

Study of the Phenomenon of Interfaith Marriage Based on the Lived Experiences of a Group of Non-Co-Religious Men in Iran

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Article Info

Article type:

Original Article

How to cite this article:

Habibi, E., Torkaman, F., & Hazrati Someeh, Z. (2025). Study of the Phenomenon of Interfaith Marriage Based on the Lived Experiences of a Group of Non-Co-Religious Men in Iran. *Applied Family Therapy Journal*, 6(1), 47-60.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.61838/kman.aftj.6.1.6>



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ABSTRACT

Objective: The objective of this study is to explore the lived experiences of Zoroastrian-Muslim interfaith marriages in Iranian society, focusing on the challenges, outcomes, and strategies adopted by couples.

Methods: This qualitative study employed interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to understand the participants' perspectives. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 13 male participants involved in interfaith marriages between Zoroastrians and Muslims in Iran. Theoretical sampling was used, and interviews were analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding, with data saturation achieved after the 13th interview. The Atlas.ti software was used for coding and analysis to derive themes from the participants' narratives.

Findings: The findings reveal both positive and negative outcomes of interfaith marriages. Negative consequences include social exclusion, personal dissatisfaction, and emotional stress due to religious and cultural conflicts. These challenges were exacerbated by legal constraints, such as the requirement for non-Muslims to convert to Islam for formal marriage registration. On the other hand, positive outcomes included personal growth, intellectual development, and enhanced social cohesion through exposure to different religious and cultural perspectives. Acceptance of differences and maturity were key factors in successful marriages. Social exclusion and family opposition were prevalent but varied based on gender and minority status.

Conclusion: Interfaith marriages in Iran, particularly between Zoroastrians and Muslims, are fraught with complexities. While many couples experience significant challenges related to social exclusion and cultural conflicts, others find personal growth and mutual understanding through their relationships. These marriages reflect broader societal dynamics, where religious hegemony and legal frameworks play crucial roles in shaping outcomes. The study highlights the need for legal reforms and social support to foster inclusivity in interfaith marriages.

Keywords: Non-co-religious couples, Social exclusion and acceptance, Religious hegemony, Religious institutions in Iran

1. Introduction

The culture of marriage in Iran has undergone changes over time. In this culture, marriage is regarded as a highly significant social contract. Undoubtedly, Islam has played a prominent role in shaping this social contract. The Quran and the tradition of the Prophet of Islam provide detailed descriptions of the conditions and prerequisites for marriage, including the importance of marrying within the same religion. In recent decades, the influences of modern society and its values have shifted decision-making in marriage to personal reflections and individual considerations. However, most people in Iran still seek religious symbols in their wedding ceremonies while also attempting to preserve and promote Islamic culture. 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 for this is that when members of ethnic and racial groups marry individuals from other groups, it signifies that these groups accept each other on an equal and mutual basis. Intergroup marriage is also considered important due to its potential consequences. Such marriages may reduce group identity and prejudice in future generations, as children of intergroup marriages are less likely to identify with a single group. Furthermore, it is believed that the children of intergroup marriages tend to establish connections beyond group boundaries and are more likely to choose their marriage partners from the majority group. In the end, a high rate of intergroup marriage may blur the boundaries of ethnic or racial groups, weakening their prominence in society (Kalmijn, 2010, 2015).

Giddens, in his theory on the transformation and changes in the family structure in the modern era and the process of globalization, argues that today, the composition of the traditional family has changed, and the fixed roles of men and women within this institution have undergone significant transformations. Modernization can be seen as a progressive rationalization of social arrangements, which weakens traditionalism and increases the overall level of formal rationality in social organization. The foundations of authority are entirely relative, and no system of values can serve as a definitive guide for social action. Cultural modernity involves an increasing reliance on scientific knowledge, which has developed through the application of formal rationality principles and has been assessed based on its practical success in technologies. The core structure of modern culture is both secular and individualistic. Religious

beliefs face numerous challenges for their continuity or appear as a lack of rationality in the face of scientific knowledge. Thus, each person must organize their choices without the authoritative leadership of traditional or universalized beliefs (Scott, 2005).

The theory of religious power relations examines the role of religious figures and institutions in shaping and influencing societal attitudes and behaviors towards interfaith marriages. This theory analyzes the dynamics of power within religious institutions and how these dynamics influence social and cultural issues, particularly interfaith marriages. The perspectives and attitudes of religious figures play a significant role in determining the official stances of various religions towards interfaith marriages, which may vary within each religion and lead to internal disagreements. Religious institutions, through interactions with governments and legal institutions, as well as the application of soft power through education, religious ceremonies, and cultural influence on society, shape societal attitudes and behaviors towards interfaith marriages. The formal and informal positions of religious institutions affect individual and collective behaviors in society, shaping people's attitudes and behaviors towards interfaith marriages. This theory is particularly relevant in regions with high religious diversity, such as Toraja, Indonesia, where religious figures and institutions hold differing views on interfaith marriages (Davie, 2013).

The paradigm of boundary theory, based on the ideas of Fredrik Barth and Pierre Bourdieu, emphasizes the concept of boundary formation and social distinctions. Regarding interfaith marriage, this paradigm suggests that religious distinctions can act as social boundaries that limit marriage between individuals from different religions. In other words, this theory posits that the presence of religious distinctions can serve as a barrier or constraint to interfaith marriages in Western societies (Koenig, 2023).

Additionally, the Anzney perspective involves the interaction of class or socioeconomic status. Previous research shows that ethnic and racial prejudices are weaker among educated individuals; therefore, children of intergroup and interfaith marriages with higher social status are more likely to be accepted than those with lower social status. The impact of intergroup marriage on children with higher social status is more positive (Kalmijn, 2015).

The theory of immigrant integration suggests that through interactions and contacts between immigrants and their younger generations with the host society, they become familiar with new cultures and values. Regarding interfaith

marriage, these interactions can lead to changes in societal attitudes towards marriage between individuals from different religions. For example, these interactions may result in the formation of shared values and ideologies within society that accept interfaith marriage and increase the tendency to embrace religious diversity (Koenig, 2023).

"In Iran, intergroup marriages between different social groups have also expanded with the growth of urbanization, increased migration, and social changes. Analyzing and explaining patterns of spouse selection is one of the key areas of focus in research related to the family institution" (Askari-Nodoushan & Torabi, 2011).

"After the Islamic Revolution, religious values gained greater importance in the context of social changes in Iran. Following the revolution, Islam transitioned from a cultural value to a fundamental component of policymaking. For example, in the area of marriage and family, laws were designed based on religious values that had to be adhered to" (Meshkini-Ardebili, 2014). Therefore, interfaith marriage is not a conventional form of marriage, but it does occur. Hence, this study aims to "understand the phenomenon of interfaith marriage based on the lived experiences of non-co-religious couples" and seeks to answer the question: "What image do couples from two different religions present of their marriage?"

2. Methods

Based on the research questions and cognitive objectives, the methodological approach of this study is interpretive phenomenology. The research method has been conducted based on 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. In this theory, the three stages of coding are sequentially as follows: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.

The study population is defined as men who have experienced interfaith marriage. In Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM), the sampling framework is purposive and theoretical rather than statistically representative. In this research, theoretical and purposive sampling methods were used simultaneously, and during data collection and data analysis, the process of theoretical saturation determined the sample size. Throughout the study, data were collected continuously and decisions regarding the sample size were made in conjunction with the progress of the work. In total, by conducting 13 qualitative and in-depth interviews with

men, theoretical saturation and data saturation were achieved. In fact, the interviews continued until the interviewees provided responses similar to previous participants, making further work somewhat repetitive. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using Atlas.ti software (version 7).

To ensure the validity of the research data, the researcher exercised utmost care to pose questions clearly, and at the end of the interview, the participant's statements were reviewed, and their agreement with the content of their remarks was obtained. In some cases, after transcribing the interview text and performing open coding, the relevant file was provided to the participant, and their opinion about the codes was sought.

In this study, 13 interviews belong to men. The open codes from the male participants' interviews amount to 1,027 codes, and there are 1,746 open codes in the men's interviews. In the axial coding stage, 45 subcategories or axial codes were extracted. In the third stage of selective coding, with the emergence of six main categories of the research (causal conditions of the phenomenon, central intervening conditions, contextual conditions, strategic actions, and consequences), theoretical models derived from inductive data emerged, and finally, the storyline of the model was narrated.

3. Findings and Results

In this study, 13 interviews were conducted with men. In the open coding phase, a total of 1,027 open codes or concepts (excluding duplicate codes) and 1,746 open codes (including duplicates) were extracted from the 13 interviews. Additionally, there were 1,724 quotes. In the final stage, selective coding was performed to develop a theory based on the research data and context. This was accomplished by categorizing the axial subcategories and linking them to the core category. With the identification of the core category, the final analysis of the research emerged in the form of a theoretical model for men.

The research findings are structured around the categories of the grounded theory paradigm model as follows:

Central Phenomenon: Interfaith marriage faces many challenges in Iranian society.

In the view of the participants in this study, interfaith marriage is described as an unavoidable red line, a forbidden love, impossible, a sensitive issue, unachievable, unexpected, challenging, burdensome, difficult, accompanied by significant challenges and stress, and as a

marriage inevitably fraught with problems and negative outcomes.

“Interfaith marriage was a challenge for me that needed to be addressed” (Male, 58 years old, Zoroastrian).

Causal Conditions

1. Individual Criteria for Spouse Selection

- **Shared Perspective on Religion:** The data indicate that an individual's perspective on religion is one of the most critical factors in the success of an interfaith marriage.
- “At the age of 32, I met a woman named Bahareh, she was Muslim. For me, religious matters were never important when selecting a partner or spouse because I grew up in a family where such issues were not emphasized, and we didn't have strong or extreme religious beliefs” (Male, 58 years old, Zoroastrian).
- **Emotional Connection and Love:** Participants considered love and emotional connection as more important than religion or other factors in choosing a spouse.
- “No, I was looking for someone I loved. It didn't matter to me if she was Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, atheist, or Buddhist. I wanted to marry the person I loved. Her religion was not important to me at all” (Male, 54 years old, Zoroastrian).
- **Disregard for Others' Preferences in Choosing a Spouse:** Traits such as being energetic, mature, artistic, independent, calm, introverted, and noble, along with a lack of authoritarianism, were mentioned as important factors.
- “I always had this image of my mother as a queen or an angel, and honestly, she was. I was always looking for a girl who was very similar to my mother” (Male, 54 years old, Zoroastrian).
- **Humanity:** Defined as moral values, belief in God, honesty, loyalty, simplicity, and purity.
- “In the 22 years we've known each other, I only heard him once, during our engagement, talk about how one of his friends' uncles, a lawyer and former parliament member during the Shah's reign, criticized his grandfather for allowing his grandchild to marry a non-Muslim. But my husband, who was the last prosecutor in Tehran under the Shah and a deputy minister, simply smiled and said, ‘Religion doesn't matter to me, only humanity and the person's character do. I

don't care about their religious strictness or affiliation” (Male, 53 years old, Zoroastrian).

- **Material and Educational Factors:** These were of lesser importance compared to appearance.
 - “I was very sensitive about my wife's beauty; it was very important to me” (Male, 59 years old, Zoroastrian).
 - **Family and Personal Background:** The importance of a well-respected and cultured family was also highlighted.
 - “My father was a high-ranking engineer in the oil company, holding a senior position, but Mina's family was just average, yet they were very noble, empathetic, and close-knit. This caught my attention” (Male, 54 years old, Zoroastrian).
2. **Avoiding Genetic and Medical Problems from Intra-Faith Marriages Among Minorities**
 3. One key motivation for interfaith marriage was avoiding the genetic limitations often seen in minority religious groups, such as those resulting in congenital problems. The participants emphasized the importance of preventing genetic diseases and marrying outside the family to ensure healthier children with higher IQs.
 4. “Zoroastrians are a small community. When they marry within the group, there are a lot of genetic problems. For instance, your child is much healthier than one born from two Zoroastrians who marry each other” (Male, 81 years old, Zoroastrian).
 5. **Increased Awareness, Social Connections, University Education, and Travel**
 6. Participants in this study had met their spouses in university settings and had experience interacting with people from other religions. Higher levels of university education were seen as a significant factor in choosing interfaith marriage.
 7. “There I happened to come across a very complete version of a translation and interpretation of the Quran, and I thought I'd sit down and really study it. I wanted to understand what this ideology, with so many devout and passionate followers, was really about” (Male, 37 years old, Zoroastrian).
 8. **History of Interfaith Marriage in the Family**
 9. The results showed that having a history of interfaith marriage in one's family played a role in the decision to marry someone from a different

religion. Families with a history of interfaith marriage were more accepting of such unions.

10. "I was born into a family where my father was Zoroastrian, and my mother was Muslim" (Male, 53 years old, Zoroastrian).
11. **Pressure from Religions for Intra-Faith Marriage Among Their Followers**
12. According to participants, intra-faith and cultural marriage is the prevailing model in Iranian society. They criticized the common belief in intra-faith marriage and attributed the avoidance of interfaith unions largely to the cautious stance of minority religions on such marriages. This trend was more prominent among Zoroastrians and Armenian Christians.
13. "At one point, they had a program called 'Night Gathering,' but I think it was just for profit. Sure, some people met there, but now such things don't happen anymore, even among the very devout Zoroastrians. So how are we supposed to find someone? How are we supposed to enter into a relationship?" (Male, 37 years old, Zoroastrian).

14. **Religiosity of the Individual and Their Family**

- **Nominal or Documented Religiosity, Lack of Faith:** This refers to being religious only in name and not adhering to the core tenets of the faith, akin to being secular. Participants described their religiosity with terms such as being Muslim or Zoroastrian "on paper," without practice or strong belief. They viewed religiosity as unrelated to goodness or bringing peace and considered it merely a means of connection with God.
- "It's just a name that they gave us: 'You're Zoroastrian.' If they had told me I was Armenian, it wouldn't have made any difference because I don't know this book, or that book, or the Quran, or any of them..." (Male, 54 years old, Zoroastrian).
- **Mild Religiosity:** This approach emphasizes accepting religion through open-mindedness and rational choice rather than blind faith and fanaticism.
- "Although I wasn't officially initiated into the faith, I had that belief, that conviction, that like anyone born into any other religion, the one I was born into was the right one, and I had to defend it with knowledge and awareness. I believed that according to Zoroaster's teachings, people should convince each other through reason and thought,

not force or coercion" (Male, 37 years old, Zoroastrian).

- **Strict Religiosity:** This involves rigid beliefs, strong convictions, and closed-mindedness, associated with fanatical religiosity.
 - "See, my father's family, especially, were extremely religious. They were very devout in the Zoroastrian faith" (Male, 35 years old, Zoroastrian).
 - **Experience of Changing Perspective on Religion:** Participants described changes with terms like the fading of religion's influence, beginning to question religion, changing views, the meaninglessness of religion, regret over rigid religious beliefs, from belief to disbelief, and distancing from religion.
 - "In religious education, because Shia Islam is the official religion in Iran, they taught Islamic studies. I had to leave the classroom because my father was very strict and said I shouldn't stay in class. So, I was outside alone in the yard, whether it was hot or cold, and it didn't feel good. You feel like an outsider. That was the first challenge religion created for me" (Male, 55 years old, Zoroastrian).
7. **Acceptance by Families, Relatives, and Friends**
 8. Gaining the approval of families was one of the biggest and most serious challenges participants faced, causing them significant stress. One participant described an idealistic marriage based on feelings and emotions without family approval. Some participants mentioned the pressure they felt from their families to abandon interfaith marriage, and they viewed cultural differences between families as a serious issue. This perspective emphasizes the challenge of resolving family conflicts in interfaith marriages.
 9. "There's another issue, the language we speak. I take my wife to a Zoroastrian gathering, and we speak in Dari, our native language, so she doesn't understand" (Male, 56 years old, Zoroastrian).

Intervening Conditions

1. **Pre-marital Acquaintance**
2. Participants emphasized the importance of pre-marital acquaintance between men and women, independent of the traditional limitations in Iranian culture. They noted that such freedoms are one of the factors contributing to the success and longevity of interfaith and successful marriages. In their

view, cultural and religious differences become clear during these pre-marital interactions.

3. "Our relationship gradually turned into a deep friendship and love through academic interactions. After a few years, we accepted each other as spouses and decided to marry" (Male, 37 years old, Zoroastrian).
4. **Age at Marriage**
5. The tendency toward interfaith marriage at older ages is due to the higher maturity and mental development of the couple.
6. "Sahar was three years older than me, and I was worried because her time to start a life together was running out sooner than mine" (Male, 37 years old, Zoroastrian).
7. **Religious Affiliation of the Individual and Their Spouse**
8. All the male participants in this study were Zoroastrians married to Shia Muslim women. The female participants belonged to two religions: Zoroastrianism and Islam, while their spouses belonged to three religions: Christianity, Zoroastrianism, and Islam. The religious orientation of the Muslims examined in this study was Shia, and the Christian participants were reported to be Catholic.
9. "I am Zoroastrian and have a Shia Muslim spouse" (Male, 55 years old, Zoroastrian).
10. **Method of Pre-marital Acquaintance**
11. Field data from this research show that most of the pre-marital acquaintances of participants occurred in university settings, work environments, neighborhoods, and virtual spaces.
12. "After I finished my military service and returned, I immediately met my future wife, Sahar, at work in a private lab. We became friends there" (Male, 37 years old, Zoroastrian).
13. **Status as a Religious Majority or Minority in Iranian Society and the Creation of a Sense of Discrimination and Superiority of the Majority**
14. In Iranian society, Islam is recognized as the majority religion, while other religions are seen as minorities, and belonging to a religion other than Islam is often considered an unacceptable label. Field data from this study indicate that sensitivities towards religious minorities have increased in post-revolutionary Iranian society, highlighting the limited social presence of religious minorities and

the challenges, discrimination, and harassment they face. This makes interfaith marriages among religious minorities more challenging, and they approach them with more caution and defensiveness.

15. "Another thing was the mourning ceremonies during Tasua and Ashura. They placed speakers on trucks, playing drums and cymbals at midnight. Our house was a single floor, so the sound hit our brains, and we couldn't do anything about it. Or our neighbor would play loud mourning chants until midnight. This drove me crazy, and I would leave the house because it was the same everywhere. This is one of the reasons my resentment towards religion grew" (Male, 55 years old, Zoroastrian).
16. **Gender**
17. Participants in this study were both male and female. A total of 18 women and 13 men shared their views and lived experiences from their own perspectives.

Contextual Conditions

1. **Religious Hegemony in Iran and the Prevalence of Religious Rituals and Beliefs, Along with Intolerance, Among the Majority Religion's Followers**
2. Religious hegemony in Iran regards belonging to any religion other than Islam as an unacceptable label. According to participants, religious dominance in Iranian society has failed due to the gap it has created between religion and society, losing its place in today's world. This approach suggests that religion creates divisions among people, whereas the function of religious rituals should be to unite people and strengthen their relationships. This perspective accepts the premise that no religion is superior to others, but the religious hegemony in Iranian society has led to a negative portrayal of Islam in the eyes of religious minorities. Some participants even regarded religion as a factor that has led to Iran's suffering, criticizing the lack of relevance between certain religious issues and today's world.
3. "This went on until I was about 10 years old when the revolution happened. Before that, although I was Zoroastrian, religion wasn't that significant" (Male, 55 years old, Zoroastrian).

4. **Dowry as an Issue**
5. Field data showed that one of the challenges for couples considering interfaith marriage was the issue of dowry. One participant viewed dowry and women's rights as problems caused by religion in Iranian society.
6. "In my opinion, when two people marry, everything in their life should be split equally. Whatever it is—responsibilities, work—they should share everything at home equally. It's called a shared life; everything should be 50-50" (Male, 55 years old, Zoroastrian).
7. **Formal Marriage Registration as an Issue**
8. One issue that participants raised, which was important to them in interfaith marriage, was the obligation to register their marriage according to Islamic law. Some participants found this requirement to be burdensome and difficult. Zoroastrian marriage registration, with ceremonies conducted in Dari, contrasts with Islamic Sharia marriage registration, which is conducted in Arabic.
9. "We tried really hard to find a place that would be more open on this matter. We heard that if we wanted to skip this part, I couldn't mention at all that I wasn't Muslim. Because they said if they find out one side isn't Muslim, they'll add the declaration of faith and conversion to the ceremony, which my father absolutely couldn't accept" (Male, 37 years old, Zoroastrian).
10. **Obligation to Convert to and Remain Muslim**
11. Field data indicate that the "obligation to convert to Islam" for interfaith marriages is a legal requirement. This legal restriction in Iran mandates that a religious minority must declare conversion to Islam at the official registry in order to marry a Muslim.
12. "They knew that, legally, I had to convert to Islam. According to the laws of the Islamic Republic, I had to become Muslim" (Male, 35 years old, Zoroastrian).
13. **Marriage Rituals and Related Cultural Customs, such as Dowry, Wedding, and Bride Price**
14. Data showed that differences in the customs of Zoroastrian and Muslim families are among the challenges faced by interfaith couples.
15. Regarding wedding ceremonies, three approaches were observed:
 - **A:** Some participants said they opted to forgo a wedding ceremony. One Zoroastrian bride said she skipped the wedding ceremony due to the intense psychological pressure on her family because of her interfaith marriage.
 - **B:** Others reported tension and coldness among the families during the wedding ceremony. This tension, caused by family opposition, was also present during the engagement process, where the families' behavior was not warm or friendly.
 - **C:** The third approach involved respecting the customs of both families and holding a wedding ceremony. Respecting each other's family traditions and refraining from mockery was recognized as a key factor in a successful interfaith marriage.
 - "In the end, neither my younger sister nor my mother came to the wedding or visited my home. But my mother still did what needed to be done, like buying rings and sending gifts, through my older sister" (Male, 40 years old, Zoroastrian).
6. **Religious Education in the School System**
7. Religious education became prevalent in the school system after the Islamic Revolution in Iran, with an emphasis on religious practices in schools.
8. Religious minority students faced two different approaches to religious education:
 - **A:** Some minority students attended Muslim schools, and during Islamic studies and Quran classes, they stayed in the schoolyard. One participant referred to this as "wasting time during religious classes." These students would attend their own religious classes on Thursdays or Fridays.
 - **B:** Other minority students attended schools specific to their own religion.
 - "Until I was 10, before the revolution, there was no religious education in schools, so I wasn't exposed to it. But after the revolution, when religious education was introduced in schools, that's when the problems started. That's when I began to understand what religion was" (Male, 53 years old, Zoroastrian).

Strategic Actions

1. **Choosing Personal Religion, Acceptance of Differences, and Respect**
2. Some participants in this study adopted the strategy of “to each his own religion.” They emphasized the necessity of accepting religious differences, respecting their spouse’s religion and beliefs, and fostering mutual understanding. This perspective views religious debates as destructive to relationships and promotes the idea that religious superiority causes problems in interfaith marriages.
3. “I said, ‘I don’t care, pray, fast, go to the mosque, do whatever you want. But I just ask that if you do it, keep it to yourself’” (Male, 53 years old, Muslim).
4. **Resolving Conflicts by Defining a New Narrative of Religious Interaction**
5. This narrative emphasizes the similarities between Abrahamic monotheistic religions. Through their spouse, the couple becomes familiar with the other religion, focusing on shared values as common ground. By fostering mutual understanding and engaging in reciprocal relations, they enhance emotional bonds. For this strategy to succeed, both spouses must avoid religious defensiveness and abandon religious prejudices.
6. “We try to talk openly and honestly about our beliefs and gain a deeper understanding of each other. We also discuss things thoroughly and try to minimize differences on topics we find important, reaching a mutual agreement” (Male, 37 years old, Zoroastrian).
7. **Setting Aside Religion in the Shared Life**
8. This approach counters the claim that religious differences cause conflicts in interfaith marriages.
9. Those who follow this strategy describe their approach with phrases such as: religion playing no role in shared life, religious matters not being an issue in the family, religious differences being irrelevant, mutual agreement on the insignificance of religious differences, and no challenges arising from religious differences in shared life.
10. “Like other couples, I believe religion doesn’t play any role [in shared life]. I don’t think it plays any role at all” (Male, 53 years old, Zoroastrian).
11. **Migration and the Decision to Pursue It**
12. Some participants considered migration as a way to escape the restrictions imposed on religious

minorities in Iranian society, as well as to seek freedom from legal and social inequalities. They placed migration as a priority or expressed a desire to migrate. Some postponed having children until after migration.

13. “I had agreed with her that we wouldn’t have our child in Iran, and we had already made arrangements to go to France to have the baby, but it didn’t happen because my father got sick” (Male, 40 years old, Zoroastrian).

Consequences

The consequences of interfaith marriage in Iranian society and its challenges are categorized into two groups: positive and negative outcomes.

Negative Outcomes:

1. **Negative Evaluation of Interfaith Marriage**
2. Some participants in this study evaluated their interfaith marriage experience negatively, describing it with phrases like “the biggest mistake of my life,” “an unpleasant experience,” “a negative experience,” “very difficult,” “a lot of trouble,” “accompanied by immense mental pressure.”
3. “This is what happened: first, we got married, and then I realized after being in the marriage that it was a mistake” (Male, 35 years old, Zoroastrian).
4. **Personal Regression**
5. Some social actors viewed their interfaith marriage as a factor that regressed their personal lives. One participant expressed regret over the interfaith marriage, while another regretted marrying at a young age. Yet another participant expressed regret during the first and second years of the marriage.
6. “They were more looking for a servant than a husband” (Male, 36 years old, Zoroastrian).
7. **Experience of Social Exclusion**
8. The limited social circle caused by interfaith marriage led families to isolation and separation from society. Participants experienced social exclusion on three levels due to their interfaith marriages:
 - a) Exclusion from their religious community
 - b) Exclusion from family and relatives
 - c) Exclusion from friends

At the first level, participants referred to examples such as Armenians being excluded from their community for marrying outside their religion and the Zoroastrian association's refusal to officiate a marriage between a Muslim bride and Zoroastrian groom, claiming that

interfaith marriage disrespects Zoroastrian beliefs. This exclusion was perceived as religious fanaticism.

At the second level, which most participants emphasized, social actors mentioned the loss of financial and emotional support from their families, being boycotted and excluded due to opposition to the marriage, receiving very few wedding congratulations, the absence or cold demeanor of family members during the wedding, disruptive behavior by one family towards the new spouse, and even a lack of warmth or affection from relatives. Other instances included not holding certain marriage-related ceremonies and language barriers creating social isolation.

At the third level, exclusion by friends was less emphasized. In some cases, actual exclusion did not occur, but social actors expressed a fear of it. Occasionally, friends were the only source of social support against exclusion by family and religious communities.

“Unfortunately, in some cases, we faced social prejudices and biases” (Male, 37 years old, Zoroastrian).

4. **Turning the Relationship into a Constant Battle and Cultural and Religious Conflicts**

5. The reasons for conflicts between interfaith couples can be categorized into two groups:

- a) Cultural conflicts and religious conflicts
- b) Cultural and religious conflicts
- c) Other reasons

The research data show that these marriages typically begin with love, but cultural and religious conflicts emerge after marriage, leading to friction and tension between the couples. This perspective highlights religious superiority, cultural differences, and differences in upbringing between families as factors that cause problems in interfaith marriages. Other contributing factors include patriarchy, differences in personality, anger issues, controlling behavior, and power struggles within the marriage.

“I encountered problems right from the start, even when planning the wedding ceremony” (Male, 35 years old, Muslim).

5. **Emotional Separation, Divorce, and Financial and Psychological Problems Following It**

6. The stereotype that all interfaith marriages lead to separation and divorce is worth questioning. Data point to two cases of divorce among the couples, citing reasons like infidelity and religious fanaticism.

7. “I’ve realized that religion’s main harm to humanity is that it says you don’t need to think for yourself. They’ll think for you, make decisions, and

you just follow. I don’t say this lightly—I’ve been to many countries, met different people, and came to this conclusion. I left that marriage because of these problems and returned to Iran” (Male, 55 years old, Zoroastrian).

8. **Facing the Issue of Children’s Marriage**

9. Freedom to choose a spouse of any religion and respecting the child’s preferences were highlighted by parents with interfaith marriage experience. This view prioritizes emotional connection over religious differences when choosing a spouse.

10. “With all the experience I’ve had [from interfaith marriage], I have no problem with my child’s interfaith marriage” (Male, 41 years old, Zoroastrian).

11. **Facing the Issue of Choosing Schools for Their Children**

12. Parents were faced with the decision of whether to stay in Iran or leave to ensure the upbringing of their children, including choosing between a Muslim school or one for religious minorities. Some postponed having children due to concerns about societal limitations in Iran, waiting until after migration. Participants expressed criticism of the religious education introduced in schools after the Islamic Revolution, which became a significant focus.

13. “I can’t decide yet. I need to sort things out before I can decide whether to take Nila out of Iran, or if she should study here, in a Muslim school, or in a Zoroastrian one” (Male, 35 years old, Zoroastrian).

14. **Facing the Issue of Children’s Religious Affiliation**

15. Couples adopted four different approaches regarding their child’s religion:

- a) Agreeing to let the child choose their own religion and respecting their wishes
- This group supports the idea of not imposing a religion on their children and agrees that the child should decide after the age of 16 or 18. Participants noted that young children do not fully grasp the concept of religion, regardless of whether they are taught Zoroastrianism or Quranic verses.
- b) One or both parents wanting the child to follow one of their religions
- This approach supports choosing one parent’s religion for the child, based on practicality.

- c) Some deferred the discussion of their child's religion to the future.
- d) Parents abandoning religious teachings altogether.

Some children from interfaith marriages do not follow religious rituals, and one participant mentioned that their child neither fasts nor prays. Other participants noted that many young people today are not religious, influenced by exposure to the digital world and skepticism toward religious miracles, making the issue of religion less significant. One participant mentioned that religion is a joke to the child of an interfaith family.

"Because I got married in Iran, I had to convert to Islam, so my child is supposed to choose Islam as their religion" (Male, 40 years old, Zoroastrian).

Positive Outcomes:

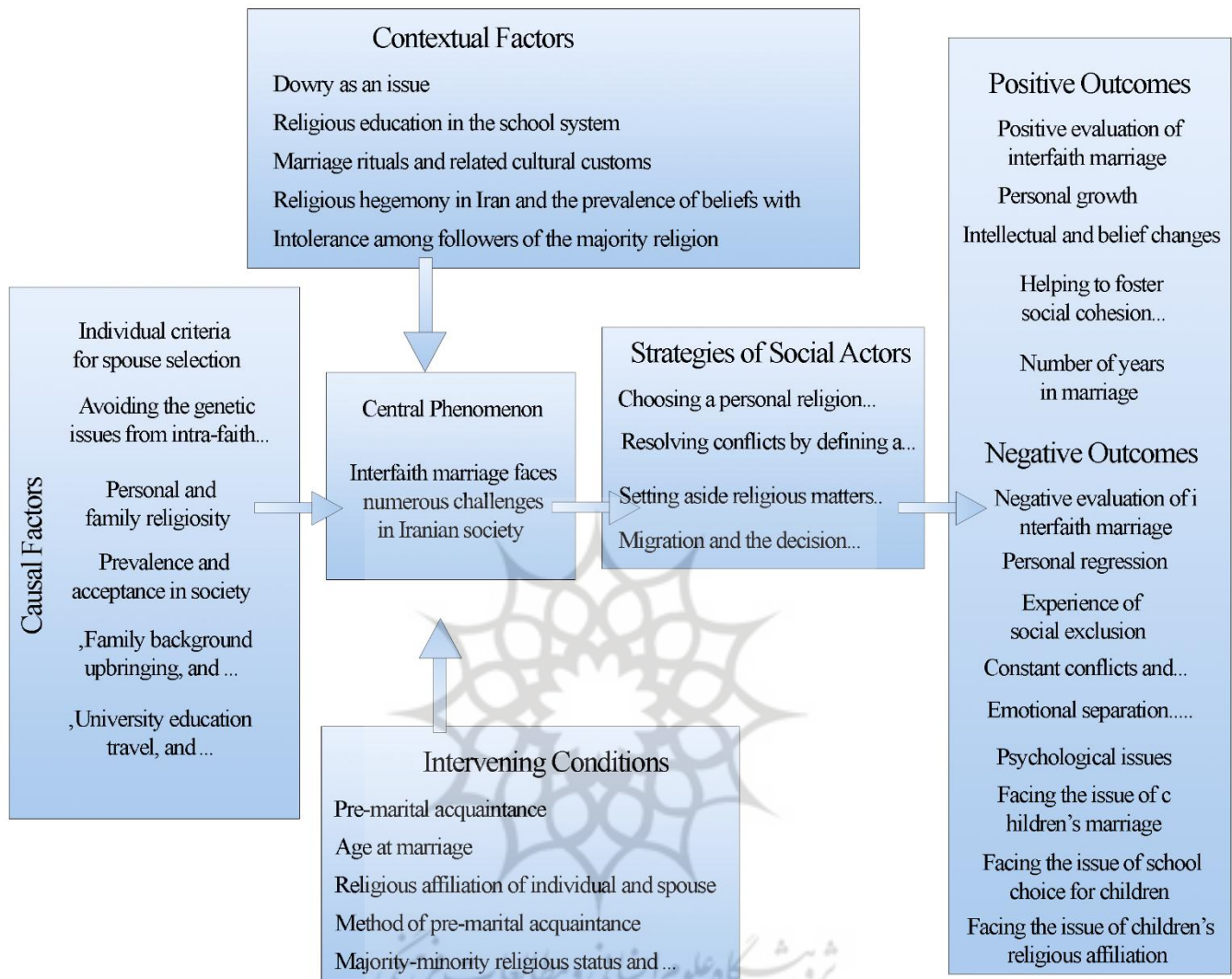
1. **Positive Evaluation of Interfaith Marriage**
2. Some participants positively evaluated their interfaith marriage experience, describing it as successful and pleasant, without problems or challenges. They expressed satisfaction due to the lack of distressing issues, as well as feelings of peace, security, and happiness. This approach views interfaith marriage as an amazing journey.
3. "My life with my spouse has been an amazing journey" (Male, 37 years old, Zoroastrian).
4. **Personal Growth**
5. The results show two different approaches among participants:
 - a) The first approach views interfaith marriage as a source of personal growth for the couple. Participants used phrases like increased confidence, positive changes in career and life, mental growth, helping each other become their best selves, a leap in personal life, and achieving peace and freedom.
 - b) The second approach sees no connection between interfaith marriage and personal growth or regression, considering religion irrelevant to individual progress.
 - "Whether marriage causes progress or regression has nothing to do with religion. I don't think religion matters. It's people's choices and actions that affect their progress, not religion" (Male, 37 years old, Zoroastrian).

3. **Intellectual and Religious Changes, Acceptance of Differences, and Mental Maturity of the Couple**
4. In this approach, interfaith marriage is seen as a life lesson, and the couple's intellectual and social maturity is considered one of the most important factors in any marriage, especially interfaith marriages. Such marriages also have the potential to bring about intellectual and religious changes, leading to a better understanding of each other and cultural and social development.
5. "We try to talk respectfully and peacefully when we have different opinions" (Male, 37 years old, Zoroastrian).
6. **Helping Build Social Cohesion by Creating Opportunities to Learn About Other Cultures and Religions**
7. Interfaith marriages offer opportunities for couples and their families to learn about each other's cultures and religions, religious customs, and diversity, increasing understanding, cultural growth, and empathy, thereby contributing to social cohesion and improving the cultural and social environment in Iranian society.
8. "I made changes to myself and my views, which helped me decide to marry someone from a different religion. We tried to find the best solutions by respecting each other and accepting our differences" (Male, 27 years old, Zoroastrian).
9. **Length of Marriage**
10. Apart from a few cases where the marriages ended in divorce, participants reported having lived together for 3 to 54 years.
11. "I got married in 1979, and it lasted until 2017, so that's 38 years" (Male, 81 years old, Zoroastrian).

In the findings, the concepts (open codes), subcategories (axial codes), and main categories (selective codes) were presented, and the grounded theory model derived from field data was explained and interpreted. This model depicted the contexts, causal conditions, and intervening conditions affecting the ups and downs of interfaith marriage in Iranian society. Based on the core and selective categories presented in the findings, the phenomenon of interfaith marriage in Iranian society can be understood through the model below.

Figure 1

Final Model of The Study



4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored the multifaceted dynamics of interfaith marriage within Iranian society, revealing the complexities and nuanced challenges that couples encounter in their lived experiences. The findings indicate both positive and negative outcomes, shaped by various contextual, causal, and intervening conditions, highlighting how interfaith marriages impact personal, social, and cultural dimensions of life.

The negative consequences of interfaith marriage in Iran are multifaceted, ranging from personal dissatisfaction to social exclusion. Several participants described their interfaith marriage as a significant mistake, often associated

with emotional turmoil and societal pressure. This aligns with Kalmijn's (2010) findings, which indicated that interfaith marriages often involve challenges in social integration, particularly when partners come from significantly different religious or cultural backgrounds (Kalmijn, 2010). The experience of social exclusion, particularly from family and religious communities, was a recurring theme in this study, where many participants felt isolated from their original social groups after marrying someone from a different faith. This phenomenon has been observed in other studies as well, where interfaith marriages often result in social marginalization due to religious and cultural boundary enforcement (Koenig, 2023). For instance, the refusal of Zoroastrian associations to officiate weddings

between Zoroastrians and Muslims in this study mirrors similar cases of social exclusion highlighted by Sundari and Retnowati (2024) in Indonesia, where religious communities resist interfaith unions to preserve cultural purity (Sundari & Retnowati, 2024).

The cultural and religious conflicts experienced by couples post-marriage further complicate the interfaith marital relationship. In the present study, participants highlighted that their marriages often started with love but were later plagued by cultural and religious conflicts. These conflicts reflect the power dynamics and entrenched religious beliefs within families and broader society, often leading to significant emotional stress and, in some cases, divorce. These findings are consistent with Priliyanti et al. (2024), who emphasized that identity confusion in interfaith marriages arises when cultural and religious differences become insurmountable within family life (Priliyanti et al., 2024). Additionally, Khatun et al. (2024) discussed similar issues in Jewish-Christian unions, where religious rituals and cultural practices often become points of contention, contributing to emotional and relational strain (Khatun et al., 2024).

Another key finding is that interfaith marriages often involve constant negotiations of power and identity, where couples must navigate complex religious and cultural dynamics to sustain their relationship. These negotiations, however, are often accompanied by emotional labor, with some participants noting how religious superiority and patriarchal or matriarchal expectations exacerbated conflicts. These insights align with the work of Maula and Muhsin (2024), who explored the ongoing tensions between religious precepts and human rights in the context of interfaith marriages, particularly the burden placed on couples to reconcile their individual beliefs with societal expectations (Maula & Muhsin, 2024).

Despite these challenges, the study also revealed positive outcomes for some interfaith couples. Several participants described their marriages as successful and fulfilling, highlighting experiences of personal growth, intellectual development, and social cohesion. These couples expressed satisfaction with their marriages, often citing the broadening of their perspectives on religion and culture. This finding resonates with Kalmijn (2015), who found that children of interfaith marriages, while facing some integration challenges, often benefit from the cultural and intellectual diversity of their parents (Kalmijn, 2015). The acceptance of religious differences and maturity of both partners were identified as key factors in the success of these marriages,

reflecting the notion that interfaith marriages can serve as a bridge between cultures and religions, fostering tolerance and understanding. Dribe and Lundh (2011) similarly argue that interfaith marriages, while initially fraught with difficulties, can promote cultural exchange and social cohesion, particularly in diverse societies (Dribe & Lundh, 2011).

One important aspect of the findings is the role of religious hegemony and legal constraints in shaping the interfaith marriage experience. Many participants reported feeling constrained by Iran's religious and legal systems, particularly the requirement to convert to Islam for formal marriage registration. This legal imposition often forced non-Muslim participants into situations where they had to hide or downplay their religious identity, contributing to a sense of cultural displacement. These legal challenges are not unique to Iran; Sundari and Retnowati (2024) pointed out similar restrictions in Indonesia, where legal pluralism often complicates interfaith unions (Sundari & Retnowati, 2024). Furthermore, participants also expressed concern about the religious education of their children, with some delaying having children until after migration to avoid exposing them to religious bias in the Iranian school system. This is a significant finding, as it illustrates the far-reaching implications of religious hegemony on family life, including the upbringing and religious orientation of children.

The intervening conditions—such as pre-marital acquaintance, age at marriage, and the religious affiliation of both partners—played a crucial role in mediating the success or failure of these marriages. Couples who had greater familiarity with each other's culture and religion before marriage tended to report fewer conflicts and a smoother transition into married life. These findings echo those of Koenig (2023), who noted that early exposure to religious and cultural differences through education or socialization can help individuals better navigate the challenges of interfaith relationships (Koenig, 2023). Furthermore, the study found that gender and minority status often influenced the degree of social exclusion experienced by participants, with women and religious minorities facing greater scrutiny and discrimination in their interfaith marriages. This resonates with the work of Madjegu and Napitupulu (2023), who explored the intersectionality of gender and religious identity in interfaith communication, particularly how societal norms and expectations place additional burdens on women in interfaith unions (Madjegu & Napitupulu, 2023).

Overall, the results of this study contribute to a growing body of literature on interfaith marriage, highlighting both

the opportunities and challenges these unions present. The findings align with existing studies on the social, cultural, and legal barriers faced by interfaith couples, while also emphasizing the potential for personal growth and social cohesion. The experiences of the participants demonstrate that interfaith marriages in Iran, much like those in other contexts, are deeply influenced by societal norms, religious institutions, and legal frameworks. While many couples face significant challenges, others are able to use their differences as a source of strength and mutual growth.

5. Suggestions and Limitations

There are several limitations to this study that should be acknowledged. First, the study focused exclusively on the experiences of Zoroastrian-Muslim couples in Iran, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other religious and cultural contexts. Future research should explore interfaith marriages among a wider range of religious groups to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Second, the study relied on self-reported data from interviews, which may be subject to bias or incomplete recollection of events. Third, the sample size was relatively small, consisting of 13 interviews, which may not capture the full diversity of experiences within interfaith marriages in Iran. Additionally, the study did not fully examine the long-term impact of interfaith marriages on children, which is an important aspect of these unions that warrants further investigation.

Future research on interfaith marriage should expand to include more diverse religious and cultural contexts to better understand the varying dynamics at play in different societies. It would be beneficial to conduct comparative studies across different regions, particularly in societies where religious pluralism is more prevalent, to explore how legal and social frameworks influence interfaith marriages. Longitudinal studies could also provide valuable insights into how interfaith marriages evolve over time, particularly regarding the religious and cultural identity formation of children born into these unions. Moreover, future studies should investigate the role of education and socialization in reducing prejudice and fostering tolerance in interfaith marriages, as early exposure to diversity appears to play a crucial role in the success of these relationships.

To support couples in interfaith marriages, it is essential to create more inclusive social and legal frameworks that respect religious diversity and individual autonomy. Religious institutions and communities should be

encouraged to adopt more flexible and inclusive attitudes toward interfaith marriages, recognizing the potential for these unions to promote social cohesion and understanding. Educational programs that foster interfaith dialogue and cultural sensitivity should be introduced, both at the community level and within the school system, to reduce prejudice and promote mutual respect. Legal reforms should be considered to ensure that individuals in interfaith marriages are not forced to compromise their religious identity, particularly in countries with strict religious laws. Finally, counseling services specifically tailored to interfaith couples should be made available to help them navigate the unique challenges they face and to support the well-being of their families.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

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.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our gratitude to all individuals helped us to do the project.

Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

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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