




# Exploring the Phenomenon of Interfaith Marriage with an Emphasis on the Lived Experiences of Women in Iran: An Interpretative Phenomenological Study

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study aims to explore the phenomenon of "interfaith marriage" from the perspective of the lived experiences of women belonging to different religious affiliations.

**Methods and Materials:** Utilizing the interpretative phenomenological approach and Strauss's grounded theory methodology, 18 in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted. Data were analyzed through three stages of open, axial, and selective coding using ATLAS.ti software (version 7), resulting in the development of a theoretical model for women.

**Findings:** The findings indicate that in Iranian society, factors such as individual criteria for spouse selection, religious pressures to encourage intra-faith marriage, individual religiosity and familial religiosity, acceptance and confrontation by families and friends, and the expansion of awareness and social connections contribute to women's selection of interfaith marriage. Additionally, factors such as premarital familiarity, age at marriage, and gender also influence this process. Women encounter various strategic actions and reactions, leading to the formation of four strategies: individual religious choice and acceptance of differences with respect, resolving conflicts by defining a new narrative of interfaith interaction, disregarding religion in marital life, and migration.

**Conclusion:** The study's findings reveal that interfaith marriage results in both positive and negative outcomes.

**Keywords:** *Interfaith couples, social rejection and acceptance, religious authority, Iranian religious institutions.*

## 1. Introduction

For a long time, intergroup and interfaith marriages have been considered a primary indicator of the integration of ethnic and racial minorities into society. The main reason is that when members of ethnic and racial groups marry outside their group, it indicates that these groups accept each other as equals (Kalmijn, 2010, 2015).

In Iran, marriages between different social groups have expanded with the growth of urbanization, increased migration, and social changes. Analyzing and explaining spousal selection patterns are key areas of focus in family-related research (Askari Nodoushan & Torabi, 2019).

The theoretical framework for understanding interfaith marriage can be structured across macro, meso, and micro levels, each offering unique insights into the dynamics of interfaith unions. At the macro level, Giddens' theory of family transformation highlights how modernity and globalization have altered traditional family structures, challenging fixed gender roles and weakening traditional norms through increasing formal rationality (Khatun et al., 2024; Scott, 2005). Meso-level theories delve deeper into institutional and cultural dynamics. Theories like Davie's analysis of power dynamics within religious institutions examine how official stances and internal disagreements within religions shape attitudes toward interfaith marriage (Davie, 2013). Barth and Bourdieu's paradigm of boundary formation underscores how religious distinctions act as social barriers, limiting interfaith unions (Koenig, 2023). Erikson's identity formation theory explains the lifelong process of identity development, shaped by cultural and religious crises (Priliyanti et al., 2024), while Kelsen's pure theory of law advocates for unbiased legal frameworks enabling free choice in marriage, regardless of religious affiliation (Sundari & Retnowati, 2024). Labeling theory explores the effects of discrimination and how higher social status can mitigate biases against interfaith children, leading to better outcomes (Kalmijn, 2015). Cultural assimilation theories like Dribe and Lundh's suggest that migrants' initial cultural and socioeconomic distinctions act as barriers to interfaith marriage, but integration erodes these differences (Dribe & Lundh, 2011). Neo-reformist perspectives argue that cultural gaps between migrants and host societies narrow over time, fostering societal acceptance of interfaith unions (Koenig, 2023). Ting-Toomey's identity negotiation theory emphasizes the fluid yet cohesive nature of personal identity shaped through intercultural interactions, suggesting that identity can be enriched and empowered through such

processes (Madjegu & Napitupulu, 2023). Furthermore, theories of cultural convergence and divergence reveal that shared cultural values between religious groups, such as Judaism and Christianity, can lead to more positive perceptions of interfaith marriages (Khatun et al., 2024). At the micro level, the integration theory posits that interfaith marriages promote greater social interaction and acceptance of diverse unions (Koenig, 2023). Contrastingly, theories like heterogamy challenge homogamy by arguing that complementary differences, rather than similarities, are the key to marital stability (Hashemi et al., 2014). Together, these theories collectively provide a nuanced framework to analyze interfaith marriages, blending structural, cultural, and individual dimensions to illuminate their complexities and implications.

Previous research highlights the complexities of interfaith marriage within various sociocultural and legal contexts. In Iran, studies emphasize the influence of religion on family laws, as seen in the comparative work on marital equality in Iran, Egypt, and Lebanon, which identifies religion as the source of family legislation (Shariati et al., 2022). Qualitative studies in regions like Sistan and Baluchestan explore factors contributing to successful interfaith marriages (Shirdel et al., 2021), while quantitative research compares the sociobiological quality of life between Muslim and Armenian families, revealing the sociocultural impact of marriage as a dynamic institution. Discussions on the legal and religious rights of Muslim husbands and non-Muslim wives underscore significant jurisprudential challenges (Haeri et al., 2016). Historical analyses, such as the study on Arab-Iranian intermarriages during the Umayyad period, provide insights into peaceful cultural integration post-Islam (Abbasi, 2012). Similarly, research on ethnic and religious marriage patterns in Qorveh county reveals the importance of cultural and normative alignment (Abbasi Shavazi & Khani, 2009). Internationally, studies in Indonesia examine tolerance within interfaith families (Simatupang & Endi, 2023) and sociological perspectives on Islamic law's influence on interfaith family life (Halimang, 2023). Additionally, works addressing the concept of interfaith marriage between Islam and Catholicism explore its impact on children's moral education (Emanuel et al., 2023). The book *Till Faith Do Us Part: How Interfaith Marriage Is Transforming America* analyzes interfaith marriage dynamics in the U.S. (Dashefsky & Sheskin, 2019), reflecting broader sociopolitical implications. Together, these studies underscore the multifaceted nature of interfaith

marriages, emphasizing the role of legal, cultural, and religious factors in shaping these unions.

Interfaith marriage is generally unconventional but does occur. This research aims to understand the experiences of interfaith couples and address the question of how they perceive their marriage. The study employs an interpretative phenomenological approach and grounded theory methodology.

What are the causal conditions of interfaith marriage based on the lived experiences of a group of Iranian interfaith couples?

What are the contextual conditions of interfaith marriage based on the lived experiences of a group of Iranian interfaith couples?

What are the intervening conditions of interfaith marriage based on the lived experiences of a group of Iranian interfaith couples?

What are the outcomes of interfaith marriage based on the lived experiences of a group of Iranian interfaith couples?

What strategies are adopted in interfaith marriage based on the lived experiences of a group of Iranian interfaith couples?

What is the core category of interfaith marriage based on the lived experiences of a group of Iranian interfaith couples?

## 2. Methods and Materials

Based on the research questions and cognitive objectives, the methodological approach of this study is interpretative phenomenology. The research method follows the grounded theory model. Data collection techniques included in-depth interviews and observations. The data obtained from semi-structured interviews were subjected to theoretical coding. This process involves three stages of coding: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.

In grounded theory, the sample framework is purposive and theoretical rather than statistical. This study employed both theoretical and purposive sampling concurrently. The sample size was determined during data collection and analysis through the process of theoretical saturation. Data collection was conducted in a continuous and iterative manner, with sample size decisions made as the research progressed.

In the open coding stage, 1,055 open codes were extracted from 18 interviews, which increased to 1,863 when repetitive codes were considered. In the axial coding stage, 45 subcategories were identified, and in the selective coding

stage, six main categories emerged: causal conditions, intervening conditions, contextual conditions, strategic actions, and outcomes.

Through the identification of main categories and the core category, the final analysis of the study resulted in a theoretical model for women. The research findings are presented within the framework of the grounded theory's paradigmatic model as follows:

## 3. Findings and Results

### 3.1. Central Phenomenon

Interfaith marriage involves significant challenges in Iranian society. Participants described interfaith marriage as an unavoidable red line, forbidden love, impossible, sensitive, unachievable, unexpected, challenging, troublesome, and burdensome. It was characterized by enduring numerous ups and downs, stress, anticipated difficulties, and inevitable problems.

*"I knew the rocky road that awaited me, so I decided to suppress my feelings and not accept this relationship" (Female, 32 years old, Zoroastrian).*

### 3.2. Causal Conditions

#### 3.2.1. Individual Criteria for Spouse Selection

##### 3.2.1.1 Shared Perspective on Religion

The data revealed that individuals' views on religion play a significant role in the success of interfaith marriages.

*"We had many disagreements, but religion was never one of them. Neither Farshad nor I cared about those things" (Female, 48 years old, Muslim).*

##### 3.2.1.2 Love and Emotional Attachment

Participants considered love and emotional attachment to be a priority over religion and other factors in spouse selection.

*"We entered an emotional relationship, which led to our marriage" (Female, 35 years old, Muslim).*

##### 3.2.1.3 Similarities in Moral and Personal Traits

Traits such as independence, calm demeanor, introversion, nobility, and lack of authoritarianism were emphasized, along with disregarding others' preferences in spouse selection.

*"My father always told me to focus on their character, not their looks. You'll live with their personality, not their appearance" (Female, 43 years old, Muslim).*

#### 3.2.1.4 Humanity

Humanity was defined as adherence to moral values, belief in God, honesty, loyalty, and simplicity.

*"Religion has never played a role in my life, nor will it. When it came to marriage, I valued honesty, humanity, and loyalty more than anything else" (Female, 42 years old, Muslim).*

#### 3.2.1.5 Low Priority of Material and Educational Status, Importance of Appearance

*"In marriage, you don't think about their degree or which university they attended. What matters is their personality, behavior, and family" (Female, 42 years old, Muslim).*

#### 3.2.1.6 Individual and Family Prestige, Family-Oriented and Cultural Background

*"My grandfather, a pre-revolution prosecutor in Tehran, called a Zoroastrian family friend to inquire about the family we intended to marry into. Their endorsement settled everything" (Female, 48 years old, Muslim).*

#### 3.2.2. Avoidance of Genetic Issues Associated with Intra-Religious Marriages

Avoidance of genetic risks from familial marriages and ensuring the birth of healthier and more intelligent children were significant motivations.

*"My cousin proposed, but I insisted on marrying outside the family to avoid the genetic risks. My parents initially opposed because they didn't know the suitor well" (Female, 40 years old, Muslim).*

#### 3.2.3. Expansion of Awareness, Social Connections, Higher Education, and Travel

*"I started university, and during my third year, I met someone. After some time, he proposed to me" (Female, 43 years old, Zoroastrian).*

#### 3.2.4. History of Interfaith Marriages in the Family

*"One of his cousins called to congratulate me, mentioning that his uncle had also married someone of a different religion" (Female, 40 years old, Muslim).*

#### 3.2.5. Religious Pressures for Intra-Religious Marriage

*"We couldn't hold the ceremony at the Khosrow Hall if one party was Muslim. They insisted on an intra-religious marriage to have a traditional ceremony" (Female, 30 years old, Muslim).*

#### 3.2.6. Level of Individual and Familial Religiosity

Results showed four levels of religiosity:

##### 3.2.6.1 Nominal and Documented Religiosity, Lack of Belief in Religion, Ethical Commitment

Nominal religiosity, described as lack of adherence to religious principles and absence of religious fanaticism, was expressed as "Muslim on paper" or "inherited religion."

*"Ali wasn't religious at all" (Female, 47 years old, Muslim).*

##### 3.2.6.2 Moderate Religiosity

This level emphasized a rational, open-minded acceptance of religion without "blind fanaticism."

*"I never prayed or fasted, nor did my family impose these practices. The pressure mostly came from schools" (Female, 40 years old, Muslim).*

##### 3.2.6.3 Strict Religiosity

Participants associated strict religiosity with rigidity, closed-mindedness, and dogmatism.

*"We heard rumors about Yazdan being a Zoroastrian, but he seemed as rigidly devout as a strict Muslim" (Female, 80 years old, Zoroastrian).*

##### 3.2.6.4 Experience of Changing Perspectives on Religion

This change was described as distancing from religion, abandoning rigid beliefs, and adopting a non-religious worldview.

*"Around 25 or 26, I started to feel religion fading from my life" (Female, 37 years old, Muslim).*

#### 3.2.7. Acceptance and Support from Families, Relatives, and Friends

Gaining family approval was one of the most significant challenges for participants, often accompanied by high levels of stress.

*"When Alireza proposed, I told him my father wouldn't approve. My family didn't even allow me to have Muslim*



friends, let alone marry one" (Female, 39 years old, Zoroastrian).

### 3.3. Intervening Conditions

#### 3.3.1. Premarital Acquaintance

Participants considered premarital acquaintance to be one of the factors contributing to the success and sustainability of interfaith marriages. They believed that such acquaintance helps couples better understand cultural and religious differences before marriage.

*"I think if two people with different religions get to know each other before anything happens, like getting engaged, and their families interact for a while to see if they enjoy being together and face no issues, it can help them accept each other more easily" (Female, 43 years old, Muslim).*

#### 3.3.2. Age at Marriage

The tendency for interfaith marriage was higher among older individuals, attributed to greater maturity and intellectual development.

*"I think I wish I had married a bit later when I was more mature" (Female, 40 years old, Muslim).*

#### 3.3.3. Religious Identity of the Individual and Spouse

The participating women belonged to two religions: Zoroastrianism and Islam, while their spouses adhered to three religions: Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and Islam. All Muslim participants were Shia, and Christian participants were Catholic.

*"I am Zoroastrian, and my husband's religion is Islam" (Female, 45 years old, Muslim).*

#### 3.3.4. Context of Premarital Acquaintance

Most premarital acquaintances occurred in educational institutions, workplaces, neighborhoods, or through online platforms.

*"I met José on Facebook, in a group for Iranians living in Germany. I've always liked the German language, and I was following a friend in Germany. I joined this group, and we started exchanging messages, which eventually led to us getting to know each other better" (Female, 44 years old, Muslim).*

#### 3.3.5. Religious Majority-Minority Dynamics and Perception of Discrimination

In Iranian society, Islam is the majority religion, and other religions are considered minorities. Acceptance of interfaith marriage is more challenging among minorities, who often adopt a more cautious and defensive stance.

*"Perhaps Zoroastrians valued marrying into a majority family because they wanted to be connected to the majority group. Unfortunately, Islam's reputation might have made minorities more cautious in this regard" (Female, 27 years old, Muslim).*

#### 3.3.6. Gender

All participants in this study were women. A total of 18 women shared their lived experiences and perspectives.

### 3.4. Contextual Conditions

#### 3.4.1. Religious Hegemony in Iran

The dominance of religion in Iran has led to the stigmatization of non-Islamic identities. Participants believed that the religious governance in Iranian society has created a divide between religion and society, reducing its relevance. They argued that religion should enhance human connections, but its dominance has tarnished the image of Islam among minorities and elicited criticism regarding its incompatibility with modern life. Some participants even identified religion as a source of suffering in Iran.

*"What struck me was how important Ashura and Tasua were in my family until a few years ago. Things changed drastically after Ahmadinejad came into power. People started to view religion differently, and its significance diminished in society, including my family" (Female, 30 years old, Muslim).*

#### 3.4.2. Dowry as an Issue

One participant highlighted dowry and women's rights as challenges created by religion in Iranian society.

*"His brother faced challenges with dowry payments. Zoroastrians typically don't have dowries, but in Islamic ceremonies, at least one coin or some equivalent must be specified to perform the marriage. Their family found this challenging" (Female, 40 years old, Muslim).*

### 3.4.3. Registration of Marriage as an Issue

Participants described the legal requirement to register Islamic marriages as burdensome. Zoroastrian ceremonies conducted in Dari often contrasted with Islamic rituals in Arabic.

*"When it came to marriage, my mother wanted me to have a Zoroastrian ceremony, while his family wanted an Islamic one for their brother" (Female, 80 years old, Zoroastrian).*

### 3.4.4. Legal Requirement to Convert to Islam

Iranian law requires a non-Muslim individual to officially convert to Islam to marry a Muslim.

*"Whether it was for a temporary marriage or an Islamic contract, they needed a certificate proving the conversion, which we had to obtain to proceed" (Female, 42 years old, Muslim).*

### 3.4.5. Marriage Rituals and Cultural Traditions

Participants identified differences in cultural and religious traditions, such as dowry, wedding celebrations, and bride price, as challenges in interfaith marriages. Three distinct approaches to wedding ceremonies were identified:

- a. Some participants chose to forgo wedding ceremonies due to familial stress related to their interfaith marriage.
- b. Others reported tense interactions between families during wedding negotiations, leading to less amicable ceremonies.
- c. A third approach involved respecting both families' traditions and organizing inclusive ceremonies, with mutual respect contributing to successful marriages.

*"Regarding the bride price, my mom said she would waive it out of love for her child, saying no monetary value could ever match that" (Female, 37 years old, Muslim).*

### 3.4.6. Religious Education in Schools

Religious education became mandatory in schools after the Islamic Revolution in Iran, with an emphasis on performing rituals. Religious minority students adopted two distinct approaches:

- a. Some minority students attended Muslim schools but stayed outside during religious and Quran classes. One participant described this as "wasting time during religion class." These students attended their own religious classes on weekends.
- b. Others attended schools specific to their own religion.

*"Even as a woman, I often found it difficult to reconcile what was taught in schools about religion. I thought, if God is so beautiful, why would He be so rigid?" (Female, 37 years old, Muslim).*

### 3.5. Strategic Actions

Four strategies were identified as the strategic actions of the participants:

#### 3.5.1. Adopting Personal Religion, Acceptance of Differences, and Respect

Some participants referred to the strategy of "each to their own religion" and emphasized the necessity of accepting religious differences and respecting their spouse's beliefs. They believed that discussing religious issues invades personal boundaries and considered religious superiority a source of conflict in interfaith marriages.

*"Everyone is deserving of respect; everyone has their own perspective. I can't imagine telling someone what to do or how to act" (Female, 42 years old, Muslim).*

#### Resolving Conflicts by Defining a New Narrative of Interfaith Interaction

- 3.5.2. *This strategy requires couples to avoid taking defensive stances toward each other's religion and to abandon religious prejudices.*

*"We would attend each other's ceremonies, whether it was Zoroastrian or Muslim. We participated together" (Female, 80 years old, Zoroastrian).*

#### 3.5.3. Setting Aside Religion in Marital Life

This approach counters the claim that religious and faith-based issues are the main causes of conflict and unsuccessful interfaith marriages. Advocates of this strategy described religion as having no role in their marital life and downplayed the significance of religious differences, viewing them as minor challenges.

*"Our conflicts were never related to religion. Naturally, we came from two very different worlds, which caused friction. Both of us had strong personalities, and it took a long time to learn to compromise, but religion played no part in it" (Female, 46 years old, Muslim).*

#### 3.5.4. Migration and Plans to Pursue It

Some participants prioritized migration as a means to escape the restrictions imposed on religious minorities in

Iranian society and to attain freedom from legal and social inequalities. Others expressed their desire to migrate or planned to have children only after leaving the country.

*"Migration has become a significant topic in our life now. When two people from different religions marry, the one from the majority religion has it easier, while the one from the minority faces more challenges" (Female, 40 years old, Muslim).*

### 3.6. Outcomes

The outcomes of interfaith marriage in Iranian society, along with its challenges, can be categorized into positive and negative consequences.

#### 3.6.1. Negative Outcomes

##### 3.6.1.1 Negative Evaluation of Interfaith Marriage

Some participants evaluated their interfaith marriage experiences negatively, describing them as the "biggest mistake of life," an "unpleasant experience," "very difficult," "full of complications," and "accompanied by significant emotional stress."

*"If you had asked me 10 years ago whether this marriage was a step forward or backward, I would have said it was definitely a setback. I endured a lot of stress, emotional pressure, and sometimes reached the brink of collapse, feeling completely helpless and unable to do anything" (Female, 42 years old, Muslim).*

##### 3.6.1.2 Personal Regression

Some participants viewed their interfaith marriage as a cause of regression in their lives. Expressions of regret included marrying young or experiencing dissatisfaction during the early years of marriage.

*"When it comes to progression or regression, our life hasn't seen much regression, but our progress has been limited too" (Female, 45 years old, Muslim).*

##### 3.6.1.3 Social Exclusion

Interfaith marriage often led to limited social interactions, pushing families toward isolation. Participants experienced social exclusion on three levels:

- **Exclusion from their religious community:** Participants mentioned instances like Armenians being ostracized for interfaith marriage or the

refusal of Zoroastrian associations to conduct ceremonies.

- **Exclusion from family and relatives:** This included loss of emotional and financial support, family boycotts, limited congratulatory messages, and absence from wedding ceremonies.
- **Exclusion from friends:** While some feared exclusion, others found their friends to be a critical source of social support.
- *"My father was extremely stressed, worried about whether I could live with this person and how others would react. He wondered how the family would treat us" (Female, 42 years old, Muslim).*

#### 3.6.1.4 Transforming the Relationship into a Continuous Conflict and Cultural-Religious Tensions

The reasons for conflict in interfaith marriages were divided into:

- **Cultural and religious differences**
- **Other causes**
- The data revealed that interfaith marriages often began with love but later faced conflicts stemming from religious and cultural differences. Religious superiority, cultural upbringing, and personality or family issues were identified as significant sources of tension.
- *"The only difficulty I faced was his behavior—sometimes he was unreasonable and ill-tempered, which bothered me" (Female, 42 years old, Muslim).*

#### 3.6.1.5 Emotional Separation, Divorce, and Financial and Emotional Challenges

The stereotype that all interfaith marriages end in separation or divorce was questioned, though the study noted two cases of divorce attributed to infidelity and religious prejudice.

*"My grandfather, being a judge, insisted that Farshad grant Bahareh the right to divorce. Farshad refused, saying he didn't like the idea and offered a dowry of 500 gold coins instead" (Female, 46 years old, Muslim).*

#### 3.6.1.6 Addressing Children's Marriages

Parents with interfaith marriage experiences emphasized their children's freedom to choose a spouse of any religion, prioritizing emotional connection over religious differences.

*"I never interfere. Whatever they want, it's their choice. We never thought our child should marry a Muslim or a Zoroastrian. I tell Baran she can marry whoever she loves, even abroad, with any religion" (Female, 42 years old, Muslim).*

### 3.6.1.7 Addressing School Selection for Children

Participants faced challenges in choosing between Muslim schools and schools for religious minorities for their children's education. Concerns about societal restrictions often led families to plan childbearing after migration.

- **Enrolling children in minority religious schools**
- **Enrolling children in Muslim schools**

### 3.6.1.8 Addressing Children's Religious Affiliation

*"Many people don't even know what religion their child follows. At Bamdad school, no one even asks" (Female, 46 years old, Muslim).*

Participants adopted four approaches regarding their children's religious affiliation:

- **Mutual agreement to let children freely choose their religion and respect their preferences:** These participants did not impose religion and considered ages 16–18 appropriate for such decisions. Some noted that children under eight years old lacked an understanding of religious concepts.
- **Preference for one parent's religion by both or one partner:** This involved guiding the child toward the religion of either parent.
- **Postponing the decision until the future:** Some couples agreed to revisit the topic later.
- **Abandonment of religious teachings:** Children from interfaith families often refrained from religious rituals like fasting or prayer.
- *"Early on, I didn't have an issue with having children, but my husband was hesitant. We both agreed that our child should freely choose their religion and not be forced into one. Religion plays no role in our household" (Female, 35 years old, Muslim).*

## 3.6.2. Positive Outcomes

### 3.6.2.1 Positive Evaluation of Interfaith Marriage

This perspective views interfaith marriage positively, describing it as a "wonderful journey."

*"For me personally, it was important to marry someone with a different religion. I am grateful to God for putting the right person in my path. Marrying someone of a different religion, particularly an Iranian, has significantly impacted my intellectual and belief development in many ways" (Female, 42 years old, Muslim).*

### 3.6.2.2 Personal Growth

The findings indicate two distinct participant perspectives:

- The first perspective sees interfaith marriage as a driver of personal growth for the couple.
- The second perspective considers interfaith marriage entirely unrelated to personal progression or regression and views religion as having no impact on personal development.
- *"Living with someone from a different religion helped me build my confidence. My husband encouraged me by placing me in challenging situations, pushing me to express myself and adapt. This experience allowed me to gradually progress and thrive" (Female, 42 years old, Muslim).*

### 3.6.2.3 Intellectual and Belief Changes, Acceptance of Differences, and Intellectual Maturity

This perspective views interfaith marriage as a life lesson, emphasizing intellectual and social maturity as a critical factor in all types of marriages, particularly interfaith ones.

*"Undoubtedly, marrying a Zoroastrian man gave me the opportunity to broaden my perspectives and gain a better understanding of others. My message to others is that differences are natural, and with respect and understanding, one can live harmoniously in a relationship with religious and cultural diversity" (Female, 32 years old, Muslim).*

### 3.6.2.4 Promoting Social Cohesion by Creating Opportunities to Learn About Other Cultures and Religions

Interfaith marriage provides an opportunity for couples and their families to familiarize themselves with one another's cultures and religions, fostering cultural and religious understanding and enhancing the social and



cultural fabric of Iranian society through learning and empathy.

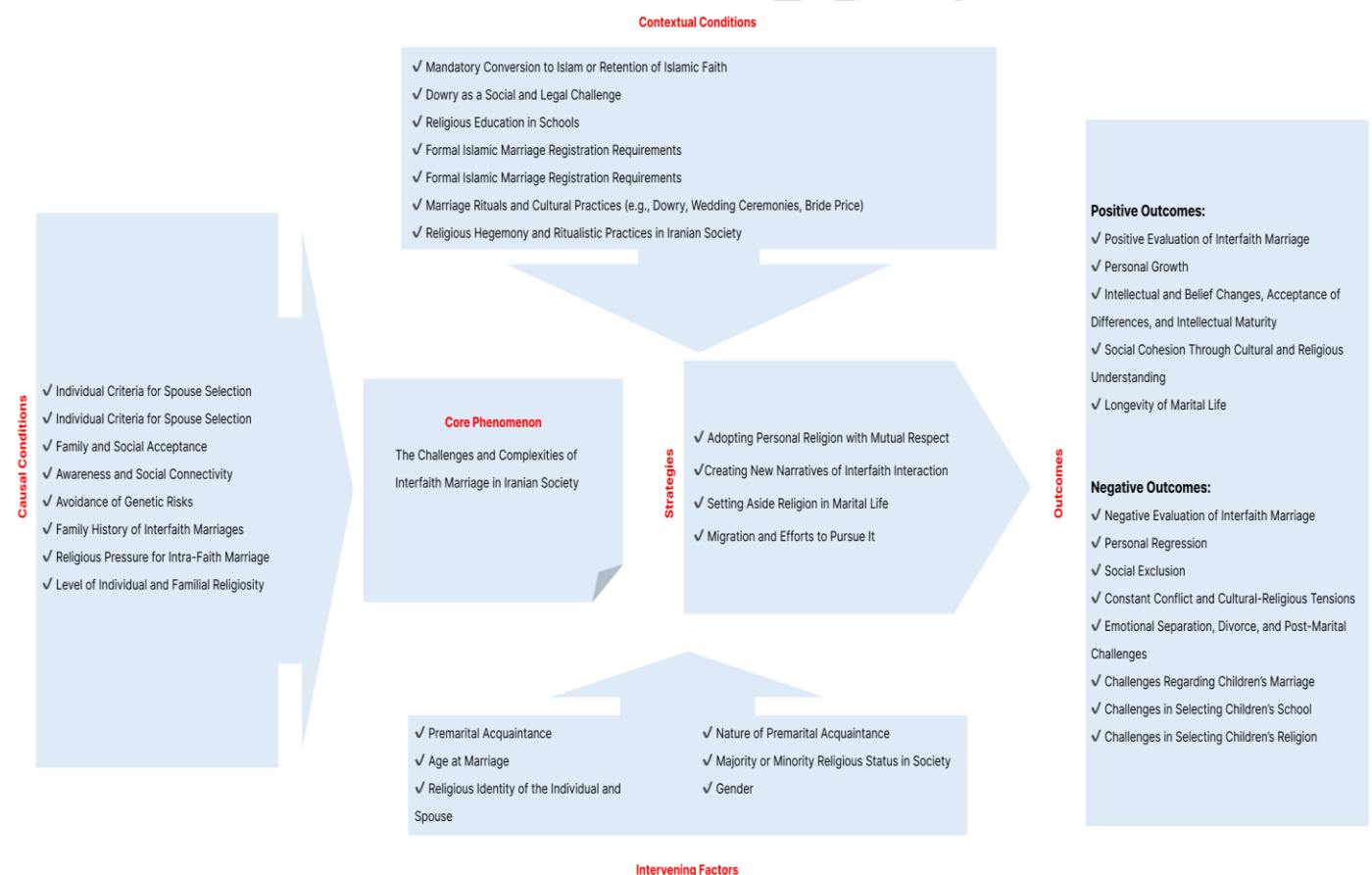
*"The most important point is that by focusing on family connections, mutual respect, and a willingness to understand differences, you can strengthen family relationships and view religious differences as an opportunity for growth and positive learning. Interfaith marriage can enrich the cultural diversity of your family and strengthen relationships"* (Female, 80 years old, Zoroastrian).

### 3.6.2.5 Duration of Shared Life

With the exception of a few marriages in the study that ended in divorce, participants reported durations of shared life ranging from 3 to 54 years.

**Figure 1**

*Final Model of The Study*



## 4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined the lived experiences of socially active women engaged in interfaith marriages in Iran,

analyzing the challenges, strategies, and outcomes associated with these unions. The findings provide a nuanced understanding of how individual, social, and institutional factors shape interfaith marriages and the

coping mechanisms employed by women in navigating the complexities of such relationships.

One of the key findings was the role of individual criteria, such as shared values, emotional attachment, and compatibility, in spouse selection. Participants emphasized love and mutual respect as crucial factors, suggesting that personal agency often overrides institutional and societal pressures. This resonates with the findings of Shirdel et al. (2021), who observed similar dynamics in successful interfaith marriages in Sistan and Baluchestan (Shirdel et al., 2021). Additionally, the participants' emphasis on avoiding genetic risks associated with intra-faith minority marriages aligns with Koenig's (2023) paradigm of boundary formation, which highlights the intersection of cultural and biological considerations in marriage choices (Koenig, 2023).

Another significant finding was the impact of family and community acceptance. Participants highlighted the dual challenge of gaining approval from both immediate families and broader religious communities. This echoes Abbasi Shavazi and Khani's (2009) research on marriage patterns in Qorveh, where normative and cultural alignment influenced familial and societal approval (Abbasi Shavazi & Khani, 2009). Resistance from religious institutions, as seen in the refusal to recognize certain interfaith ceremonies, underscores the findings of Davie (2013), who argued that institutional power dynamics heavily influence the societal perception of interfaith marriages (Davie, 2013).

Participants also reported contextual challenges such as mandatory Islamic marriage registration, dowry negotiations, and religious education in schools, which created additional stressors. These findings are consistent with Shariati et al. (2022), who noted the central role of religion in family laws across Islamic countries like Iran, Egypt, and Lebanon (Shariati et al., 2022). Similarly, Emanuel et al. (2023) found that institutionalized religious practices often complicate interfaith dynamics, particularly in educating children within interfaith families (Emanuel et al., 2023).

The study identified four strategic actions adopted by women: embracing personal faith with mutual respect, creating new narratives of interfaith interaction, setting aside religion in marital life, and migration. These strategies highlight the agency of women in managing interfaith dynamics, aligning with Ting-Toomey's identity negotiation theory, which emphasizes the role of intercultural interactions in shaping identity (Madjegu & Napitupulu, 2023). The strategy of migration, adopted by some

participants, mirrors the findings of Simatupang and Endi (2023), who observed similar trends in Indonesian interfaith families seeking tolerance and freedom (Simatupang & Endi, 2023).

The study also highlighted positive outcomes such as personal growth, intellectual maturity, and social cohesion. Participants described their experiences as transformative, providing opportunities for self-discovery and broader cultural understanding. These findings support Kalmijn's (2015) observation that interfaith marriages can foster greater tolerance and acceptance in socially advanced settings (Kalmijn, 2015). Furthermore, the notion of interfaith marriage as a "life lesson" aligns with Priliyanti et al. (2024), who highlighted the lifelong identity development facilitated by intercultural relationships (Priliyanti et al., 2024).

Negative outcomes included social exclusion, cultural and religious conflicts, and challenges in raising children within an interfaith context. These results reflect the findings of Halimang (2023), who noted that interfaith marriages in Indonesia often encounter institutional and societal resistance (Halimang, 2023). The participants' experiences of isolation and rejection also resonate with Abbasi's (2012) analysis of Arab-Iranian marriages during the Umayyad period, where interfaith unions faced significant cultural resistance despite instances of peaceful coexistence (Abbasi, 2012).

The role of institutional constraints, such as compulsory conversion for marriage, underscores the enduring dominance of religious hegemony in Iran. Participants' dissatisfaction with such practices aligns with Sundari and Retnowati (2024), who advocate for legal reforms to ensure equality and freedom in marriage laws (Sundari & Retnowati, 2024). Similarly, the participants' critiques of dowry practices and cultural rituals mirror Dribe and Lundh's (2011) findings, which emphasize the challenges posed by traditional practices in cross-cultural marriages (Dribe & Lundh, 2011).

This study contributes to the literature by offering a comprehensive analysis of interfaith marriage dynamics in a predominantly Islamic society, emphasizing the intersection of individual agency, societal expectations, and institutional constraints. By integrating findings from domestic and international studies, it underscores the shared challenges and opportunities faced by interfaith couples worldwide while highlighting the unique cultural and legal contexts of Iranian society.

## 5. Limitations and Suggestions

This study has several limitations. First, it focused exclusively on socially active women, excluding men and individuals from less visible or marginalized groups. This limits the generalizability of the findings to a broader demographic. Second, the qualitative methodology relied on self-reported experiences, which may introduce subjective biases and limit the objectivity of the results. Third, the study is contextually restricted to Iran, a predominantly Islamic society, which may not capture the nuances of interfaith marriages in secular or religiously diverse settings. Finally, the cross-sectional design precludes an understanding of how interfaith marriage dynamics evolve over time.

Future research could adopt a longitudinal approach to explore the evolving dynamics of interfaith marriages over time, particularly their impact on children's identity and family relationships. Expanding the sample to include men, younger participants, and individuals from different socioeconomic and educational backgrounds could provide a more comprehensive perspective. Comparative studies across diverse cultural and religious contexts would offer insights into how institutional and societal structures influence interfaith marriages globally. Additionally, mixed-methods research combining qualitative interviews with quantitative surveys could provide statistical evidence to complement the lived experiences documented in this study.

Policymakers should consider revising laws that impose constraints on interfaith marriages, such as mandatory conversion, to promote equality and freedom of choice. Educational institutions could incorporate curricula that foster cultural and religious tolerance, equipping students with the tools to navigate diversity. Religious leaders and community organizations should facilitate open dialogues to reduce stigma and provide support for interfaith couples. Social campaigns aimed at raising awareness about the benefits of interfaith marriages could enhance social cohesion and mutual respect. Finally, family counseling programs tailored to the needs of interfaith couples could help them address challenges and strengthen their relationships.

## Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

## Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

## Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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## Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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## Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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