

# DIVORCE IS THE ONLY WAY OUT

**The educated middle class women of Kenya are more and more rejecting the mistreatment they experience in marriage. And having discovered that male attitudes are not going to change, they are deciding in disturbing numbers that the only way out is divorce.**

**F**or a growing number of career women in Kenya, marriage no longer has either the charm or the ring of necessity so widely associated with it.

And their response, increasingly, is to seek divorce.

Nothing's especially new about this—but what is different now is the attitude these women are bringing to the question of divorce, as is their inability to put up with the constraints that most of our men impose on their wives.

Twenty years ago, a divorced woman was a social anathema. She was a much maligned individual whose own fate was blamed entirely on her. She could not seek solace among her lot, for they were very few, and just as sad as she. Men avoided her like the plague, except when they felt they could have some fun; women saw in her a potential man-snatcher and would try to ensure that she never came into contact with their own husbands. Prospective employers smelt disaster in her and bank managers considered her a bad risk. But today's divorced career woman is very different in many ways. Her discredited wedding anniversary is as likely to find her in London or Lagos as in Nairobi, and wherever she is, she is more likely to be celebrating her separation rather than bemoaning it. She is assertive, positive and frightfully independent, and therefore not inclined to sit around wishing she had tried harder to make a success of her marriage. Most important of all, she now has a group of similarly-oriented women friends who are themselves in the same position and who can provide support and solace in times of need. And because she is a member of this growing community, she is able to feel deep down that she is not necessarily to blame for having been unable to put up with some of the male prejudices.

What has brought about this change of thinking which is going to have the most far-reaching effects on the fabric of our society?

According to the nine divorced women who agreed to in-depth interviews on our promise of

anonymity, the major factors motivating the change are the education and economic independence of the middle class women and the general reluctance of men to recognise that modern man-woman relationships require a different code of behaviour than was acceptable in the past. Other reasons now established as causes for marriage breakdown such as drunkenness and adultery, continue to plague the domestic scene, of course, but many of the new tensions have arisen as a direct result of the added (though not enough) acceptance that women are getting in areas heretofore considered bastions of male power. As women cease to be mere ornaments or abused, unsalaried household hands, they also reject lifestyles that hinder their progress as individuals—even if this means dissolving marital ties.

Of course, it is not women alone who have changed their attitudes. The rapid socio-economic changes taking place have affected men too. The newly rich husband will get, apart from the obligatory large car, a new wife to adorn his new line of acquisitions—the first wife is considered “out-moded,” or “out-modeled,” as the new saying goes. And on top, there is also enough money for an extra mistress. New wealth in this country has created a class consciousness that dictates the eligibility of marriage partners and suitability of prospective in-laws. The new social roles among the rich in Kenya have less to do with morality than money. The choice of a spouse has become more of a business transaction than a cupid-propelled mission. And women, particularly those with higher formal education, have become increasingly independent—emotionally as well as economically—and less likely to succumb to domestic martyrdom.

Today's thinking woman will not bow submissively while her husband sits on a pedestal and pontificates. A woman who has a challenging career will not tolerate a husband who spends all his income on women and drink and neglects his family, especially when he insists that she stay home and be a good girl while he