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# Marital satisfaction and emotional divorce among Iranian married individuals: A survey of hospital visitors of nine provinces

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## Abstract:

**BACKGROUND:** Evidence is accumulating that the pattern and nature of marital relationships are very different in different cultures. This nationwide study aimed to determine marital satisfaction and the prevalence of emotional divorce as well as to identify the sociodemographic correlates in a Muslim population.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS:** In this cross-sectional study, one-third of Iran's provinces were selected randomly and a representative sample of inhabitants of their central city was included in the study. The ENRICH marital satisfaction scale was used to determine marital satisfaction levels. A single-item measure with confirmed validity and reliability was used to find out about emotional divorce. The demographic variables included respondent's age, spouse's age, gender, educational level, residency, childbearing, and premarriage familiarity.

**RESULTS:** Of the 2033 participants, 1034 were women (50.9%). Nearly one-third of both men and women had academic degrees. Almost 53% of them were satisfied with their marital life and 9.7% had emotional divorce. Men with academic degrees had a higher probability of marital satisfaction (odds ratio [OR] = 1.26, 95% confidence interval [CI]: 1.04–1.53) and a lower prevalence of emotional divorce (OR = 0.37, 95% CI: 0.24–0.58).

**CONCLUSION:** This study showed a relatively high percentage of marital dissatisfaction as well as emotional divorce. Policymakers should strengthen premarriage education programs and postmarriage counseling centers.

## Keywords:

Divorce, Iran, marital satisfaction, prevalence

## Introduction

Divorce rate has increased dramatically in both the east and the west over the past few decades.<sup>[1]</sup> In Iran, the divorce rate shows a rapid increase in comparison with two decades ago. It can be stated that while only one divorce was registered per 10 marriages in 2004, this ratio has increased to one divorce per three marriages in 2018. While a happy married life can be a

barrier against psychological distress and negative events, distress and instability in married life can have negative effects on physical and emotional health of the spouses and their children.<sup>[2]</sup> Today, divorce is not an individual problem anymore; rather, it is a multistage process that is notable not only from the perspective of its impacts on spouses and their children but also due to its negative impacts on society and the economy as a whole.<sup>[3]</sup>

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When due to unresolved sustained conflicts and disagreements the relationship between a husband and wife goes cold, traces of the emotional divorce emerge. There may even be no fighting between the husband and wife, but the couple enters into the isolation cascade and emotional divorce phase.<sup>[4]</sup> In the Urban Dictionary, there is a new term, Marringle, which is defined as “a married person who behaves like they are single,” which can be known as the equivalent of emotional divorce.<sup>[5]</sup> In fact, the emotional divorce is the “final stage in marital relation.”<sup>[6]</sup> Although living under the same roof, there is no relationship between them and actually they have grown apart.<sup>[7]</sup> From the perspective of those around them, “they appear a genuine couple, but their real connection has already died.”<sup>[7]</sup> Research on the prevalence and associated factors of emotional divorce is particularly valuable in non-Western societies where divorce is more obscene. Despite the importance of emotional divorce and its negative effects, enough attention is not paid to this issue. Given that marital dissatisfaction and emergence of emotional divorce are considered to be a prerequisite for marital dissolution, it is important for researchers to be informed of these two factors in finding ways to reduce marital conflicts and increase marital quality. Although marital dissatisfaction and emotional divorce do not necessarily lead to divorce, it is important to determine the level of marital satisfaction and the prevalence of emotional divorce. Iranian studies published regarding marital satisfaction are mostly related to one city or a specific subgroup.<sup>[2]</sup> As well, little is known about prevalence and associated factors of emotional divorce across the country.

The aim of this study was to determine the level of marital satisfaction and the prevalence of emotional divorce in Iranian society based on sociodemographic characteristics. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study in an Islamic country which has addressed these two issues.

## Materials and Methods

In this survey study, the country's provinces ( $n = 31$ ) were divided into three tertiles based on divorce rates. Then, three provinces were randomly selected from each group (9 provinces in total). Next, the sample size was distributed between provinces according to the number of divorces per year. Visitors of patients admitted at referral hospitals in the provincial capitals were interviewed when entering or leaving the hospital [Table 1]. The reason for selecting hospitals as the sampling framework was the ease of access and previous experience, which revealed that hospital visitors to the referral hospitals of provincial capitals could be roughly regarded as a representative sample of residents of that province.<sup>[8]</sup> Trained individuals were

**Table 1: Sample size of hospital visitors enrolled in the study from each province**

Serial number	Province	Number of interviewees
1	Yazd	100
2	Zanjan	100
3	Qom	160
4	Golestan	183
5	Kordestan	199
6	Kerman	200
7	Alborz	293
8	Fars	398
9	Khuzestan	400
Total		2033

stationed in the lobby of the hospital in a predetermined location and after introducing themselves consecutively invited hospital visitors to complete the questionnaires in a private place. Inclusion criteria were having a spouse, age <60 years, and consent to be interviewed. A total of 2300 people were invited to enroll in the study.

To increase participation in completing the questionnaires, we tried to include fewer questions in the questionnaire. The data collection tool consisted of three parts. The first part included the demographic questions: respondent's age, spouse's age, gender, childbearing, educational level, residency, and premarriage familiarity. For the second part, we used the ENRICH marital satisfaction (EMS) scale.<sup>[9]</sup> The questionnaire contains 10 questions that measure global marital satisfaction. Sample items were “I have some needs that are not met by our relationship” and “I am very pleased about how we relate sexually.” The idealistic distortion scale contains five questions added to the questionnaire to modify the EMS score based on the degree to which respondents express their satisfaction based on unrealistically positive terms (e.g. “we understand each other perfectly”). Using the Likert scale ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree,” the questionnaire is scored from 5 to 1, respectively. Therefore, higher scores indicate greater marital satisfaction. Those with a score above 54 were considered as a married-satisfied group.<sup>[10]</sup> Psychometric properties of this questionnaire have been validated in Persian.<sup>[11]</sup> Cronbach's alpha of the questionnaire in this study was 0.89. For the third part, a single-item measure was used to determine the existence of emotional divorce.<sup>[12]</sup> Based on the empirical definition of this questionnaire, the true answer to the item “although my spouse and I live under the same roof, we have no relationship” meant the emotional divorce. Using convergent validity and item-total correlation, the psychometric properties of the single-item measure of emotional divorce have been tested and confirmed previously in the Iranian context.<sup>[12]</sup>

Chi-square test and Chi-square for trend were used to compare categorical variables between nominal and ordinal variables, respectively. Multivariate logistic regression was performed to determine the relationship between sociodemographic variables and binary variables (such as marital satisfaction and emotional divorce).

### Ethical considerations

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Kerman University of Medical Sciences under the code IR.KMU.REC1394.740. Initially, the study objectives and the voluntary participation of the respondents were explained. The subjects were included in the study with verbal informed consent. The questionnaires were completed anonymously. At the time of completing the questionnaire, the privacy conditions were met to ensure that the participant completed the questionnaire with confidence.

## Results

The results showed that of the 2300 people interviewed, 2033 completed the questionnaire (response rate = 88.4%). The mean age of women was  $35.8 \pm 9.9$  years, and the mean age of men interviewed was  $37.0 \pm 10.1$  years. On average,  $13.5 \pm 10.5$  years had elapsed since their marriage. The frequency of other demographic variables is presented in Table 2.

**Table 2: Demographic characteristics of participants (n=2033)**

Characteristic	n (%)
Gender	
Female	1034 (50.9)
Male	999 (49.1)
Childbearing	
Yes	1657 (81.5)
No	376 (18.5)
Wives' educational level	
Academic	571 (28.1)
Other	1462 (71.9)
Husbands' educational level	
Academic	629 (30.9)
Other	1404 (69.1)
Residency	
Urban	1330 (65.4)
Rural	703 (34.6)
Premarriage familiarity	
By parents	616 (30.3)
By friends and relatives	779 (38.3)
By themselves	638 (31.4)
Duration of marriage (years)	
<1	85 (4.2)
1-5	544 (26.8)
>5	1404 (69.1)

Overall, 53.4% of the participants had marital satisfaction ( $n = 1086$ ) and 9.7% had emotional divorce ( $n = 198$ ). Men with academic degrees had both a lower emotional divorce and a higher percentage of marital satisfaction [Tables 2 and 3].

Multivariate logistic regression analysis showed that men with academic degrees were 1.5 times more likely to have marital satisfaction (odds ratio [OR] = 1.54, 95% confidence interval [CI]: 1.22–1.94) and those living in rural areas compared to urban residents had higher marital satisfaction (OR = 1.26, 95% CI: 1.04–1.53). Other sociodemographic variables showed no significant relationship [Table 3]. As shown in Table 4, having children and academic degrees of husbands lowered the probability of emotional divorce (OR = 0.59, 95% CI: 0.38–0.91 and OR = 0.37, 95% CI: 0.24–0.58, respectively). The probability of emotional divorce was least in the 1<sup>st</sup> year of marriage (OR = 0.29, 95% CI: 0.08–0.99).

## Discussion

The present study found that about half of the Iranian couples had marital dissatisfaction and nearly 10% of Iranian men or women suffered from emotional divorce. Unlike traditional Iranian society, which almost all marriages were offered by parents or relatives and friends, nearly one-third of marriages in this study were fulfilled through direct familiarity of the girls and boys without the help of others.<sup>[13]</sup>

Multivariate logistic regression analysis showed that men's higher education and rural life were two variables significantly correlated with marital satisfaction. The relationship between marital satisfaction and educational level has opposing results in Western countries.<sup>[14]</sup> Studies of Islamic populations have found that higher educational levels increase marital satisfaction.<sup>[15]</sup> This may be due to improved social skills in people with academic degrees. Our results showed no association between women's educational level and marital satisfaction. Western studies have shown a protective role for college educational attainment of women.<sup>[16]</sup> The reason behind this association may be due to economic stability of higher educated women. On the contrary, higher education may lead to more financial independence and accordingly lesser marital adjustment of women.<sup>[17]</sup> Hence, these two opposing forces may neutralize each other effect, which was seen in our study. There was more marital satisfaction in the rural areas, implying a link between marital satisfaction and collectivistic culture in non-Western societies, which is more pronounced in the countryside than urban areas.<sup>[14]</sup> The childbearing presence of child showed no relationship with marital satisfaction. This has been shown by contradictory results in other studies.<sup>[14]</sup>

**Table 3: Logistic regression analysis to examine relationship of sociodemographic variables and marital satisfaction**

Characteristic	Marital satisfaction			
	Percentage	Adjusted OR	95% CI	P
Gender				
Female	54.1	0.92	0.76-1.10	0.349
Male	55.6	Reference	-	-
Having children				
Yes	53.5	0.84	0.65-1.10	0.216
No	52.9	Reference	-	-
Wives' educational level				
Academic	57.3	1.03	0.81-1.31	0.807
Others	51.9	Reference	-	-
Husbands' educational level				
Academic	60.3	1.54	1.22-1.94	<0.001
Others	50.4	Reference	-	-
Residency				
Rural	55.9	1.27	1.04-1.53	0.016
Urban	52.1	Reference	-	-
Premarriage familiarity				
By themselves	57.4	1.14	0.91-43	0.260
By friends and relatives	50.6	0.88	0.71-1.10	0.234
By parents	52.9	Reference	-	-
Duration of marriage (years)				
<1	58.8	1.38	0.84-2.28	0.204
1-5	54.2	0.14	0.90-1.45	0.262
>5	52.8	Reference	-	-

OR=Odds ratio, CI=Confidence interval

**Table 4: Logistic regression analysis to examine relationship of sociodemographic variables and emotional divorce**

Characteristic	Marital satisfaction			
	Percentage	Adjusted OR	95% CI	P
Gender				
Female	11.3	1.33	0.96-1.81	0.072
Male	8.1	Reference	-	-
Having children				
Yes	9.6	0.59	0.38-0.91	0.016
No	10.4	Reference	-	-
Wives' educational level				
Academic	8.1	0.85	0.56-1.30	0.464
Others	10.4	Reference	-	-
Husbands' educational level				
Academic	5.4	0.37	0.24-0.58	<0.001
Others	11.7	Reference	-	-
Residency				
Rural	8.7	0.78	0.56-1.08	0.141
Urban	10.3	Reference	-	-
Premarriage familiarity				
By themselves	9.2	1.15	0.80-1.66	0.44
By friends and relatives	10.4	1.13	0.76-1.66	0.55
By parents	9.4	Reference	-	-
Duration of marriage (years)				
<1	3.5	0.29	0.08-0.99	0.049
1-5	8.8	0.86	0.57-1.29	0.461
>5	10.5	Reference	-	-

OR=Odds ratio, CI=Confidence interval

Although marital satisfaction decreased with increasing duration of marriage, this trend was insignificant. In some studies, marital satisfaction decreased with increasing duration of marriage, and some reported the opposite effect because marital adjustment escalated with increasing duration of marriage.<sup>[18]</sup> The presence of children also had no significant relationship. Thus, it can be concluded that the relationship between demographic factors and marital satisfaction is purely culture specific.<sup>[14]</sup>

The prevalence of emotional divorce was significant, with one in 10 interviewed. In a study of nurses in Iran, the prevalence of emotional divorce was about 8%.<sup>[19]</sup> A couple, who does not enter into legal or explicit divorce for whatever reason, decides to experience the emotional divorce which is in fact a silent or a secret divorce. Accordingly, emotional divorce can, in fact, be considered as a silent and neglected epidemic in Iran. It should be noted that one of the main reasons people still live under the same roof, despite being cut-off from marriage, is that people around them do not judge them badly, so the prevalence of emotional divorce seems to

be higher in societies where divorce is unacceptable morally.<sup>[6]</sup> In the multivariate analysis, the inclusion of all sociodemographic variables studied showed that emotional divorce was inversely correlated with both husbands' educational level and having children. It is true that one of the reasons for staying in an emotional divorce is for the child, given that parents think they are less harmed in this way.<sup>[6]</sup> Presence of children in the family can have a protective effect against emotional divorce as the child gives special warmth to the family and reduces the coldness of the relationship between the couple.<sup>[6]</sup> Perhaps because of this, emotional divorce was less common in those who had children in our study. The lesser probability of emotional divorce in highly educated men may be due their improved social functioning.<sup>[20]</sup> In our study, emotional divorce was seen to a lesser degree in the newlywed couples. There is little dispute that emotional bonding of couples is high in the 1<sup>st</sup> year of marriage which is called as "honeymoon effect."<sup>[21]</sup> Some studies did not find any relationship between emotional divorce marital instability and length of marriage, which may be due to different categorization of time elapsed since marriage.<sup>[22]</sup>

The main limitation of the present study is the exclusion of some provinces from this study. Because different cultures within a country may differ significantly in terms of trends and prevalence of marital dissatisfaction, generalization of the results to the whole country should be done with caution.

## Conclusion

Our study emphasizes the relatively high rate of marital dissatisfaction and emotional divorce among Iranian couples. These findings imply the importance of addressing the causes of marital dissatisfaction and emotional divorce by policy-makers. The protective effect of husbands' educational level may indirectly imply the need to reinforce educational programs.

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## Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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