

South China Morning Post 南華早報

Divorce proves to be hardest break for expatriates in Hong Kong

PUBLISHED : Saturday, 06 August, 2016, 11:01am

UPDATED : Saturday, 06 August, 2016, 2:30pm

News › Hong Kong › Education & Community ›

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Challenges of marriage are often too great for couples arriving in a city full of temptations

All marriages require hard work, but they can be especially challenging if you're an expatriate in Hong Kong.

Divorces are on the rise in the city, and the trend appears to hold true for expat couples, experts say. The number of divorce petitions filed – both by one person or on a joint basis – grew by more than half from 14,063 in 2000 to 21,467 in 2015, according to the judiciary.

[Hong Kong divorce professionals promote radical alternative to court action](#) [1]

While there is no specific data on expat divorce rates, lawyers and counsellors who work with expats say they have seen more couples looking into separation or divorce in recent years.

“When you're in a foreign country without your extended family or friends around, you can sort of re-engineer your personality or life,” Nikki Green, a certified psychotherapist specialising in couples counselling, said.

Although there are many factors that go into divorce, experts say expat couples tend to deal with unique relationship stresses.

The changes people undergo when they move to a new environment and the pressures that come with leaving one's support network can put a strain on marriages.

Trailing spouses, or those who follow their partners when they relocate for an assignment, struggle most with reconstructing a new identity for themselves in a foreign environment, according to Yvonne McNulty, a scholar who specialises in expatriation and global mobility.

She looked at causes of expatriate divorce in a 2015 paper and found two main reasons – the exacerbation of a core issue which already existed before relocating, such as alcoholism, or when expat culture negatively impacted on one or both spouses to the point it altered behaviour compared to how they would act at home.

[How Hongkongers can minimise the impact of divorce on their children](#) [2]

Melanie Bryan, a couples' psychologist who has worked in Hong Kong for more than 20 years, said the city has many temptations that can lead couples astray.

Similar to elsewhere in Asia, cheating is “an accepted part of business” and one of the main factors that lead to divorce, she said. The culture of socialising and drinking in business circles creates more opportunities and incentives for cheating, particularly among men.

“I don’t believe that most men come here with the intention of cheating but many are treated like kings in their workplace. It’s a different culture and the way people react to men are different – there’s that pedestal quality,” Bryan said.

She said in relationships where the man is a trailing spouse, the issues that arise tend to not be ones that lead to divorce.

Growing divisions
Number of divorce petitions filed annually in Hong Kong

	Matrimonial Causes	Joint Applications	Total
2000	12,748	1,315	14,063
2005	14,956	1,647	16,603
2010	17,359	3,490	20,849
2015	16,652	4,815	21,467

Source: Hong Kong Judiciary

[3]

Divorce is also more common among expats who earn more and those in relationships where one frequently has to travel.

When expat couples do decide to get a divorce, they must also grapple with legal challenges that can complicate the process, especially when there are children involved.

Common cases include those that involve relocation – when one person is a trailing spouse and wants to return home with the children – or immigration, for example when one spouse is on a dependent visa but wants to stay, Winnie Chow, a matrimonial lawyer and partner at Hampton, Winter and Glynn, said.

You’re going through so much already, and you feel so alone

Anna*, expat on divorce

Since the way courts operate can differ from country to country, couples may also have disputes over which jurisdiction they file the divorce in, she added.

or instance, a court in one country may be favourable to the spouse of the wage earner.

Anna, not her real name, is an expat and a mother who is going through a divorce.

She moved to Hong Kong in 2006 with her ex-husband, but her marriage fell apart in 2014 and she began divorce proceedings last year.

Anna said there isn’t enough support for expats going through divorce and many have to struggle alone because their friends and family are overseas.

She added that it’s hard to find the information and those you need to help you, especially in English.

The process is also costly and time consuming – she spent more than HK\$350,000 on her divorce lawyer and had to wait months to secure a court date for custody.

“You’re going through so much already, and you feel so alone,” Anna said, adding that the same holds true for male expats.

“There are guys saying I can’t leave her because she’s threatening to take the kids.’ I’d say it’s equally difficult on the guys.”

Although divorce will likely continue to be a challenging process, Chow said mediation is becoming more popular as a method of negotiation and family lawyers are beginning to collaborate more with other experts.

“Clients are becoming more educated,” Chow said. “Very few will litigate to the bitter end. Court is only one of the options.”

Topics: City Weekend

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