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Predictors of the first marriage longevity of divorced women with children

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Abstract

Background: Divorce, as an important social harm, is associated with anxiety, fear, and feelings of helplessness and loneliness, leading to changes in behavior, financial status, and lifestyle, has always been the focus of investigators and policymakers. Since women are more affected by divorce than men, and children also play a decisive role in divorce decisions, the purpose of this article was to study the marital durability of women with children based on selected covariates.

Methods: The current study is a secondary analysis of the divorce survey data conducted by the National Organization for Civil Registration in 2016-2017. Information was collected through questionnaires from 756 women who had filed for divorce at divorce registration offices. An unshared frailty survival model was applied for analyzing this data using SAS software.

Results: In this study, 29.5%, 52.9%, and 11.8% of women had 1, 2, and 3 or more children, and the first marriage longevity (FML) medians among these women were 150.45, 221.13, and 343.20 months, respectively. An unshared Gamma frailty Weibull model was selected as the final model for analyzing the data. The variables of the human development index (AF=0.312), women's and their spouses' marriage age (AF=0.985, 0.992), the first child's age (AF=0.938), educational years (AF=1.121), number of children (AF=1.03), number of spouse's siblings (AF=1.018), father's survival status (AF=0.963), and child's custody status (AF=1.093) were found to significantly affect the FML of these women.

Conclusion: Based on the results, children can play positive or negative roles in women's divorce; as the number of children increased, women's FML also increased. On the other hand, as the age of women's first child increased, the divorce risk also increased.

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Highlights

What is current knowledge?

Women's educational year, number of children, and children's custody status had the most important effect on women's first marriage longevity.

What is new here?

Previous studies in this field used the common survival models, which can lead to inefficient results. In this study, an unshared frailty survival model was applied to analyze these data.

Introduction

Today, divorce, as one of the manifestations of global modernization, has grown in almost all countries. Statistics show that crude divorce rates increased in all OECD members between 1970 and 2017 (1). Over the past decade, divorce has faced Iranian society with challenges. According to the National Civil Registration Organization in 2024, 194,078 divorces were recorded compared with 176,890 divorces in 2014, showing an increased divorce rate (2). Kargar et al. (2023) followed up 770,000 couples who started their marriage in 2012 over a 10-year period; based on the results, 15.1% of these marriages had ended by January 2021 (3).

Divorce, as an important social harm, causes financial, emotional, physical, and legal challenges in couples (4). It is a significant phenomenon affecting the continuation of the young population in both quantity and quality; it breaks up the only legitimate and basic unit of reproduction, the family, and also causes children deprived of family support to be handed over to society (5). *Marriage Longevity* (The length of marriage until the divorce) is one of the demographic indicators of divorce; the decrease in duration of marriage is worrying and appropriate attention is needed (6). The mean marriage longevity was 9.2 years in Iran in 2019. In 2022, 32.1% of divorces occurred within the first five years of marriage; 9.5%, 14.1%, and 20.8% of divorces were related to marriages of less than a year, up to two years, and up to three years of marriage, respectively (7). In overcoming this situation, finding the risk factors of marriage longevity would be beneficial for better education of new couples and planning. Recently, researchers have been interested in studying marriage longevity in Iran by different methods. Mahdavi et al. (2013) investigated the role of selected variables in the marriage stability of 386 married people in Tabriz, utilizing discriminant analysis. Findings indicate that marriage survival determinants include participation, coherence, satisfaction, homogamy, independence, power, intimacy, stability (childbearing), and stratification (8). Norouzi et al. (2022) utilized competing risks survival analysis of 386 individuals who were married and divorced from 1991 to 2017 to investigate the marriage survival of new couples in Tabriz. The results of multivariate Lunn-McNeil models indicated that for the competing cause of having a relationship with another person, the traditional mode of being familiar, family weak role in choosing a wife/spouse, and the role of moral-religious commitment, along with other causes, exacerbated the risk of marriage survival reduction (4). Khoundabi et al. (2025) investigated the chance of leaving married life using Cox proportional hazard models with random effects, estimating the influence of demographic variables such as age at marriage, gender, place of residence, and province (6). Bagheri and Saadati (2024) examined the most important determinants of the first marriage survival of women using survival forests (9).

Having children as a deterrent to divorce can influence the inclination toward it. The cost of divorce, which refers to the greater difficulty of remarriage for divorced women, is higher for women with children (10). Since women with children often have a special attachment to their children, this has led them to endure marital difficulties as much as possible and avoid separation and divorce for the sake of their children, continuing their marital life (11). The emotional bond between the child and the mother reduces the tendency toward divorce (12). With the arrival of the first child in the family, couples take on another role, and since women fulfill some of their needs through their children in this situation, they feel less of a sense of loss, and their inclination toward divorce decreases. In order to increase marriage

duration, it is necessary and advisable to identify the factors affecting marriage longevity that can help investigators and policymakers to provide solutions for reducing the divorce rate. Therefore, the present study aimed to examine the determinants of *First Marriage Longevity* (FML) among divorced women with children using unshared frailty models based on selected covariates.

Methods

In this study, 756 divorced women with children, whose information was collected during the first wave of the marriage and divorce survey - a cross-sectional study conducted by the National Organization for Civil Registration in autumn 2017-2018- were considered. The FML (Interval between marriage and divorce) of these women was analyzed based on macro-level provincial factors (Human development index and married divorce rate), factors related to women themselves (Number of siblings, educational years, and marriage age), family-related factors (Father's educational years, mother's educational years, father's living status, and mother's living status), factors related to the spouse (Number of siblings, marriage age, and educational years), factors related to the spouse's family (Father's educational years and mother's educational years), marriage-related factors (Years of informal acquaintance), divorce-related factors (Emotional divorce and residence after divorce), women's time-use factors (Hours spent on visiting relatives, hours spent on learning activities, hours spent with spouse, and hours spent on cultural activities), and children related factors (Number of children, first child's age, child's custody status, and provider of child expenses during custody) covariates (9) by unshared frailty models utilizing SAS software.

When the aim of the study is to analyze time-to-event data, survival analysis methods are used; the most commonly applied survival model is the Cox Proportional Hazards (CPH) and parametric Accelerated Failure Time (AFT) models. When there exists variability due to unobserved individual-level factors, these common survival models lead to overestimated model parameters by ignoring individual effects. In this condition, a random component is used to express these unknown factors, which are called frailty in survival analysis. Frailty is a random component designed to account for variability due to unobserved individual-level factors that are not explained by the other predictors in the model. Shared and unshared frailty models are two common types of this model used to analyze survival data. For unshared frailty models, a subject's survival is assumed to be independent of the survival of other subjects in the study population. For shared frailty models, however, the frailty accounts for dependence among subjects who share the same frailty. Shared frailty provides an approach to account for correlation in the data due to unobservable factors common within clusters of subjects (13).

Results

Table 1 represents the covariates' frequency percentage, and Table 2 shows Kaplan-Meier estimates and Log-Rank test for divorced women's FML based on children-related covariates.

Table 1. Frequency distribution of selected covariates *

Variables		Percent	Variables		Percent
Marriage age	< 20	61.2	**Child's custody status**	Women	29.5
	20-30	36.4		Spouse	52.9
	30-40	2.3		Other	15.3
	> 40	0.1	**Provider of child expenses during custody**	Women	29.5
Educational level	Illiterate	1.9		Spouse	52.9
	Elementary school	11.0		Other	15.3
	Middle school	16.4	**Living arrangements after divorce**	Owned	14.4
	High school and diploma	45.8		Rented	32.5
	University	24.9		Paternal	46.3
Number of siblings	0-1	6.9		Other	6.8
	4-5	28.5	**Visiting relatives (Hours per week)**	Had not visiting relatives	33.4
	6 and more	29.9		0-5	46.1
Father's educational level	Illiterate	29.4		5-10	13.5
	Elementary school	24.7		10-15	3.0
	Middle school	18.0		15 +	4.1
	High school and diploma	16.8	**Spending with spouse (Hours per week)**	Had not spending time with spouse	26.7
	University	7.1		0-5	67.3
Mother's educational level	Illiterate	39.8		5-10	4.1
	Elementary school	27.6		10-15	1.0
	Middle school	16.5		15 +	1.0
	High school and diploma	13.7	**Learning (Hours per week)**	Had not learning time	93.4
	University	2.4		0-5	5.2
Father's living status	Alive	65.1		5-10	1.0
	Dead	34.9		10-15	0.4
Mother's living status	Alive	86.2		15 +	0.0
	Dead	13.8	**Cultural activities (Hours per week)**	Had not cultural activities	3.7
Number of informal acquaintance years	0	81.2		0-5	14.5
	0-1	7.0		5-10	16.2
	1 <	11.8		10-15	12.6
Number of children	1	57.7		15 +	53.0
	2	30.6	**Emotional divorce**	0-1	64.0
	3 and more	11.8		2-3	24.5
First child's age	1-5	18		4-5	6.3
	5-10	26.3		6 +	5.1
	10-15	23.1			
	15-20	13.4			
	20 and upper	18.5			
Total		100	**Total**		100

* Due to missing values, the total frequency of some variables is less than 100.

Table 2. Kaplan-Meier estimates and Log-Rank test for divorced women FML based on children-related covariates

Variables		Mean	Median	Median 95% Confidence Interval	Log-Rank test P-value
Number of children	1	152.27	142	(133.55, 150.45)	< 0.001*
	2	219.06	211	(200.87,221.13)	
	3 and more	299.80	298	(252.80, 343.20)	
First child's age	1-5	89.96	83	(78.56, 87.44)	< 0.001*
	5-10	135.33	131	(128.33, 133.67)	
	10-15	187.77	187	(181.06, 192.94)	
	15-20	240.19	237	(227.16, 246.84)	
	20 and upper	332.92	321	(313.50, 328.50)	
Child's custody status	Women	176.66	168	(157.73, 178,27)	< 0.001*
	Spouse	162.64	162	(147.06, 176.94)	
	Other	316.91	326	(301.69, 350.31)	
Provider of child expenses during custody	Women	178.01	170	(160.24, 179.76)	< 0.001*
	Spouse	169.84	163	(154.13, 171.87)	
	Other	283.79	282	(257.59, 306.41)	
Total		190.05	175	(167.64, 182.36)	-

Based on the results, 57.7%, 30.6%, and 11.8% of women had one, two, and three or more children, respectively; most of the children were 10 years old or older (55%), their custody was with their mothers (53.2%), and their fathers provided their expenses (52.9%). The estimated median of FML for divorced women with children was 175 months (±7.36 months), meaning that 50% of them had FML of 14.58 years.

As Table 2 shows, Kaplan-Meier estimates of FML were significantly different among categories of number of children, first child's age, child's custody status, and provider of child expenses during custody (P-Value <0.001); as the number of children and the age of the first child increased, women's FML also increased. On the other hand, women whose spouses had their children's custody and expenses had the shortest FMLs.

To analyze the data, AFT models, including exponential, Weibull, log-logistic, log-normal, and generalized gamma models, were fitted on women's FML based on selected covariates. Akaike information criteria (AIC) and Bayesian information criteria (BIC) were considered indices for examining the most efficient model; both criteria suggested that Weibull AFT model must be chosen as the final model. To test the significance of individual dispersion in data, an unshared frailty Weibull model with gamma and inverse Gaussian distributions was also fitted to the data.

Table 3 shows the estimated values of the frailty distribution variance(θ), the p-value of the log(θ) test, the log-likelihood, and AIC and BIC of this model. Based on the likelihood-ratio test in this table, unshared frailty variance was significant for both models (P-Value < 0.001), indicating sufficient dispersion for the variance of unshared frailty, so frailty should be considered in this model for analyzing FML of divorced women with children. Based on the values of the frailty distribution variance (Largest) and the AIC and BIC (Smallest), the unshared frailty Weibull model with gamma distribution was selected as the final model for analyzing data.

Table 4 shows the results of fitting this model. The shape parameter in the model was estimated to be 6.178, indicating that the hazard of divorce for women who had the same individual characteristics increases over time. Based on the Accelerate Factor (AF) columns in this table, the following interpretations from significant covariates for divorced women with children *who had the same individual characteristics* can be derived as follows:

1. It can be concluded that as the Human Development Index (HDI) of divorced women increases, these women divorce 0.312 times sooner; in other words, they have a shorter FML.
2. As *the number of years of education* of divorced women increases, these women divorce 1.121 times later; in other words, they have a longer FML.
3. As the *marriage age* of divorced women increases, they divorce 0.985 times sooner; therefore, they have a shorter FML.
4. It can be concluded that divorced women whose *fathers were alive* divorced 0.963 times sooner compared with those whose fathers were death.
5. As the number of *spouses' siblings* of divorced women increases, these women divorce 1.018 times later; in other words, they have a longer FML.
6. It can be concluded that as the spouse's marriage age of divorced women increases, these women divorce 0.992 times sooner.
7. It can be concluded that as *the number of children* of divorced women increases, these women divorce 1.030 times later.
8. As the *age of the first child* of divorced women increases, these women divorce 0.938 times sooner; in other words, they have a shorter survival of their first marriage.
9. For the *child's custody status* (Woman) variable, it can be concluded that women who had custody of their children after divorce divorced 1.093 times later, compared with those whose custody was held by others.

Table 3. Estimation of frailty distribution variance (θ) and goodness-of-fit criteria for unshared frailty weibull AFT model in the analysis of the FML of divorced women with children

Unshared Frailty Distribution	Frailty Distribution Variance (θ)	P-Value *Log-Rank test (θ)*	*BIC*	*AIC*
Gamma	0.318	< 0.001*	133.331	38.691
Inverse Gaussian distributions	0.265	< 0.001*	145.453	41.128

*Significance at 0.01

Table 4. Results of fitting unshared frailty weibull model with gamma distribution for analyzing FML based on selected covariates

Variables			α	*exp*(α) =AF	Standard Error	Value of test statistics	P-Value
Macro-level provincial factors	HDI		-1.166	0.312	0.348	-3.350	**0.001**
	Married divorce rate		-0.005	0.995	0.007	0.730-	0.463
Factors related to women themselves	Number of siblings		0.006	1.006	0.004	1.630	0.104
	Educational years		0.114	1.121	0.024	4.480	**< 0.001**
	Marriage age		-0.015	0.985	0.002	6.630-	**< 0.001**
Family-related factors	Father's educational years		-0.003	0.997	0.003	1.010-	0.312
	Mother's educational years		0.001	1.001	0.005	0.190	0.850
	Father's living status	Alive	-0.037	0.963	0.018	1.990-	**0.046**
		Dead (Ref)	-	-	-	-	-
	Mother's living status	Alive	-0.018	0.982	0.022	-0.790	0.431
		Dead (Ref)	-	-	-	-	-
Factors related to the spouse	Spouse's number of siblings		0.018	1.018	0.008	2.150	**0.032**
	Spouse's marriage age		-0.008	0.992	0.002	-3.630	**<0.001**
	Spouse's educational years		0.004	1.003	0.003	1.540	0.123
Factors related to the spouse's family	Spouse's father's educational years		-0.001	0.999	0.008	-0.130	0.893
	Spouse's mother's educational years		0.005	1.005	0.003	1.670	0.095
Marriage-related factors	Years of informal acquaintance		-0.007	0.993	0.007	-0.980	0.327
Divorce-related factors	Emotional divorce		-0.003	0.997	0.004	-0.760	0.445
	Residence after divorce	Owner	0.030	1.030	0.038	0.780	0.434
		Rental	-0.005	0.995	0.034	-0.140	0.885
		Father's house	-0.037	0.953	0.034	-1.390	0.166
		Others (Ref)	-	-	-	-	-
Women's time-use factors	Hours spent on visiting relatives		0.001	1.001	0.001	0.800	0.426
	Hours spent on learning activities		-0.001	0.999	0.007	-0.150	0.884
	Hours spent with spouse		0.001	1.001	0.003	0.240	0.808
	Hours spent on cultural activities		-0.001	0.999	0.001	-1.020	0.306
Children related factors	Number of children		0.030	1.030	0.012	2.540	**0.011**
	First child's age		-0.053	0.938	0.002	-31.610	**< 0.001**
	Child custody status	Women	0.089	1.093	0.029	3.050	**0.002**
		Spouse	0.013	1.013	0.032	2.280	0.063
		Others (Ref)	-	-	-	-	-
	Provider of child expenses during custody	Women	-0.015	0.985	0.028	-0.530	0.594
		Spouse	-0.020	0.980	0.027	-0.740	0.462
		Others (Ref)	-	-	-	-	-
Shape parameter log (*scale*)			1.821	-	0.048	37.580	**< 0.001**
Log (θ)			-1.144	-	0.224	-5.110	**< 0.001**
Shape parameter			6.178	-	0.299	-	-
Scale parameter			0.162	-	0.008	-	-
θ			0.318	-	0.071	-	-
***Log likelihood* :17.637**			-				
Likelihood-Ratio Test (LR) for $\theta = 0$: P-Value=0.037							

Discussion

The objective of the present study was to investigate the factors influencing FML among divorced women with children, based on selected covariates. The findings revealed that an increase in HDI led to a decrease in women's FML. What makes the relationship between development and divorce significant is the secondary effects and consequences that development brings, which contribute to the rise in divorce rates in society. Longstreet et al. (2019), Valenzuela et al. (2014), and Deihoul et al. (2018) reported results consistent with the present study (14-16).

Many researchers have pointed to the direct relationship between education levels and divorce in Iran (17,18), and found that higher levels of education among women, as well as their participation in the labor force, significantly increased the likelihood of divorce. Contrary to these studies, the present study found that as the number of years of education increases, the FML also increases among divorced women with children (The risk of divorce decreases). In line with these results, Imanzadeh et al. (2021) and Sadeghi et al. (2018) concluded that if the growth of women's education and the expansion of higher education are accompanied by the creation of job opportunities, the possibility of

increased family income arises, leading to a higher expected value of marital life and contributing to family stability and the survival of marriage (19,20).

Based on the results, as the age at marriage increases, women's FML decreases (The risk of divorce increases). Logical and emotion-free behavior, spouses' concerns about such behaviors, the lack of necessary flexibility for spousal compromise, and the inevitable selection of spouses based on inappropriate criteria are among the most important reasons for the decline in marital survival among older women, which aligns with the findings of this study and is consistent with the research of Ghiasi et al. (2010) and Moltfat and Ahmadi (2008) (12,21). In the present study, as the spouses' marriage age increased, the women's FML decreased. Consistent with the results of this study, Imanzadeh et al. (2021) showed that an increase in the spouses' marriage age elevated the risk of divorce by 1.22 times and reduced marital survival (19).

Interference or influence from the spouses' original families can be one of the underlying causes of conflicts from the beginning to the end of any marriage (22,23). The results of the present study revealed that the variables of the father's living status and the number of the spouse's siblings had a significant effect on the analysis of women's FML. Consistent with this study, Imanzadeh et al. (2021) in their research identified large paternal families as one of the most important reasons for spousal satisfaction and compromise (19).

The number of children had a positive effect on women's FML in this study. According to the findings of Ghiasi et al. (2010), women without children had a higher tendency toward divorce compared to women with three or more children (12). Sadeghi (2017) noted that the presence of children has selective and protective effects on divorce; young couples who are still uncertain about the stability of their lives do not have children and delay having them (Selective effect), and on the other hand, having children deters couples from pursuing divorce (Protective effect) (24). The negative relationship between the number of children and the risk of divorce has also been confirmed in studies conducted in other countries (25,26). Hewitt's (2008) study in Australia showed that the likelihood of divorce is inversely related to having children (26). Bernardi and Martin-Pastor's (2001) study in Spain indicated that having children reduces the probability and risk of divorce among couples (27).

As the age of the first child of divorced women increased, their FML decreased. Zhian et al. (2015) noted that the impact of children on marital stability varies based on their gender and age (28). Steel et al. (2005) found that preschool-aged children have a stabilizing effect on the lives of married or cohabiting parents, but this effect weakens for older children. As children grow older, they are more likely to provide financial and economic support, enabling parents to establish an independent life after divorce (29). On the other hand, couples are concerned about their children and societal perceptions regarding children of divorce, stepfathers, and stepmothers, leading them to endure conflicts for years to avoid harming their children. They often pursue divorce only after their children have grown up (30).

One of the fundamental challenges for couples with children during divorce is child custody. The findings of Rezazadeh et al. (2018) revealed that one of the factors influencing divorce in the final stages of marital life is child custody (31). In the present study, in most cases, women had taken custody of their children (53.2%), while the spouses of 33.1% of the women had custody. The results showed that, when the woman had custody of the children, her FML was longer compared to when other individuals (Parents and relatives of the couple) had this responsibility.

Conclusion

According to the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the presence of children in the family affects the longevity of women's marriage; by increasing the number of children, the risk of divorce is reduced. On the other hand, as the age of women's first child increased, the women's marriage longevity decreased. This result is in line with previous studies, which confirmed that children can play positive or negative roles in women's divorce.

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Ethical statement

Since no intervention was used in this survey and the questionnaires were filled out with the participants' consent, there was no requirement for an ethical code.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

Author contributions

All authors participated in the design, implementation, and writing of all sections of the present study.

Data availability statement

The data for this study was gathered through a national survey conducted by the Civil Registration Organization, and it is only available to authorized individuals.

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