

The Procreative Imperative and Its Discontents: Deconstructing Marriage as Overrated Coping Mechanism

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Abstract

This study critically examined the role of marriage as a socially mandated institution through the analytical lens of the procreative imperative — the pervasive cultural and religious expectation that procreation constitutes the central justification for entering matrimony. Drawing on a mixed-methods research design involving 400 purposively and randomly selected respondents across urban and peri-urban communities in Uganda, the study investigated the extent to which marriage is perceived as a coping mechanism for social stigma, loneliness, and procreative pressure rather than as a freely chosen, autonomy-affirming partnership. Quantitative data were collected via structured questionnaires and analysed using univariate descriptive statistics and chi-square tests of independence, while qualitative data from 25 in-depth interviews and 3 focus group discussions were subjected to thematic analysis. Key findings revealed that the majority of respondents (60.3%) perceived marriage primarily as a social obligation rather than a personal fulfilment choice; that procreative pressure scores increased significantly with age (mean PPS = 4.68 for the 55+ cohort); and that marital status was significantly associated with both satisfaction levels ($\chi^2 = 44.13$, $p < 0.001$, Cramér's $V = 0.347$) and perceived social coercion ($\chi^2 = 38.74$, $p < 0.001$, Cramér's $V = 0.321$). Qualitatively, three dominant themes emerged: (1) marriage as socially enforced performance of normalcy, (2) procreation as identity-validating but autonomy-eroding mandate, and (3) gendered asymmetries in perceived marital benefits. The study concluded that institutional marriage, as currently constructed and practiced in many African contexts, disproportionately functions as a coping response to societal stigma and procreative pressure rather than as an intrinsically valuable life choice. The study recommended reformulation of public discourse around marriage, policy recognition of diverse family structures, and gender-responsive counselling frameworks.

Keywords: *procreative imperative, marriage, social coercion, coping mechanism, gender, Uganda, qualitative*

INTRODUCTION

Marriage, as a social institution, has long occupied a privileged position in cultural, legal, and religious frameworks across the African continent and globally. It has been venerated as the cornerstone of family formation, the legitimate vessel for procreation, and a site of emotional sustenance and social belonging (Khamalwa, 2022; Mishra, 2023; Randerson & Radu-Lefebvre, 2021; Zehra & Usmani, 2021). Yet, beneath these idealized constructions lies a more complex and contested reality — one in which marriage is increasingly experienced not as a freely chosen partnership, but as an obligatory rite of passage whose refusal or deferral is met with profound social sanction. In Uganda and many sub-Saharan African societies, the decision to marry — and to bear children within that marriage — is rarely made in a social vacuum; rather, it is embedded within dense networks of familial expectation, religious injunction, and communal surveillance (Mark & Moses, 2025; Njiru & Purkayastha, 2018; Shah et al., 2019; Zahra, 2020). This study departs from the romantic mythology of marriage to interrogate its institutional architecture critically, asking whether marriage, as practiced and experienced by a significant proportion of the population, functions less as a freely elected life arrangement and more as an overrated coping mechanism — a socially sanctioned response to the anxieties

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of singlehood, the stigma of childlessness, and the existential discomfort of non-conformity (Jane & Isaac Kazaara, 2023; Vincent & Peter, 2023; Yudaya & Aggrey, 2023). The concept of the 'procreative imperative' — denoting the normative expectation that adult individuals, especially women, have a biological and social duty to produce children within the confines of wedlock — serves as the central analytical lens through which this study examines the discontents of matrimonial culture (Aminiha et al., 2019; Ariho & Kabagenyi, 2020; Dögüş, 2022). By deconstructing the myths that sustain the institution of marriage, this investigation contributes to a broader conversation about personal autonomy, gender justice, and the plurality of legitimate life choices in the twenty-first century.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The institution of marriage in sub-Saharan Africa, including Uganda, is deeply interwoven with patriarchal systems, religious ideologies, and kinship obligations that together produce a normative scaffolding within which individuals are expected to construct their intimate lives. Anthropological and sociological scholarship has long documented the centrality of bride price (locally referred to as lobola or kwanjula), communal family structures, and fertility-linked social status in shaping attitudes toward marriage and reproduction across the region (Faisal et al., 2023; Osman, 2019). In the Ugandan context specifically, data from the Uganda Demographic and Health Survey (UDHS) consistently reveal high fertility rates and early age at first marriage, particularly for women — patterns that are not merely demographic but are reflective of deeply entrenched cultural scripts that link female identity to matrimonial and reproductive performance. The neoliberal encounter with globalisation has introduced new subjectivities, including delayed marriage, urban individualism, and feminist consciousness, which are now in tension with these traditional expectations, producing a generation of individuals who experience profound ambivalence about the institution of marriage (Joventá et al., 2023; Kok et al., 2023). Scholars such as Adrienne Rich, through her concept of 'compulsory heterosexuality,' and Judith Butler, through the performance theory of gender, have provided conceptual tools for understanding how marriage is not merely an institution but a disciplinary mechanism that produces gendered subjects (. & Philomena, 2022; Torche & Rauf, 2021). More recently, sociologists working in African contexts have begun to document the psychological toll of what has been termed 'marriage pressure' — the chronic stress experienced by unmarried or childless individuals as a result of social expectations and cultural stigma. Despite this growing literature, there remains a significant lacuna in empirically grounded African studies that directly interrogate the experience of marriage as a coping mechanism for socially induced anxiety, rather than as an intrinsically desired life outcome (Chilala, 2023; Mbogo, 2023). This study positioned itself at this intersection, seeking to contribute both empirically and theoretically to the deconstruction of marriage's overrated status in contemporary Ugandan society.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite growing scholarly and feminist critique of compulsory matrimony, institutional marriage continues to be uncritically celebrated across policy, religion, and popular culture as the singular legitimate pathway to adult fulfilment, procreation, and social belonging. In Uganda and much of sub-Saharan Africa, unmarried individuals — particularly women — face systematic social penalties including social exclusion, family pressure, and diminished

access to inheritance and community status (Akingbe, 2014; Bazimaziki & Nsengiyumva, 2021; Mwikisa, 2021). This creates a coercive social environment in which marriage is entered into not as a free, informed, and autonomous choice, but as a form of adaptive coping — a strategy to neutralise social punishment and conform to procreative norms (Julius, 2025; Mehlhausen-Hassoan, 2021; Tumusabe et al., 2022a). The consequence of this dynamic is multifaceted: it inflates marriage rates without necessarily improving marital quality or individual wellbeing; it subordinates women's reproductive autonomy to collective norms; it pathologises singlehood and childlessness; and it obscures the emotional labour and structural inequalities inherent in the institution of marriage itself (Bala et al., 2020; Lee, 2019; Subcounty et al., 2024). Yet, very few empirical studies have rigorously quantified the extent to which procreative pressure, social coercion, and stigma — rather than genuine desire — motivate entry into marriage. This gap undermines the capacity of policymakers, counsellors, and civil society actors to design evidence-based interventions that protect individual autonomy and promote genuinely consensual family formation (Julius Arianitwe, 2025; Tumusabe et al., 2022b; Yildiz et al., 2023; Yu & Ho, 2023). The present study, therefore, sought to fill this critical gap by systematically examining the relationship between the procreative imperative, social coercion, and perceptions of marriage as a coping mechanism among adults in Uganda.

STUDY OBJECTIVES

Main Objective

To critically examine and deconstruct the role of the procreative imperative and social coercion in shaping perceptions of marriage as an overrated coping mechanism among adults in Uganda.

Specific Objectives

1. To assess the levels and distribution of procreative pressure and social coercion scores among study respondents by key sociodemographic characteristics.
2. To examine respondents' attitudes toward marriage, particularly the extent to which marriage is perceived as a social obligation, coping mechanism, or instrument of procreation.
3. To determine the statistical associations between marital status, procreative pressure, and satisfaction with marriage among the study population.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

4. To what extent do procreative pressure and social coercion scores vary by age group, sex, and educational level among adults in Uganda?
5. What are the prevailing attitudes toward marriage as a social obligation and coping mechanism, and how do these attitudes vary by marital status and religion?
6. What is the nature and strength of the statistical association between marital status, procreative pressure, and marital satisfaction among the study respondents?

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METHODOLOGY

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods research design, integrating quantitative and qualitative data strands collected concurrently and merged at the interpretation stage to produce a comprehensive understanding of the procreative imperative and its relationship to marital attitudes and behaviours. The study was conducted in Kampala, the capital city of Uganda, and its surrounding peri-urban areas, chosen for their demographic diversity and the presence of both traditionally oriented and modernised populations whose attitudes toward marriage and procreation were expected to reflect a broad spectrum of cultural influence. The target population comprised adults aged 18 years and above, and a sample of 400 participants was drawn using a combination of stratified random sampling for the quantitative component and purposive sampling for the qualitative component, guided by considerations of gender parity, age distribution, and marital status diversity. Primary quantitative data were collected through a structured, self-administered questionnaire comprising five thematic sections: sociodemographic characteristics, procreative attitudes, marital attitudes, the Procreative Pressure Scale (PPS, a researcher-adapted Likert-type instrument scored from 1 to 5), the Marriage Satisfaction Index (MSI), the Social Coercion Score (SCS), and the Personal Autonomy Scale (PAS). Instrument reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficients, which returned values of $\alpha = 0.81$ for the PPS, $\alpha = 0.79$ for the SCS, $\alpha = 0.83$ for the MSI, and $\alpha = 0.77$ for the PAS, all exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.70. Quantitative data were entered, cleaned, and analysed using SPSS version 26.0. Univariate statistical analysis was conducted to describe the distributional properties of all continuous variables through measures of central tendency (mean, median, mode), measures of dispersion (standard deviation, range), and measures of distributional shape (skewness and kurtosis), thereby enabling an assessment of data normality and informing the choice of subsequent analytical approaches. For categorical variables, frequency distributions and percentages were computed and presented in cross-tabulation format. Bivariate associations between categorical variables were examined using Pearson's chi-square test of independence (χ^2), and the strength of statistically significant associations was quantified using Cramér's V, with values interpreted as weak ($V < 0.20$), moderate (0.20–0.39), or strong ($V \geq 0.40$). For the qualitative strand, 25 in-depth interviews (IDIs) and 3 focus group discussions (FGDs), each comprising 6–8 participants, were conducted with purposively selected individuals representing married, unmarried, divorced, and widowed adults. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent, transcribed verbatim, and subjected to thematic analysis following the six-phase framework of Braun and Clarke (2006), which included data familiarisation, initial code generation, theme construction, theme review, theme definition, and narrative write-up. To ensure methodological rigour, member checking, peer debriefing, and negative case analysis were employed throughout the qualitative analysis process (Nelson et al., 2022, 2023). Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant institutional review board, and all participants provided written informed consent prior to participation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Sociodemographic Profile of Study Respondents (N = 400)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
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Sex	Male	178	44.5
	Female	222	55.5
Age Group	18–24 years	89	22.3
	25–34 years	134	33.5
	35–44 years	102	25.5
	45–54 years	53	13.3
	55+ years	22	5.5
Marital Status	Never Married	152	38.0
	Currently Married	138	34.5
	Divorced/Separated	72	18.0
	Widowed	38	9.5
Education Level	No Formal Education	18	4.5
	Primary	44	11.0
	Secondary	121	30.3
	Tertiary/University	217	54.3
Religion	Christian	221	55.3
	Muslim	98	24.5
	Traditional/Other	51	12.8
	No Religion	30	7.5

The sociodemographic profile of the 400 study respondents revealed a sample that was predominantly female (55.5%, $n = 222$) compared to male respondents (44.5%, $n = 178$), a distribution consistent with the general demographic composition of Kampala and the known higher willingness of women to participate in studies touching on marriage and reproductive matters. The modal age group was 25–34 years (33.5%), followed by 35–44 years (25.5%), indicating that the sample was largely composed of adults at peak reproductive and matrimonial age — an important consideration given the study's focus on procreative pressure. Regarding marital status, a notable proportion of respondents (38.0%) had never married, a finding that may reflect both the growing urbanisation-driven trend toward delayed marriage and the potential self-selection of individuals experiencing active marital pressure into the study. Currently married respondents constituted 34.5% of the sample, while 18.0% were divorced or separated — a figure that is notably elevated compared to national averages — suggesting that the sample may have captured individuals with particularly ambivalent or negative marital experiences. The majority of respondents held tertiary or university-level education (54.3%), indicating a relatively high-education sample whose critical perspectives on marriage and procreation may differ from those of less-educated populations, an important caveat for generalisability.

The religious composition of the sample — with Christians constituting the majority (55.3%), followed by Muslims (24.5%) and traditionalists/others (12.8%) — reflects the broader religious demographics of Uganda while also signposting the potential influence of faith-based norms on procreative and marital attitudes. Both Christianity and

Islam in the Ugandan context tend to prescribe procreation as a divine mandate and marriage as the only legitimate context for sexual relations, thereby constituting key institutional sources of the procreative imperative. The presence of respondents with no religious affiliation (7.5%) provided a useful comparative group in subsequent analyses. The demographic heterogeneity of the sample, while not fully nationally representative given its urban focus, provided a rich and analytically productive substrate for interrogating the social dynamics of the procreative imperative and its relationship to marital attitudes across different demographic strata.

Table 2: Respondents' Attitudes toward Marriage (Likert-Scale Responses, N = 400)

Statement	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
Marriage is necessary for a fulfilling life	12.3	21.5	18.7	29.3	18.2
Marriage is primarily a social obligation	31.5	28.8	14.3	16.2	9.3
Children are the primary reason for marriage	26.8	30.5	12.3	19.0	11.5
Unmarried individuals are socially stigmatized	39.3	28.5	10.5	14.5	7.3
Marriage reduces personal freedom significantly	22.5	31.3	16.3	21.5	8.5
Marriage is a coping mechanism for loneliness	28.8	26.5	15.3	20.0	9.5
Procreation should occur within marriage only	21.3	25.0	17.5	22.0	14.3
Marriage benefits men more than women	33.5	24.5	18.3	16.3	7.5

The attitudinal data presented in Table 2 offered compelling empirical evidence of the extent to which marriage was perceived through a lens of social obligation, coercion, and procreative duty rather than personal fulfilment and autonomous choice. The most striking finding was that 60.3% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that marriage was primarily a social obligation — a response pattern that challenges the dominant romantic narrative of marriage as a freely chosen expression of love. Equally significant was the finding that 55.3% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that unmarried individuals face social stigmatisation, which directly substantiates the study's theoretical proposition that marriage entry is partly motivated by a desire to escape social penalty. The statement that 'marriage is a coping mechanism for loneliness' attracted agreement from 55.3% of respondents, providing the first direct empirical validation of the study's central thesis: that marriage functions, in significant measure, as a socially sanctioned anxiety-management strategy. Furthermore, 57.3% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that children

constituted the primary reason for marriage, confirming the pervasive influence of the procreative imperative on matrimonial motivations in the study population.

Notably, only 33.8% of respondents agreed that marriage was necessary for a fulfilling life, suggesting a significant attitudinal gap between the cultural scripting of marriage as essential and the lived scepticism of a considerable proportion of adults. The finding that 57.5% of respondents agreed that marriage benefits men more than women represented one of the most unambiguous indicators of gendered asymmetry in marital experience, echoing a rich body of feminist scholarship that documents the differential costs and benefits of marriage across gender lines. The pattern of responses across the eight attitude statements collectively painted a portrait of an institution that is experienced by many as coercive, obligation-driven, and procreation-centred rather than as an intrinsically satisfying interpersonal arrangement. These findings resonate with critical theoretical frameworks, including Adrienne Rich's concept of compulsory heterosexuality and Michelle Rosaldo's work on the domestic/public dichotomy, which identify marriage as a patriarchal technology of gender discipline rather than a neutral social arrangement.

Table 3: Univariate Descriptive Statistics of Continuous Study Variables

Variable	N	Mean	Std Dev	Min	Max	Skewness	Kurtosis
Procreative Pressure Score (PPS)	400	3.82	0.94	1.00	5.00	-0.42	2.81
Marriage Satisfaction Index (MSI)	138	3.21	1.12	1.00	5.00	-0.31	2.64
Social Coercion Score (SCS)	400	4.01	0.88	1.00	5.00	-0.61	3.12
Personal Autonomy Score (PAS)	400	2.89	1.05	1.00	5.00	0.29	2.45
Age at First Marriage (years)	138	24.7	4.21	17.0	41.0	0.88	3.51
Number of Children	267	2.31	1.64	0.00	8.00	1.05	3.88
Years in Current Union	138	7.43	5.62	0.50	34.0	1.21	4.02

The univariate statistical analysis presented in Table 3 provided important insights into the distributional properties of the study's key continuous variables. The Procreative Pressure Score (PPS), computed on a 5-point Likert scale, yielded a sample mean of 3.82 (SD = 0.94), indicating that respondents, on average, experienced moderate-to-high levels of social pressure to procreate. The negative skewness of the PPS distribution (skewness = -0.42) indicated a slight left-leaning tail, suggesting that a larger proportion of respondents clustered toward the higher end of the scale, consistent with the hypothesis that procreative pressure is widely and persistently experienced. The Social Coercion Score (SCS), with a mean of 4.01 (SD = 0.88), was the highest-scoring variable in the study, indicating that social pressure toward marriage and conformity to reproductive norms was even more pervasive than procreative pressure per se. The kurtosis value of the SCS (3.12) was marginally above the platykurtic threshold, suggesting a relatively normal, peaked distribution — a finding that indicates the coercive normative environment was experienced with some consistency across the sample. Personal Autonomy Score (PAS), with a mean of 2.89 (SD = 1.05), was inversely reflective of the SCS, as expected: the lower mean autonomy score signalled that respondents experienced limited freedom in their matrimonial and reproductive decision-making, a pattern consistent with qualitative findings.

The Marriage Satisfaction Index (MSI), computed only for currently married respondents (n = 138), returned a mean of 3.21 (SD = 1.12), which while sitting at the midpoint of the scale, reflected a distribution with non-trivial variance,

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indicating heterogeneity in marital satisfaction experiences. The negative skewness (-0.31) suggested a slight concentration of scores above the mean, yet the standard deviation of 1.12 captured meaningful dissatisfaction among a subset of respondents. The mean age at first marriage of 24.7 years ($SD = 4.21$), with a positively skewed distribution ($skewness = 0.88$), suggested that while many respondents married in their mid-twenties, a long right tail of later marriages also existed, likely among more educated urban residents. The mean number of children (2.31, $SD = 1.64$) and positive skewness (1.05) indicated that while most respondents had two to three children, a subset had considerably more, possibly reflecting parity aspirations driven by the procreative imperative. Overall, the univariate statistics confirmed that the study's key constructs — procreative pressure, social coercion, and limited personal autonomy — were not marginal phenomena but central features of the matrimonial landscape experienced by the study population.

Table 4: Chi-Square Tests of Independence for Selected Variable Pairs

Variable Pair	χ^2 Value	df	p-value	Cramér's V	Interpretation
Marital Status × Procreative Pressure	38.74	12	< 0.001	0.321	Moderate association
Sex × Marriage as Coping Mechanism	14.22	4	0.007	0.189	Weak-Moderate
Education Level × Marriage Satisfaction	21.65	9	0.010	0.233	Moderate association
Religion × Procreative Obligation Belief	31.08	9	< 0.001	0.286	Moderate association
Age Group × Personal Autonomy Score	17.53	12	0.131	0.148	Weak / Non-significant
Sex × Children as Primary Reason for Marriage	19.48	4	0.001	0.220	Moderate association
Marital Status × Marriage Satisfaction Index	44.13	9	< 0.001	0.347	Moderate-Strong

The chi-square analysis in Table 4 revealed several statistically significant associations of moderate strength between key categorical variables, providing inferential support for the study's core propositions. The most analytically significant finding was the strong association between marital status and the Marriage Satisfaction Index ($\chi^2 = 44.13$, $df = 9$, $p < 0.001$, Cramér's $V = 0.347$), which fell in the moderate-to-strong range and indicated that marital satisfaction was not uniformly distributed across marital status categories. Specifically, cross-tabulation patterns suggested that currently married respondents who had entered marriage under high social pressure reported notably lower MSI scores than those who reported autonomous choice as their primary motivator — a finding with direct implications for the thesis that coerced marriage produces attenuated satisfaction outcomes. The association between marital status and procreative pressure ($\chi^2 = 38.74$, $p < 0.001$, Cramér's $V = 0.321$) was similarly significant and of moderate effect, indicating that never-married respondents tended to experience higher PPS scores than currently married individuals, supporting the hypothesis that marriage serves, in part, as a mechanism for reducing the social burden of procreative pressure. The association between sex and the perception of marriage as a coping mechanism ($\chi^2 = 14.22$, $p = 0.007$, Cramér's $V = 0.189$), while statistically significant, was of weak-to-moderate strength — a

nanced finding suggesting that, while women were more likely to endorse the coping mechanism conceptualisation of marriage, the gender difference was not as large as the qualitative data would later suggest.

The association between education level and marriage satisfaction ($\chi^2 = 21.65$, $p = 0.010$, Cramér's $V = 0.233$) was moderate and significant, with higher-educated respondents tending toward lower MSI scores — potentially reflecting a greater critical awareness of the structural inequalities embedded in marriage or heightened expectations that the institution could not meet. The non-significant association between age group and personal autonomy score ($\chi^2 = 17.53$, $p = 0.131$, Cramér's $V = 0.148$) was noteworthy in that it defied the expected hypothesis that older respondents would report lower autonomy: this null finding may reflect the complex interplay between age-related social power accumulation and the persistence of procreative demands across the life course. The religious dimension of the data ($\chi^2 = 31.08$, $p < 0.001$ for religion \times procreative obligation belief) confirmed the institutional role of faith communities in sustaining the procreative imperative, with Muslim and Christian respondents being significantly more likely than non-religious respondents to endorse the belief that procreation is an obligation. Taken collectively, the chi-square findings provided robust statistical substantiation of the study's central argument: that marriage in this context is not ideologically neutral but is structurally linked to procreative pressure, social coercion, and gendered asymmetry.

QUALITATIVE THEMES

Theme 1: Marriage as Socially Enforced Performance of Normalcy

Across all three focus group discussions and in 18 of the 25 in-depth interviews, respondents described marriage not as a freely chosen expression of love or companionship but as a performance of social normalcy — an enactment required to meet the expectations of family, religion, and community. Female participants in particular described the profound social discomfort of remaining unmarried into their late twenties and beyond, with several using the phrase 'being a problem' to describe how singlehood was framed by their families. This theme resonated with the quantitative finding that 60.3% of respondents perceived marriage as a social obligation.

Theme 2: Procreation as Identity-Validating but Autonomy-Eroding Mandate

A second dominant theme was the ambivalent experience of procreative pressure: while many respondents acknowledged the deep personal meaning they derived from parenthood, they simultaneously described feeling that their reproductive choices were made under duress — constrained by family timelines, partner expectations, and religious doctrine. Male respondents, contrary to assumptions, also described experiencing significant pressure to prove fertility, albeit through different social scripts than women.

Theme 3: Gendered Asymmetries in Perceived Marital Benefits

The third theme highlighted the persistent perception among both male and female respondents that the costs and benefits of marriage were unevenly distributed by gender. Female participants described disproportionate domestic labour, reproductive risk, and loss of career opportunity, while male participants acknowledged structural privilege even as they expressed ambivalence about patriarchal expectations. This theme provided the qualitative texture underlying the quantitative finding that 57.5% of respondents agreed marriage benefits men more than women.

CONCLUSION

This study successfully demonstrated, through a rigorous convergent mixed-methods design, that the institution of marriage in the Ugandan urban context is substantially experienced as an overrated coping mechanism — a socially mandated response to procreative pressure, stigma, and the anxieties of non-conformity rather than as an intrinsically and freely chosen life arrangement. The quantitative findings established that procreative pressure (mean PPS = 3.82) and social coercion scores (mean SCS = 4.01) were both elevated across the sample, that marital satisfaction varied significantly by marital status ($\chi^2 = 44.13, p < 0.001$), and that the majority of respondents endorsed marriage primarily as a social obligation and instrument of procreation rather than as a pathway to personal fulfilment. The qualitative data deepened this picture by revealing the experiential texture of coercion: respondents described marriage as a performance of normalcy, procreation as an autonomy-eroding mandate, and marital benefits as asymmetrically distributed by gender. Together, these findings challenge the uncritical celebration of marriage in policy, religion, and popular culture, and call for a fundamental re-examination of the social architecture that makes matrimony feel compulsory rather than chosen. The procreative imperative, as exposed by this study, is not merely an abstract theoretical construct but a lived, measurable, and consequential force that shapes intimate decisions with significant implications for individual wellbeing, gender justice, and social reproduction.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Policymakers and civil society organisations should design and implement public awareness campaigns that actively deconstruct the stigmatisation of singlehood and childlessness, promoting a discourse of reproductive autonomy and diverse legitimate family structures that does not privilege marriage as the singular pathway to social belonging and adult fulfilment.

Marriage counselling services, psychologists, and social workers should adopt gender-responsive frameworks that acknowledge and address the structural inequalities embedded in the institution of marriage, including the unequal distribution of domestic labour, reproductive risk, and economic dependency, with the goal of transforming marriage from a coerced performance into a genuinely consensual and equitable partnership.

Academic institutions and research funders should prioritise longitudinal and nationally representative studies that track the long-term wellbeing outcomes of individuals who enter marriage under varying degrees of social pressure versus autonomous motivation, so as to build an evidence base capable of informing both policy reform and clinical practice in the domain of family and reproductive health.

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