are seeking mental health services for their children.*

Caregiving

Most of the women (87%) had children with their ex-husbands; the average number of children was three. At the time of the survey, 63% of the women had a child younger than 18 (see Table 15 in Appendix A).

In almost all cases, the mothers now bear the majority of the responsibility for their children. The majority of the mothers have their children sleeping in their homes more than 90% of the time, with 43% having their children all the time.

Most of the mothers also carry the lion's share of the "mental load"—that is, the cognitive and emotional labor of childrearing. 72% of the mothers say they do all the thinking, planning, and scheduling for their children, and another 24% say they do more than 90% of that work. These numbers reflect the reality in the general population—even among married couples, women do the vast majority of the cognitive and emotional labor of running a household.¹⁰

Inequitable distribution of caregiving responsibilities is detrimental to both women and children. Research in the general population has shown that parents with sole custody of their children generally fare poorly compared to parents with joint custody: they have worse health, more stress, and less freedom.¹¹ Sole custody is also worse for children on measures including academic achievement, mental health, stress, self-esteem, and substance use and abuse.^{12,13}

Co-Parental Relationships

Most of the mothers experience substantial post-divorce conflict with their ex-husbands. Only a minority of the mothers can talk to their ex-husbands about issues concerning their child or participate in family events together.¹⁴ See Figure 6 below.

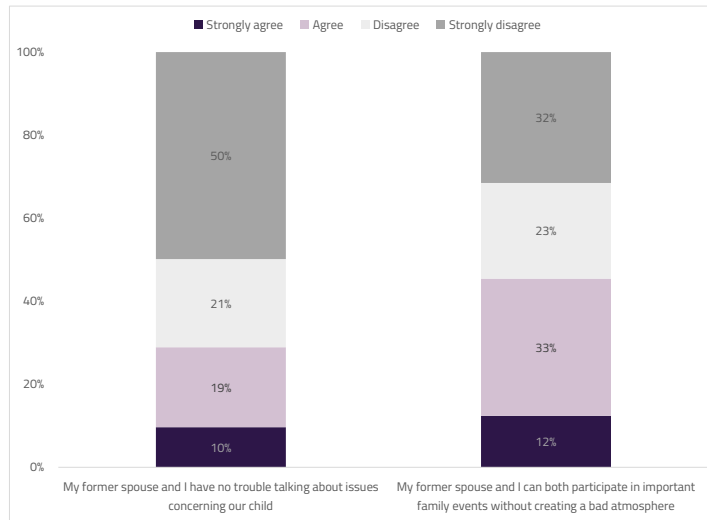
Table 2. How to pay for a \$400 emergency expense.

| | |
|---|-------------|
| With the money currently in my checking/savings account or with cash | 30% |
| Put it on my credit card and pay it off in full at the next statement | 29% |
| Put it on my credit card and pay it off over time | 19% |
| By borrowing from a friend or family member | 10% |
| I wouldn't be able to pay for the expense right now | 9% |
| By selling something | 1% |
| Using money from a bank loan or line of credit | 1% |
| Using a payday loan, deposit advance, or overdraft | 0% |
| Total | 100% |

Table 3. Subjective financial situation.

| | |
|--|-------------|
| Don't have enough to meet basic expenses | 23% |
| Just meet your basic expenses | 49% |
| Live comfortable | 25% |
| Live very comfortably | 4% |
| Total | 100% |

Figure 6. Post-divorce conflict.



Research in the general population has shown that positive co-parental relationships, with cooperation and low levels of conflict, lead to better outcomes for children of divorce.¹⁶ The high levels of post-divorce conflict in this population likely have negative consequences for the children.

Children with Special Needs

About half of the mothers (46%) have a child with special needs. See Table 4 below. Many more of the women have a child with special needs than would be expected by pure chance: for example, given the prevalence of autism spectrum disorder among children (1.7%), a woman with three children has a 5% chance of having a child with autism spectrum disorder, but 13% of survey respondents have a child with autism spectrum disorder. In the general population, having a special needs child is a risk factor for divorce,¹⁷ which may explain the high prevalence of special needs among children of respondents.

Table 4. Prevalence of developmental disabilities in children.

| | Prevalence in U.S. children ages 3 to 17 years ¹⁸ | Prevalence among families with 3 children ¹⁹ | Survey respondents |
|--|--|---|--------------------|
| ADHD or ADD ²⁰ | 9.0% | 25% | 43% |
| Autism spectrum disorder ²¹ | 1.7% | 5% | 13% |
| An intellectual disability | 1.1% | 3% | 5% |
| Learning disability | 7.7% | 21% | 31% |
| Other developmental delay | 4.4% | 13% | 13% |

The mothers whose child has an intellectual disability (e.g., Down syndrome), autism spectrum disorder, or another developmental delay have even greater caregiving responsibilities than other mothers. They have their child more nights and carry a larger share of the mental load.

Male Role Models

Asked to list the biggest challenges of being a divorced woman in the Orthodox community, 12% of respondents volunteered that the absence of a father in the home makes it difficult for sons to access religious life (see page 8). The mothers of boys identified two major issues:

- **Shul and davening.** Many sons of divorced women do not have a man to accompany them to shul, leading to feelings of disconnection and displacement. One mother shared that her son “doesn’t want to sit alone in shul but feels awkward when people he doesn’t have a relationship with offer.” Another mother noted that “even the strongest woman can’t assure that her son gets an aliya on Simchas Torah, knows how to duchan, how to knot a tie, wrap a gartel or perhaps wicks for the menorah or a lulav.”
- **Father-son learning.** Sons of divorced women are often left out of father-son learning opportunities. The mothers see this as “one of the most painful voids.” As one mother explained, “My sons begged me to go with them to father-son learning and yet I could not and no one I asked was able to help.”

Overall, as one mother put it, “the pressure of being both the mother and the father to my children” is a major challenge with regards to boys’ informal religious education.

Stigma and Children

When asked about major challenges for divorced women in the Orthodox community, 7% of the women talked about stigma in relation to their children (see page 8). They say that children are viewed by classmates as the “kid from the divorced home” and not invited to play at other children’s homes because they come from a “troubled home.” The mothers believe that the stigma of divorce negatively impacts their sons’ acceptance into some yeshivot, in some cases making it “near impossible.” Later in life, the stigma extends into the shidduch world, where children of divorce are unable to find a strong shidduch. One woman explained that her biggest challenge was “giving over the confidence to my children that it’s okay to come from a divorced home.”

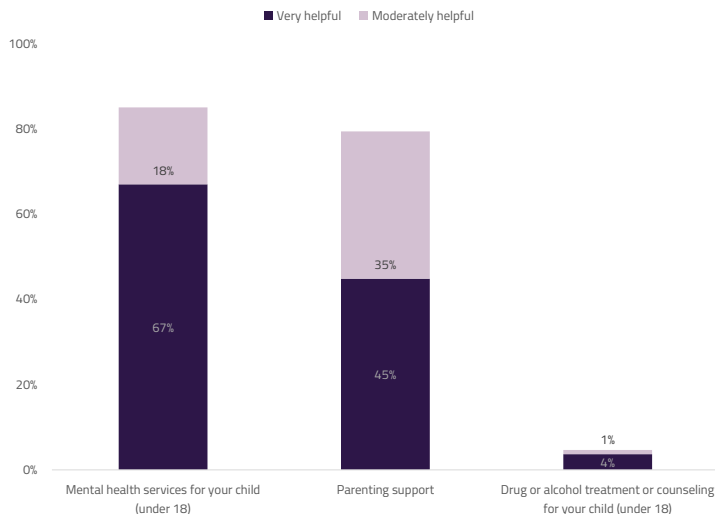
Desired Services for Children

Asked about services that would be helpful to them, two-thirds of the mothers said that mental health services for their child would be very helpful. Just under half (45%) also said that parenting support would be very helpful. In contrast, very few of the mothers needed drug or alcohol treatment or counseling for their child. See Figure 7 below.

“Parental Alienation”

Several of the mothers mentioned “parental alienation disorder” in response to open-ended survey questions. Purportedly, parental alienation disorder occurs in children of divorce who are turned against one parent by the other parent. This concept is cited frequently in the family court system, especially in custody disputes—but it has no empirical support and has been soundly rejected by the academic and scientific community.²²

Figure 7. Divorced mothers' needs.



Jewish Life Post-Divorce

*Living in the Jewish community post-divorce brings many challenges. Many of the women feel **lonely and stigmatized**, and they lack social support. While some are satisfied with the support they receive from rabbis, many also **lack confidence** in Jewish institutions, especially the beis din. Lack of confidence in Jewish institutions is associated with feeling distant from G-d.*

Lack of Community Connection and Support

Asked to list the biggest challenges of being a divorced woman in the Orthodox community, more than half of survey respondents said they feel lonely and isolated, without the social support they need (see page 8). They described their lives with words like “disconnected,” “invisible,” “on the outskirts of mainstream society,” and “cast to the side.” Almost one quarter of the women felt not too or not at all attached to their local Jewish communities. See Table 5 in the sidebar.

A major contributing factor to feelings of isolation is a lack of invitations for Shabbat and Yom Tov meals. The women shared that they do not receive many invitations, perhaps because people do not want to have divorced women at their house, or because people simply forget about them. One woman said, “I have stopped going to shul since I moved to this community because it’s painful and lonely, sitting by myself, and then saying ‘good shabbos’ to a few people and then just walking back alone to spend the long shabbos day alone.”

Based on their responses to three survey questions, the women were classified as having poor, moderate, or strong social support from their local Jewish communities.²³ Almost half of the women had poor social support. See Table 6 in the sidebar.

One woman shared, “COVID was like the biggest ‘flag’ waved in our faces, how alone we truly are in this world was really scary.”

Table 5. Feelings of attachment to local Jewish community.

| | |
|---------------------|------|
| Very attached | 38% |
| Somewhat attached | 40% |
| Not too attached | 16% |
| Not at all attached | 6% |
| Total | 100% |

Table 6. Social support.

| | |
|-------------------------|------|
| Poor social support | 46% |
| Moderate social support | 37% |
| Strong social support | 17% |
| Total | 100% |

Stigma

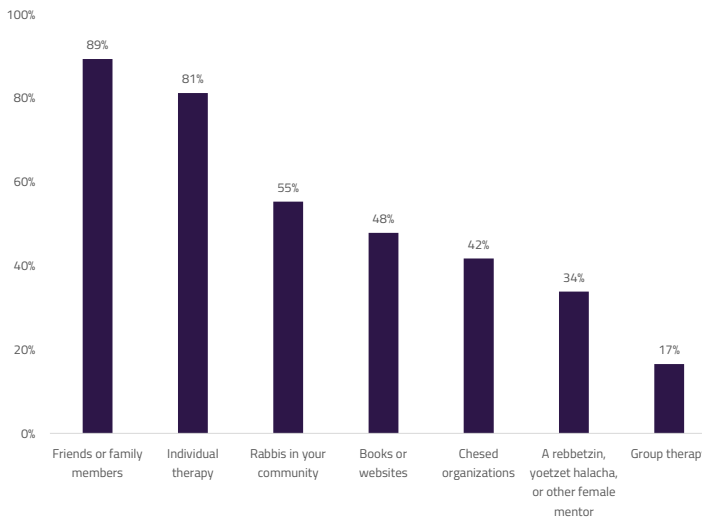
One third of survey respondents volunteered that stigma is a major challenge for divorced women in the Orthodox community (see page 8). Some of the women described being viewed as a “*nebach*,” an object of pity. Others described being treated as “damaged goods,” as if they were tainted or had a “contagious disease.” The women shared stories of being rejected for jobs and apartments because they are divorced, and being shunned by former friends. The stigma also extended to their children (see page 11).

Many of the women reported that divorce is viewed as “a choice” by the Jewish community. Yet for many, divorce was matter of safety and child welfare. As one woman shared, “I’m separated due to abuse. I did it to save my children. There was no other choice. And I’m blamed.” A few women contrasted their experience with the experience of widows, who they see receiving tremendous communal support.

Seeking Help

After divorce, most of the women sought advice and support from friends or family members, or from individual therapy. About half (55%) of women sought support from rabbis. Of those, most were at least somewhat satisfied. See Figure 8 and Table 7.

Figure 8. Where women sought support.²⁵

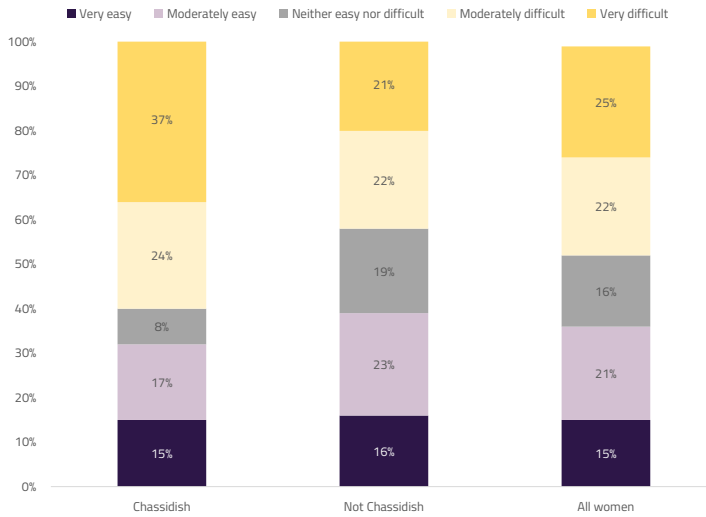


At the same time, about half (47%) of the women find it difficult to speak to a rabbi when they need rabbinic guidance. The quarter of survey respondents who self-described as Chassidish found seeking out rabbinic guidance particularly difficult. See Figure 9 below.

Table 7. Satisfaction with support provided by rabbis.²⁴

| | |
|---------------------------------|------|
| Didn't seek support from rabbis | 44% |
| Not at all satisfied | 10% |
| Somewhat satisfied | 25% |
| Very satisfied | 19% |
| Total | 100% |

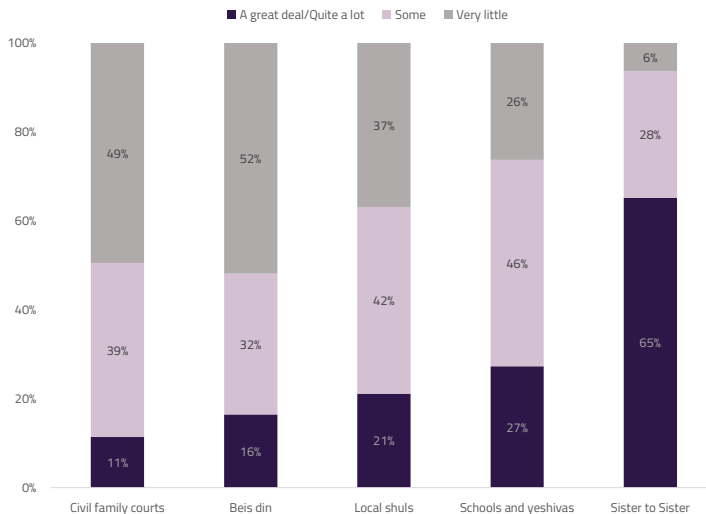
Figure 9. Ease of accessing rabbinic guidance.



Distrust of Religious Leaders and Institutions

Many of the women lacked confidence in Jewish institutions. Although they were even more doubtful of civil courts, about half of the women had very little confidence in the beis din specifically, and not insignificant proportions had minimal trust in shuls and schools. See Figure 10 below. Unsurprisingly, those who sought and were satisfied with the support provided by rabbis also had more trust in the beis din, local shuls, and schools.

Figure 10. Confidence in institutions.



Critiques of the Beis Din range from allegations of unequal treatment of women to those of corruption. Many complained that the Beis Din lacks the power or will to enforce agreements. Many of the women struggled to secure a get from their husbands, relinquishing child support “because they’re terrified of not receiving a get.”

As for the shul and school rabbis, survey respondents who are distrustful complain that these rabbis don't want to get involved, are ill-equipped to provide support, and have little will to help in the face of manipulative or wealthy ex-husbands. One woman lamented, "We are disillusioned by the system for a reason...no one gets the women's perspective, no one listens to our voice or lets us even have a say."

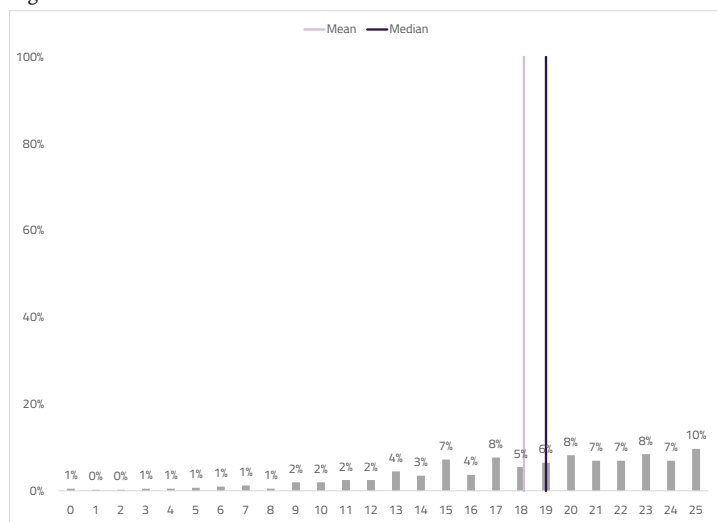
Faith and Doubt

The women were asked the extent to which they had the following emotions or thoughts during the previous fortnight:

- Find strength or comfort in religious observance
- Wonder if G-d was punishing you
- Wonder if G-d had abandoned you
- Feel G-d's love

Responses to these four items were combined to form a Closeness-to-G-d Scale, with values ranging from 0 to 25.²⁶ A woman would have a score of zero if she never or almost never finds strength or comfort in religious observance, never or almost never feels G-d's love, and wonders many times a day if G-d is punishing her or has abandoned her. Conversely, a woman would have a score of 25 if she finds strength or comfort in religious observance many times a day, feels G-d's love many times a day, and never or almost never wonders if G-d is punishing her or has abandoned her. The women were arrayed along the full length of the scale; the mean score was 18.1. See Figure 11 below. Modern Orthodox women had marginally lower scores, with a mean of 16.8.

Figure 11. Closeness-to-G-d scale scores.



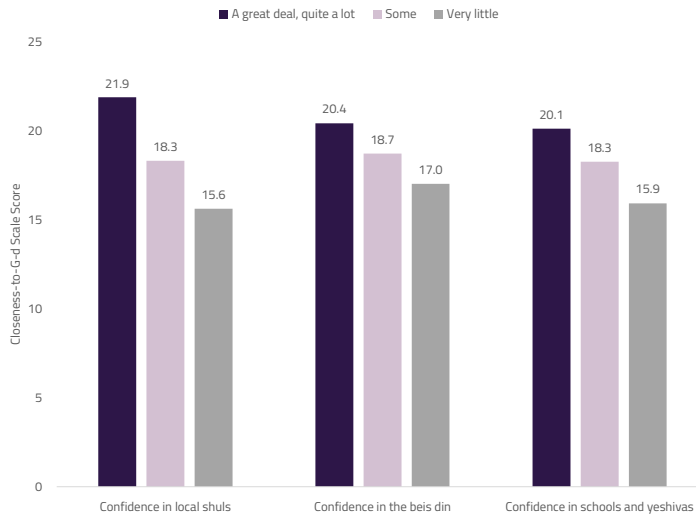
Open-ended responses reflected this wide spectrum of closeness to G-d. Some of the women said that "Hashem sends me what I need when I need it" or "you're not alone, Hashem is there with you." Other women shared that it is "hard to maintain religious level when so much of the time you are alone and lonely," and that they "no longer believe in it."

The women who were less confident in Jewish institutions felt significantly more distant from G-d. See Figure 12 below.

Sister to Sister

Two thirds of survey respondents had a great deal of confidence in Sister to Sister. They said that Sister to Sister looked out for them and generally described the organization as "amazing." One woman described Sister to Sister as "the hug that I needed during hard times." Among the women who lacked confidence, their primary critiques of Sister to Sister were that the organization doesn't adequately support divorced women without children and doesn't provide financial support.

Figure 12. Mean closeness-to-God scale score by confidence in Jewish institutions.



Remarrying

*Two-thirds of the women feel ready to **marry again**, but they struggle to find a husband. Many want **better tools** and more support in finding a shidduch.*

Of all women who responded to the survey, 13% were remarried. See Table 10 on page 21. Women who were younger at the time of their divorce were more likely to have remarried. However, women with and without children were equally likely to remarry, and women in different sectors of Orthodoxy were equally likely to remarry.

Almost two thirds of unmarried survey respondents feel ready to get married again. See Table 8 in the sidebar.

However, finding a shidduch is difficult. First, the women describe a lack of mentally healthy divorced men who are interested in remarrying. Second, they describe a lack of gender “equity” in the shidduch system, with men being more sought after than women and less negatively affected by the stigma of divorce. Third, they describe a lack of guidance or structures in their community to help them find a new spouse. Among the women who feel ready to get married again, many would like better tools and support in finding a husband. See Table 9 below.

The women would also welcome suggestions for shidduchim from community members. “It would be nice as well if maybe just maybe someone would ask me if I would like to be set up. No one ever once approached me with any shidduch opportunity,” shared one woman.

Table 8. “I feel I am ready to get married again.”

| | |
|-------------------|------|
| Strongly agree | 32% |
| Agree | 33% |
| Disagree | 21% |
| Strongly disagree | 13% |
| Total | 100% |

Table 9. Needs related to dating (of those ready to get married).

| | “I have the tools to access the right shidduch for me” | “I would benefit from the services of a coach who could improve my success in dating” |
|-------------------|--|---|
| Strongly Agree | 18% | 49% |
| Agree | 40% | 37% |
| Disagree | 27% | 12% |
| Strongly Disagree | 16% | 2% |
| Total | 100% | 100% |

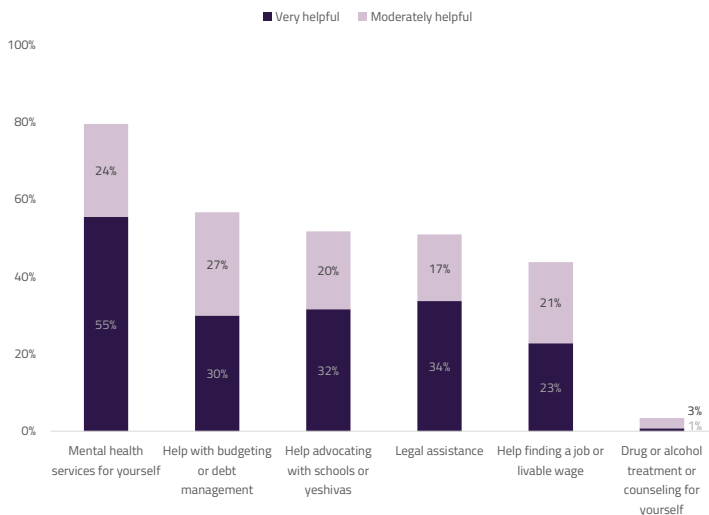
Making It Better

The women want mental health services, financial help, parenting support, legal assistance, and help finding a shidduch. They also want communal leaders to understand how lonely and unsupported they feel, and to address the stigma around divorce. They believe that the community at large needs to develop a greater understanding of divorce, and of related issues like domestic violence and mental health.

Services Women Want

Asked what services would be helpful to them, four in five of the women felt they needed mental health services. See Figure 13 below. This figure likely reflects the trauma associated with divorce in a community where divorce is relatively rare; most adults in the general population are psychologically resilient and fare quite well following divorce.²⁷ The women also want financial help, help advocating with schools or yeshivas, and legal assistance.

Figure 13. Divorced women's needs.



Messages for Communal Leaders

Survey respondents were asked an open-ended question what they would like Orthodox communal leaders to know about divorced women in the Orthodox community (see Appendix B on page 22). The women had several key messages for communal leaders:

- About half (47%) of the women simply want leaders to understand that they feel lonely and isolated. “We are so alone and carrying so much,” wrote one woman.
- 25% of the women spoke about the stigma surrounding divorce, the feeling of being “painted with the ‘divorced brush’” and “treated like a disease.” “We won’t spread divorce,” wrote one mother. “Invite us to your homes, make play dates with our kids.” Another woman said, “Just because we suffered greatly doesn’t mean we’re broken.” These women asked for more acceptance and compassion.

- 24% of the women asked for more financial assistance as they are “struggling to eke out a living.” Frequent requests were for help with school and camp tuition and medical expenses, including mental health professionals for the “overload of therapy and trauma work.” There was an undertone of desperation in the responses: “I’m exhausted working full time to cover our needs, my kids are with me 100% time, I just can’t do everything.”
- 24% of the women wanted rabbis, school administration and teachers, and the community at large to have a greater understanding of divorce, and of related issues like domestic violence and mental health. They wanted the community to create a more formal infrastructure for education and support. “Rabbis need to get educated” was a common theme, as was the need for pre-marital education about healthy relationships. “Few things are more aggravating to me as a divorcée than to see failed marriages in process before these young men and women are even dating,” wrote one woman.

Policy Considerations

The needs of divorced women in the Orthodox community are varied and complex. Survey respondents made four specific, actionable requests:

- Alleviate loneliness by ensuring that divorced women are invited for Shabbat and Yom Tov meals.
- Provide more financial support.
- Help the sons of divorced women access and become comfortable in traditionally male spaces, including shul and father-son learning.
- Help divorced women find a shidduch.

Other policy considerations arising from this study include:

- Addressing major risk factors for divorce in pre-marriage education and throughout the lifecycle: mental health, money, and intimacy.
- Providing respite for divorced mothers who are largely or solely responsible for the physical and emotional labor of childrearing.
- Providing general parenting support for divorced mothers.
- Supporting parents of children with special needs, including married couples who are likely experiencing marital stress, and divorced parents facing substantial caregiving challenges.
- Easing access to mental health services for divorced women and their children.
- Fostering more informal social support networks for divorced women.
- Helping rabbis better understand, support, and guide divorced women.
- Helping schools and yeshivas better understand and support divorced women, and helping women navigate the education system.

Together, these considerations illuminate a path toward providing a supportive home for divorced women in Orthodox communities.

The leadership of Sister to Sister is taking steps to address the needs identified in this study (see page 19). The study’s authors and sponsors encourage other Jewish organizations to join that effort.



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Sister to Sister supports Jewish divorced women by providing them with a support network and resources. As a result of the study findings, Sister to Sister is exploring and/or implementing the following items:

- In partnership with Relief Resources, strengthening the process of referral to mental health services.
- Expanding supports for women dating, including making available dating coaches.
- Exploring the development of an automated system to support Sister to Sister's Shabbos and Yom Tov invitation program.
- Researching models for shul engagement of boys, particularly focused on the barriers of discomfort/hesitancy.
- Partnering with the OU/Living Smarter Jewish to supplement Sister to Sister's budgeting and financial planning support programs.

Notes

- 1 Paul R. Amato, "Research on Divorce: Continuing Trends and New Developments," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 72, no. 3 (2010): 650–66, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2010.00723.x>; Paul R. Amato, "The Consequences of Divorce for Adults and Children: An Update," *Drustvena Istrazivanja* 23, no. 1 (March 1, 2014): 5–24, <https://doi.org/10.5559/di.23.1.01>.
- 2 Peng Tao, Rosemary Coates, and Bruce Maycock, "Investigating Marital Relationship in Infertility: A Systematic Review of Quantitative Studies," *Journal of Reproduction & Infertility* 13, no. 2 (2012): 71–80.
- 3 Annette Mahoney et al., "Religion and the Sanctification of Family Relationships," *Review of Religious Research* 44, no. 3 (2003): 220–36.
- 4 Amato, "Research on Divorce."
- 5 See Heidi D. Nelson, Christina Bougatsos, and Ian Blazina, "Screening Women for Intimate Partner Violence: A Systematic Review to Update the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force Recommendation," *Annals of Internal Medicine* 156, no. 11 (June 5, 2012): 796–808, <https://doi.org/10.7326/0003-4819-156-11-201206050-00447>.
- 6 Questions were drawn from Marcie-jo Kresnow et al., "The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey: 2016/2017 Methodology Report" (Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, January 2022).
- 7 R. Kelly Raley and Megan M. Sweeney, "Divorce, Repartnering, and Stepfamilies: A Decade in Review," *Journal of Marriage & Family* 82, no. 1 (February 2020): 81–99, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12651>.
- 8 Numbers refer to AGI and do not include child support payments that they received or were entitled to.
- 9 Excluding Canadian respondents.
- 10 Lucia Ciciolla and Suniya S. Luthar, "Invisible Household Labor and Ramifications for Adjustment: Mothers as Captains of Households," *Sex Roles* 81, no. 7–8 (October 2019): 467–86, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-018-1001-x>; Allison Daminger, "The Cognitive Dimension of Household Labor," *American Sociological Review* 84, no. 4 (August 1, 2019): 609–33, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122419859007>.
- 11 Anja Steinbach, "Children's and Parents' Well-Being in Joint Physical Custody: A Literature Review," *Family Process* 58, no. 2 (June 2019): 353–69, <https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12372>; Robert Bauserman, "A Meta-Analysis of Parental Satisfaction, Adjustment, and Conflict in Joint Custody and Sole Custody Following Divorce," *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage* 53, no. 6 (August 2012): 464–88, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10502556.2012.682901>.
- 12 Amandine Baude, Jessica Pearson, and Sylvie Drapeau, "Child Adjustment in Joint Physical Custody Versus Sole Custody: A Meta-Analytic Review," *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage* 57, no. 5 (July 3, 2016): 338–60, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10502556.2016.1185203>; Steinbach, "Children's and Parents' Well-Being in Joint Physical Custody"; Linda Nielsen, "Shared Parenting After Divorce: A Review of Shared Residential Parenting Research," *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage* 52, no. 8 (November 2011): 586–609, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10502556.2011.619913>.
- 13 This does not apply where there has been a prior history of domestic abuse. Stephanie Holt, "'Quality' Contact Post-Separation/Divorce: A Review of the Literature," *Children and Youth Services Review* 68 (September 2016): 92–99, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2016.07.001>.
- 14 Modification of Gert Martin Hald et al., "The Divorce Conflict Scale," *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage* 61, no. 2 (February 17, 2020): 83–104, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10502556.2019.1627150>.
- 15 This is a measure used in the FED's Survey of Household Economics and Decisionmaking.
- 16 Baude, Pearson, and Drapeau, "Child Adjustment in Joint Physical Custody Versus Sole Custody"; Steinbach, "Children's and Parents' Well-Being in Joint Physical Custody"; Amato, "The Consequences of Divorce for Adults and Children"; Daniela Teubert and Martin Pinquart, "The Association Between Coparenting and Child Adjustment: A Meta-Analysis," *Parenting* 10, no. 4 (November 11, 2010): 286–307, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295192.2010.492040>; Kelly N. Rogers, "A Theoretical Review of Risk and Protective Factors Related to Post-Divorce Adjustment in Young Children," *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage* 40, no. 3–4 (March 22, 2004): 135–47, https://doi.org/10.1300/J087V40N03_09.
- 17 See, e.g., Sigan L. Hartley et al., "The Relative Risk and Timing of Divorce in Families of Children with an Autism Spectrum Disorder," *Journal of Family Psychology* 24, no. 4 (2010): 449–57, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0019847>.
- 18 Benjamin Zablotsky et al., "Prevalence and Trends of Developmental Disabilities among Children in the United States: 2009–2017," *Pediatrics* 144, no. 4 (October 1, 2019): e20190811, <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2019-0811>.
- 19 Calculated as: $1 - (1 - \text{Prevalance among U.S. children})^3$
- 20 Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder or Attention-Deficit Disorder.
- 21 Autism, Asperger's disorder, pervasive developmental disorder.
- 22 Joan S. Meier, "A Historical Perspective on Parental Alienation Syndrome and Parental Alienation," *Journal of Child Custody* 6, no. 3–4 (August 18, 2009): 232–57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15379410903084681>; M. Brianna Pepiton et al., "Is Parental Alienation Disorder a Valid Concept? Not According to Scientific Evidence. A Review of Parental Alienation, DSM-5 and ICD-11 by William Bernet," *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* 21, no. 2 (March 2012): 244–53, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10538712.2011.628272>.
- 23 How many people in your local Jewish community are so close to you that you can count on them if you have great personal problems?, How much interest and concern do people in your local Jewish community show in you?, How easy is it to get practical help from neighbors if you should need it?. Rüya-Daniela Kocalevent et al., "Social Support in the General Population: Standardization of the Oslo Social Support Scale (OSSS-3)," *BMC Psychology* 6, no. 1 (July 17, 2018): 31, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-018-0249-9>.
- 24 Includes women who are currently re-married.
- 25 Includes women who are currently re-married.
- 26 For details about the scale, see Adina Leah Bankier-Karp and Michelle Shain, "COVID-19's Effects upon the Religious Group Resources, Psychosocial Resources, and Mental Health of Orthodox Jews," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 61, no. 1 (2022): 197–216, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12770>.
- 27 David A. Sbarra, Karen Hasselmo, and Kyle J. Bourassa, "Divorce and Health: Beyond Individual Differences," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 24, no. 2 (April 1, 2015): 109–13, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721414559125>.
- 28 Includes 1 widow.
- 29 For 97% of respondents, findings refer to their first marriage and divorce. For 3% of respondents who were divorced twice and had children only with the second husband, findings refer to the second marriage.

Appendix A: Describing the Sample

Survey respondents were a diverse group of women in terms of location, Orthodox affiliation, age, and the number and ages of their children. It is impossible to know to what extent they are representative of all divorced Orthodox women, as there is no extant data that can provide valid estimates of the number of divorced Orthodox women or their characteristics. Nevertheless, because these respondents sought help from a Jewish organization, they are a good barometer of unmet needs.

Although most respondents had been married only once and were divorced at the time of the survey, some had been divorced multiple times, and 13% were remarried. See Table 10.

Table 10. Marital status and history.

| | | | |
|--------------------|---|------|------|
| Currently divorced | Married once and divorced | 60% | 87% |
| | Married once, divorce in process | 14% | |
| | Married twice, divorced twice | 8% | |
| | Married twice, 2nd divorce in process | 4% | |
| | Married three times, divorced three times | 1% | |
| Currently married | Married once, remarried ²⁸ | 13% | 13% |
| | Married twice, divorced twice, remarried | 1% | |
| Total | | 100% | 100% |

Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Table 11. Location.

| | |
|----------------------------------|------|
| Brooklyn (excl. Borough Park) | 16% |
| Lakewood | 13% |
| Monsey | 12% |
| Borough Park | 12% |
| Five Towns | 9% |
| Other NY or NJ | 17% |
| Baltimore | 6% |
| Elsewhere | 15% |
| Total | 100% |

For the purposes of this report, we will include remarried respondents when describing the experience of marriage prior to divorce (page 6) and the experience of raising children post-divorce (page 9). Remarried respondents will be excluded from subsequent sections of the report.²⁹

The majority of respondents—79%—live in New York or New Jersey. There is a small concentration of respondents in Baltimore (6%), and the remainder live in smaller Orthodox communities including Cleveland, Los Angeles, Toronto, and Chicago. See Table 11.

Table 12 shows how respondents reported their religious affiliation. Those who volunteered another affiliation gave responses ranging from “Heimish” to “just frum” to “Open Orthodox egalitarian.”

Respondents crossed the age spectrum, with a mean age of 40 years. See Table 13 below. Respondents’ median number of children—including adult children—is 3. The majority (63%) have at least one child under age 18. See Table 14 and Table 15 below.

Table 12. Orthodox affiliation (self-report).

| | |
|-----------------|------|
| Chabad | 7% |
| Chassidish | 25% |
| Litvish | 37% |
| Sefardic | 5% |
| Modern Orthodox | 13% |
| Other | 13% |
| Total | 100% |

Table 13. Age.

| | |
|-------|------|
| 18-34 | 34% |
| 35-44 | 35% |
| 45+ | 32% |
| Total | 100% |

Table 14. Children (all ages).

| | |
|--------------|------|
| None | 11% |
| One | 19% |
| Two | 18% |
| Three | 20% |
| Four | 14% |
| Five or more | 18% |
| Total | 100% |

Table 15. Children under 18 years.

| | |
|--------------|------|
| None | 37% |
| One | 22% |
| Two | 19% |
| Three | 13% |
| Four | 5% |
| Five or more | 4% |
| Total | 100% |

Appendix B: Method

Data for this study were gathered in collaboration with Sister to Sister, a nonprofit organization that provides resources and a support network to divorced women in the Orthodox Jewish community. Sister to Sister invited their membership to complete a survey about the experiences of divorced women in the Orthodox community. The survey instrument (available on request) covered a range of topics including conflict prior to and after divorce, social support, mental health, finances, and religious beliefs.

The survey was conducted online using the Qualtrics survey management platform.¹ Sister to Sister distributed email invitations with personalized survey links to 2,105 members. These email invitations were sent on May 8, 2022. Reminder emails were sent to nonrespondents on May 16, 2022 and May 23, 2022. The survey was closed on June 7, 2022.

The final survey dispositions with AAPOR disposition codes are shown in Table 16, to the right.

Table 16. Final survey dispositions.

| Returned questionnaire (1.0) | | |
|---|-------|------|
| Complete (1.1) | 474 | 23% |
| Partial (1.2) | 51 | 2% |
| Non-interview (2.0) | | |
| Break-off or partial with insufficient information (2.12) | 29 | 1% |
| Logged on to survey, did not complete any items (2.1121) | 44 | 2% |
| Non-contact (2.20) | 1,507 | 72% |
| Total | 2,105 | 100% |

Survey respondents were asked two open-ended questions:

- What are the biggest challenges you experience(d) as a divorced woman in the Orthodox community?
- What would you like Orthodox communal leaders to know about divorced women in the Orthodox community?

374 (71%) wrote a response to the first question, and 324 (62%) wrote a response to the second question. The research team identified the major themes in these two sets of responses through a process of inductive coding. Each response was then coded independently by two researchers; multiple codes could be applied to one response. Cohen's κ was used to assess interrater reliability, and values ranged from 0.49 to 0.84, reflecting substantial agreement. A third coder adjudicated disagreements.

¹ The survey was administered over the phone to 2 respondents who do not have internet access.