

## How to manage sexual propositions during a divorce

A woman getting divorced must be dying to sleep with any and everyone, right? NOT!

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Photo Credit: Penguin Books India

*After being thrown out of her marital home with just the clothes on her back and Rs 750 in the bank, Vandana Shah rebuilt her world and founded the first Indian support group to help people going through a divorce, 360 Degrees Back to Life. She has since come full circle from being a litigant to being a divorce lawyer and practices at the family court in Mumbai. An extract from her book about her experiences:*

## **Kamasutra**

Fat, grotesque woman 1 (W1): 'Let's not invite her. She's going through a divorce and will definitely be a bitch on heat.'

Skinny, dumb, wannabe woman 2 (W2): 'Yeah and I honestly think she is looking better with the weight she's lost since her divorce started.'

W1: 'And I have gained weight and just don't want to risk my husband around her.'

W2 (not taking the cue and saying the right things to her friend): 'Yeah, I know.'

W1: 'Go ahead and say it. You know, my husband has always liked her or rather, has lusted after her and will definitely go for her. And since she is going through a divorce, she is shameless. She will pounce on him like a hungry child left in a candy store.'

W2: 'You know, she looks like a damsel in distress now.' (This woman didn't know the rules of bitchiness at all!)

W1: 'No, it's just an act to get to the men.'

W2: 'But I didn't know she had a bad character.'

W1: (losing her patience): Now don't be so bloody

dumb. Once you are married and your husband leaves you, you are like a half-eaten packet of chocolates. You can't be returned to the store, and well, someone is going to come after you since you are available. In short you are neither a virgin nor married so you are public ka maal.'

W2: 'But why did you invite Surendra then? He is also going through a divorce, right?'

W1: 'Arre, he's a man, he's rich and there are different rules for men. They are always welcome especially since when you are marrying a divorced man, you focus more on his financial status—the stigma is less. A man never grows old and that applies to everything. Even if he has kids but is rich, it is the woman's job to look after the kids. It's so much easier for a man to get resettled than a woman. I hope we are clear now. No more invitations to you-know-who. In the meantime, I really must lose weight. I am almost 32 now—can't really risk a divorce!'

I was sitting on the next table, at a restaurant, separated by a pillar from these two women, who didn't even know me so well and were discussing my life. It was a painful way to know the truths of going through a divorce and see how society actually perceived me. The sexual overtones in a divorce are so weird, especially for a woman. There is sex and talk of sex everywhere. But the question that needs to be asked is where the actual action is. Is there any actual action or is it like a middle-aged drunk man who can't even get it up but boasts to his friends of his all-night power?

**The gossip and the stories would make you think that women going through divorces are crazed nymphomaniacs.** At divorce hearings they are so turned on by the interiors and exteriors of the court, the allegations of infidelity, abusive behaviour and the abysmal state of their life and finances, that they are literally stripping on the way back and jump into bed the minute they are home or perhaps even in the car, or worse still, auto, back from the court. Don't you think that it is both foolish and impossible? Then why are we so quick to pass judgements on women's characters when they are in a situation like this?

Why don't we consider that when a woman's life is in a shambles, the last thing in the world that she would like is to go to bed with someone? For heaven's sake,

when you are just at the beginning of your divorce you are grappling with the dramatic change in your life's circumstances and feel like an acrobat swinging from a trapeze while balancing a life-changing act - divorce. Who really would even think of flirting, let alone sex? The law though doesn't have any provision for having sex with anyone when your case is going on. In fact, your lawyer will caution you to keep a low profile and avoid going out with or be seen having dinner or a rendezvous with men alone. So where is the question of wild sex as the gossips would have you believe?

In my case, looking at the state of my finances, relatives, and the gruelling grind of courts, I was so repulsed by the brutalities of life that the divorce was putting me through, that even the thought of flirting with any guy (except the family court peon for a date for the next hearing) was not on my radar. Any physical contact with the opposite sex was unthinkable. It was a marvel that I didn't develop any kind of hatred for men. Society does pass judgements on women but if they were to analyse the situation carefully, they would realize the ridiculousness and the implausibility of these baseless and hurtful statements

I think the real reason behind these brutal attacks on a woman's character and endless speculation about her sex life, besides a patriarchal mind-set of course, is human nature's penchant for gossip and the baser things in life. Another reason for the gossip is definitely the idea of the person being taught a lesson. I knew my relatives had propounded this reason to anyone and everyone who would listen. Of course, attacking the character of a woman has to be an integral part of maligning her - our oldest example is in the Ramayana when Ram put Sita through a trial by fire because of the words of a washerman. Not much has changed unfortunately, and even now we women are subject to trials by modern-day fires and we suffer, but fortunately, not in silence.

**It's not just the women but even men have a different agenda. I remember suddenly becoming even more attractive to my friends' husbands.** They wanted to offer me seedy liaisons under the guise of advice. They wanted me to be their

business partners, and take these trips with them to conduct a recce for business. These offers weren't on the table when I was still living with my husband. One old geezer who was maybe even older than my father, had he been alive, insisted on giving me advice on the stock market on weekends at his farmhouse near Matheran. When I suggested talking about it in Mumbai, he refused saying that he would be able to explain it best at his farmhouse. I knew what he had in mind and it wasn't the intricate workings of the Indian stock market. I must admit, I did take tips from him very smartly. I roped in his wife and she became a conduit between us and she never ever suspected anything because there was really nothing to suspect.

I wanted to ask the old stock broker geezer why he didn't want to set me up with his sons who were my age and wanted me as a bed partner instead. Oh no, that thought would be blasphemous since I was used goods. When I asked them their reasons for this, this man turned around and said that his sons weren't as experienced as me and after all, what would the world say? Even here society is definitely biased towards divorced women and offers no respite. The relentless and ruthless persecution and categorization of women is unfair and continues unabated.

Another proposition that I got (and I swear I could've done with the change), but propriety prevailed and I didn't go, was when I was offered a trip to the Swiss Alps, all expenses paid, business-class travel and a five-star stay. The break would've done me good but what were the trade-offs? 'Sometimes, I tell you, even having a good character is an impediment,' I would joke to myself.

Something that these propositions made me realize, in an ironic way, was that at least if I had to settle down again and look for another relationship, I would definitely find it easier because hey, so many men found me desirable! The horrible truth of the matter is that none of these men had any honest helpful ways to actually get me out of this hole.

**When I delved into the reasons for this 'divorce-specific sexual propositions', I**

**realized that it was like my seal is broken so it's a case of used goods or rather second-hand goods for which you pay much lesser than the market rate of used goods.**

This is no middle-class mentality, it cuts across like a knife through butter, across all the barriers of age and class and pervades through the spectrum. It's the woman who is cut off from the spectrum; she loses her friends as she has spent most of the time trying to fit in into the mould of the wife and focused more to get along with his friends.

It's like a red-carpet event 'for married couples only' and since she has broken the barriers, and is going through a divorce, she has now landed herself outside the ropes of the VIP barrier of society of married couples. Also, it's easier to criticize the woman because she is a softer target, because she often lacks societal support. We've been doing this for centuries, even a dhobi did it to Sita, and look where she landed up—in a jungle! You will be ostracized and land up in societal wilderness, condemned to live alone, fend for yourself and then shrivel up and die.

All this not only angered me but also hurt me deeply. There is a fog that shrouds the sexuality of the woman in no man's land—divorce. What is really offensive is the 'nudge, nudge, wink, wink' response coupled with a slimy smile that characterizes the entire core of the sexuality of a woman in any event which is magnified more in such a situation. The surprising fact is that only women are subjected to these lewd propositions and I am sure they could make a living out of this if they wanted. No men are ever propositioned.

So only divorced women are ostracized for an apparent lack of character, labelled as sluts and sexual predators and are constantly propositioned—nothing even remotely similar happens to the men. The stigma for women is also unreasonably higher, especially for women with children— it's like you have sprouted another head or maybe there is a breast growing on your back, in short an abnormality. Since the differences in standards are harsher for women, I am glad that at least

women have recourse to law.

But did I not have any sex at all till such time that the case was going on?

Well, initially because of the grind of the divorce, I didn't even think about it. This continued for a while and I did not even feel its absence. In fact, it was a relief because my spouse was no great shakes. Plus with the total occupation of all my senses with the court case, where was the time to miss sex? But after 4–6 years I started missing the physical intimacy and it was that phase of my life when most of my friends were married and some even had babies. There was a lot of physicality going around. There were times that I would give all the money in the world for physical intimacy but I could not do it.

**Will someone please get up and change this system? During a divorce case in India, it is illegal to have sex with anyone.** Worse still, if you have sex with your spouse, your divorce petition can be dismissed in court. In other words, NO SEX - if you have a divorce case going on.

Perhaps, the courts could work out a system where if your divorce is going on for more than a few years, you could then look at finding yourself another partner. That should work and the court should not perceive it badly. This needs to change because people who are in my predicament know what it really feels like. What can you do without destroying your case? What does one do when you are in a situation when you are allowed to have sex but it's with someone who you can't have it with - your spouse that you are divorcing? And that too is legally not permissible as mentioned earlier. All I can say is that the law is unfair and there should be some respite when your case seems to be running into many years. How long will you continue to be faithful to a husband on paper? We really aren't living in the same dark ages when these laws were formulated.

My case had been going on for six years and those were some of the most sexually alive years of my life. But the system did not allow me to seek intimacy because

the repercussions were loss of face, money, character. The list is endless for losses and does not exist for gains.

So how did I beat the system? I invested in ways to pleasure myself. Am I embarrassed to say it? No, I am saddened and ashamed to be a part of the system that encourages such hypocrisy and brands anyone who is an adult and wants to have sex as a whore. I was dependent on the Kamasutra and myself for sexual satisfaction in the early stages of my divorce. But if you really want to know if I did or didn't have sex whilst going through my divorce, my honest response, clutching my injured heart would be 'nudge, nudge, wink, wink' and I am sure my broken heart would also nod mischievously and go 'nudge, nudge, wink, wink'.

The Ex-Files, *Vandana Shah, Sdé, Penguin Books India*

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