



The role of marital and family sustainability in achieving environmental and social development goals

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Abstract

Social sustainability, as a fundamental pillar of sustainable development, relies heavily on the continuity and stability of family life. The present study, employing a causal-comparative approach, seeks to explore the determinants of marital stability among couples with and without children after ten years of shared life, and to highlight the role of these determinants in strengthening the social dimension of sustainable development. The statistical population included couples from districts 5, 9, and 11 of Mashhad city, selected due to their cultural diversity. A total sample of 300 participants was chosen through purposive sampling among couples referring to counseling centers. Data were collected using a questionnaire and analyzed with PLS software. Findings revealed that among couples with children, the variable of “childbearing” (0.942) was the strongest determinant of marital stability, emphasizing the crucial role of children in marital resilience. Other significant factors included “economic conditions” (0.812), “social reputation” (0.717), and “family relations” (0.619). In childless couples, the most influential variables were “preference for collective over individual interests” (0.856), “economic factors” (0.811), “mutual interaction” (0.673), “life attitude” (0.543), and “commitment” (0.409). These results indicate that the determinants of family stability not only ensure individual health and well-being but also serve as indicators of social sustainability, thereby contributing to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities). Accordingly, the findings of this research can provide valuable insights for policymakers in strengthening family foundations and enhancing social sustainability within Islamic societies.

Keywords: Social sustainability, marital stability, couples, sustainable development, environment

Introduction

In today's challenging world, environmental sustainability has become one of the foremost global priorities. The family, as the primary unit of society, plays a fundamental role in shaping the environmental attitudes and behaviors of individuals. This article examines the reasons for family sustainability and its relationship with environmental protection. Through education and cultural transmission within the family, positive environmental habits can be promoted, preparing future generations to face ecological challenges. The discussion extends to the role of families in sustainable development, practical strategies for environmental conservation, and ways to harmonize family needs with natural resource protection. Taken together, these considerations highlight the importance of family unity and environmental responsibility (Ly & Cope, 2023).

Marital life, as one of the most fundamental social institutions, plays a crucial role in shaping both individual and collective behaviors. Given the growing environmental challenges and the urgent need to realize sustainable development, studying the reasons for marital sustainability and its influence on environmental issues becomes especially significant. Stable marital relationships foster positive norms and values within families, which in turn influence environmentally responsible behaviors among couples. When partners collaborate and engage in joint decision-making regarding ecological protection, they are more likely to make informed choices about resource consumption, waste reduction, and the use of renewable energy. In this sense, marital stability directly contributes to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (Higgins et al., 2020). Furthermore, a sustainable marital life can help shape more aware and responsible generations with respect to environmental concerns. Couples committed to one another and to shared values are often more inclined to align their lifestyles with sustainability principles and to transmit such practices to their children. In this regard, the role of families in achieving Sustainable Development Goals such as Good Health and Well-being (SDG 3), Gender Equality (SDG 5), and Sustainable Cities and Communities (SDG 11) becomes particularly salient (UN DESA, 2020).

The analysis of reasons for sustainability among couples with and without children can also deepen our understanding of how diverse family structures influence environmental behaviors and sustainable development outcomes. On the one hand, couples with children hold greater responsibilities toward future generations, which often enhances their awareness of environmental issues and strengthens their adoption of sustainable lifestyles. On the other hand, childless couples

may approach sustainability with different motivations, such as increased financial or time flexibility, enabling them to engage more actively in environmental initiatives. These variations indicate that diverse family forms provide unique insights for designing more effective sustainability policies (Nikolakis et al., 2022). In Islamic contexts, similarities in the causes of family sustainability include several key factors: religious education, social support networks, traditional values, cooperation and participation, resilience against challenges, and attention to spiritual needs. These elements contribute to the formation of stable and enduring family structures. When such values are combined with environmental and social responsibility, they provide a strong basis for sustainable development across Islamic societies. Thus, families are not only the foundation of social life but also one of the cornerstones of sustainability and environmental stewardship (Mifsud et al., 2018). Accordingly, the main approach of this article is to examine the reasons for family sustainability and, subsequently, to demonstrate the importance of family stability in both sustainable development and environmental conservation. Ultimately, this study shows how strengthening the family unit can improve environmental conditions and enhance sustainability indicators at the societal level (Starbird et al., 2016).

Theoretical Model

Based on the qualitative findings of this study (Bagheri Fam et al., 2024), along with established theoretical frameworks and prior research, the researcher identified 11 major components influencing marital sustainability. These include Power Distribution, Communication Skills, Marital Quality, Social Pressure & Interaction, Family Breakdown, Exchange System, Social Exchanges, Mutual Interaction, Family Function, Economic Factors, and Value Crisis (Fig. 1). The model is not limited to explaining marital sustainability alone; rather, it also reveals broader connections with sustainable development. For example, Power Distribution and Communication Skills foster equitable decision-making and cooperative behavior, which at the social level contribute to reducing conflicts and improving family governance. Family Function and Marital Quality provide a platform for educating and transmitting environmental values to future generations, while Economic Factors influence household consumption patterns, which are directly linked to the sustainable use of resources. Accordingly, this theoretical model can be considered not only as a framework for explaining marital stability but also as a basis for strengthening social sustainability and indirectly contributing to environmental conservation and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In the quantitative phase, the

model was operationalized through a questionnaire consisting of 49 items measuring 19 variables on a five-point Likert scale, administered to a sample of 300 respondents (Table 1).



Figure 1. Theoretical model of marital sustainability

Material and methods

This study employed a comparative quantitative design within a mixed-method framework (qualitative–quantitative). In the quantitative phase, data were collected through a researcher-developed questionnaire. The statistical population consisted of men and women with at least ten years of marital life who attended family counseling centers in districts 5, 9, and 11 of Mashhad.

A purposive sampling method was applied, and using Cochran's formula, the sample size was determined as 300 participants. The questionnaire included 49 items measuring 19 variables on a five-point Likert scale. Data were analyzed using Smart PLS3 and SPSS20, with the Partial Least Squares (PLS) approach applied to assess model validity. The Cronbach's alpha for the overall questionnaire was 0.913, indicating high internal consistency. Beyond identifying the factors contributing to marital sustainability, the quantitative results also revealed patterns of resource consumption, household economic management, and sustainable behavioral tendencies at the micro level, all of which are relevant to environmental conservation and the efficient use of natural resources. In the qualitative phase, the study adopted an explanatory approach based on in-depth interviews with 33 individuals (15 men and 18 women) who were dissatisfied with their marital life and had sought counseling services. The interviews continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. Thematic analysis was conducted in six steps: familiarization, coding, theme generation, reviewing themes, defining, and naming them. This process resulted in six main themes and 21 subthemes. The main themes included management and decision-making, financial and economic status, environmental and social pressure, responsibility, communication skills, and marital relations. Each of these themes, in addition to explaining family and marital sustainability, also reflects a dimension of social and environmental sustainability. For instance, responsibility and communication skills provide a foundation for educating children about sustainable behaviors, while environmental social pressure points to the role of societal norms in fostering pro-environmental engagement. The qualitative findings were previously published in a separate article (Bagheri Fam & Sadeghi, 2024). The qualitative results served as the foundation for developing the theoretical model of this study. Based on the model and the research literature, the quantitative questionnaire was designed. Employing this mixed-method approach enabled a deeper exploration of the factors influencing marital sustainability and facilitated the construction of a culturally grounded model. Moreover, the findings suggest that family sustainability not only strengthens interpersonal and social relationships but also contributes to the intergenerational transfer of environmental values, the improvement of consumption patterns, and ultimately the advancement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Table 1. Variables and Reliability of the Questionnaire

| Construct / Variable | No. of Items | Cronbach's Alpha |
|--|--------------|------------------|
| Honor & Reputation | 2 | 0.867 |
| Mutual Interaction | 3 | 0.886 |
| Social Acceptance & Power Distribution | 3 | 0.769 |
| Family Relations | 2 | 0.839 |
| Investment | 4 | 0.883 |
| Goal Orientation | 3 | 0.923 |
| Marital Quality | 2 | 0.856 |
| Financial Management Skills | 3 | 0.730 |
| Family Sustainability | 3 | 0.742 |
| Reward Structure | 3 | 0.895 |
| Commitment | 2 | 0.771 |
| Social Interactions | 3 | 0.965 |
| Preference of Collective over Individual Interests | 2 | 0.825 |
| Value Crisis | 2 | 0.778 |
| Life Attitude | 3 | 0.885 |
| Beliefs & Ideologies | 2 | 0.945 |
| Economics | 2 | 0.978 |
| Childbearing | 2 | 0.957 |
| Forgiveness & Sacrifice | 3 | 0.885 |

Inferential (Demographic) Analysis

The demographic characteristics of the respondents indicate a nearly balanced gender distribution, with 50.7% women and 49.3% men. This balance is important as it allows for the examination of potential gender differences in the study variables. Regarding educational level, approximately 66.3% of the respondents held higher education degrees (associate, bachelor's, master's, or PhD), while the remainder had a diploma or lower. This highlights the role of education in shaping attitudes, family interactions, and life management skills, which are critical components of marital sustainability. In terms of age, the largest proportions belonged to the 30–35 years (20.7%) and 40–45 years (18.7%) groups. These groups are typically in the middle or stabilization stages of marital life, which underscores the importance of analyzing sustainability in these life phases. Employment status showed that 38.7% of respondents were employees, 28% were homemakers, and the rest were engaged in self-employment, labor, or other occupations. Additionally, household income distribution revealed that 38.7% of families earned less than 10 million Tomans per month. This lower income level may contribute to economic challenges and marital tensions, which in the literature of sustainable development are considered threats to social and family

sustainability. With respect to health status, the majority of respondents reported good physical and mental health, while a smaller portion experienced chronic illnesses or psychological disorders. These findings emphasize that individual and spousal health directly affect marital quality and sustainability. Finally, 83.3% of respondents had children. This provides a foundation for comparing families with and without children in terms of marital sustainability. Overall, the demographic findings not only describe the sample but also provide a framework for deeper analysis of the links between marital sustainability, social and economic stability, and broader dimensions of sustainable development.

Analysis of Research Models

In this study, two conceptual models—families with children and families without children—were tested using the Partial Least Squares (PLS) method with Smart PLS3 software. The advantage of this software lies in its robustness, as it does not require data normality, is not affected by multicollinearity, and can handle small sample sizes and missing data without compromising model fit. The results are illustrated in Figures (2) and (3). The path coefficients displayed on the arrows indicate the strength and direction of the relationships among latent and observed variables in the models. These diagrams provide a comprehensive view of the structural connections between the identified components and allow for comparisons between families with and without children. Moreover, the analysis of these conceptual models highlights not only the mechanisms underlying marital sustainability but also their relevance to broader dimensions of social sustainability and sustainable development. Specifically, differences in path coefficients across the two groups reveal that factors such as childbearing or preference for collective over individual interests influence marital stability while also contributing to household consumption patterns, social responsibility, and environmentally sustainable behaviors.

Variables and Abbreviations

| Variable | Abbreviation |
|---|--------------|
| Financial Resource Management Skills | mm |
| Having a Goal in Life | hz |
| Marital Quality Assessment | kz |
| Negative Beliefs and Attitudes toward Divorce | bav |
| Honor and Reputation | ah |
| Commitment | ta |
| Forgiveness and Sacrifice | gb |
| Life Attitude | afkh |
| Reward Structure | sp |

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Investment (Maintenance and Preservation) | hn |
| Social Exchanges | te |
| Mutual Interaction | akm |
| Childbearing | fa |
| Preference of Collective over Individual Interests | tmj |
| Economic Power | eghtesadi |
| Value Crisis | aba |
| Socialization and Power Distribution | atg |
| Marital Sustainability | pay |

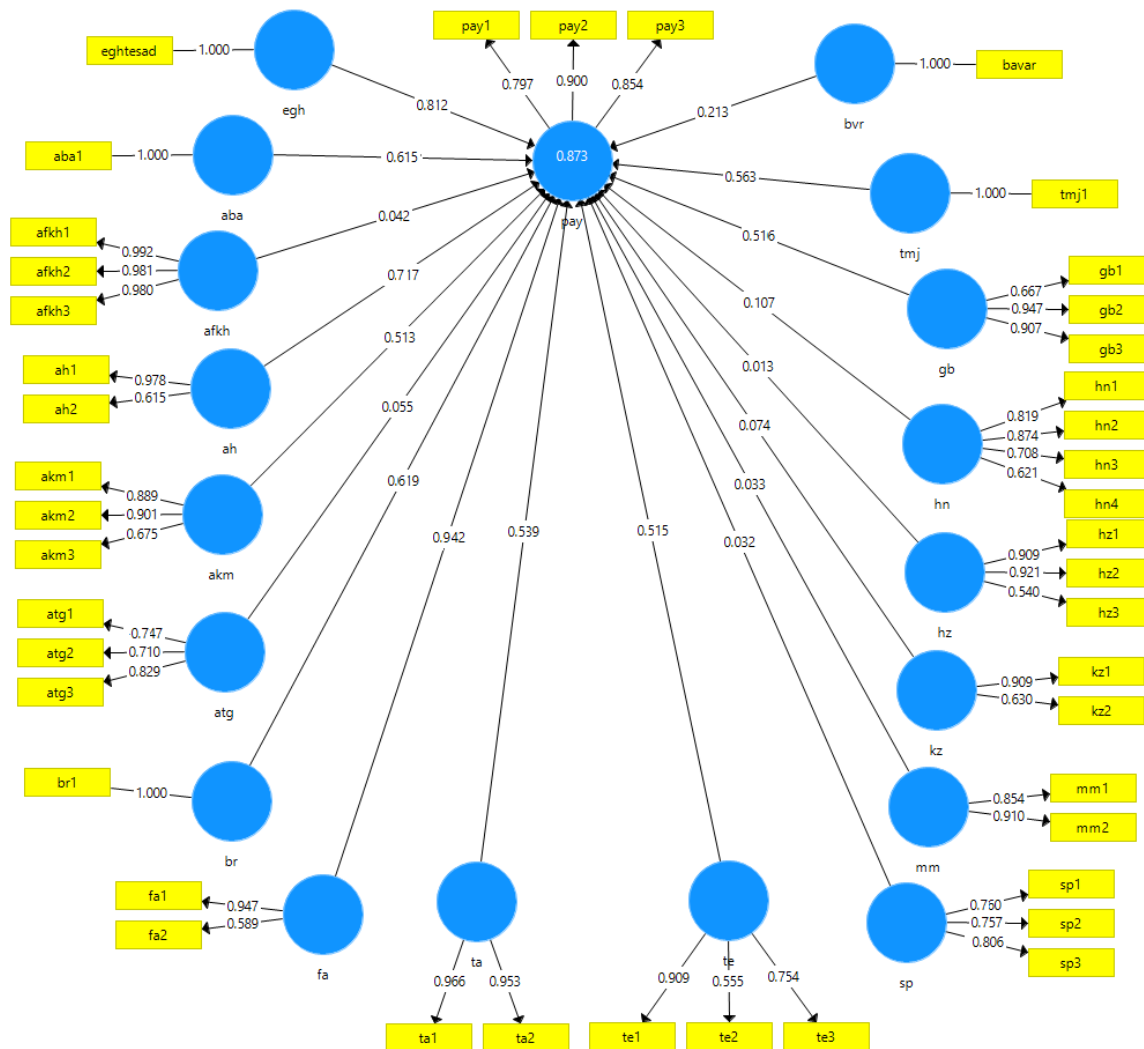


Figure 2. Measurement model of marital sustainability among couples with children

Analysis of the Model for Couples with Children

The structural model for couples with children revealed that variables such as childbearing, economic factors, honor and reputation, family relations, value crisis, preference of collective over

individual interests, commitment, forgiveness and sacrifice, social exchanges, and mutual interaction had the strongest effects on family sustainability. Among these, childbearing emerged as the most influential factor, with a path coefficient of 0.942 and a t-statistic of 1.855, underscoring the critical role of having children in strengthening marital relationships. In addition, economic factors (0.812), honor and reputation (0.717), and family relations (0.619) also demonstrated significant contributions to marital sustainability. These findings highlight that cultural, social, and financial determinant, alongside family dynamics, play a decisive role in shaping the quality and durability of marital life.

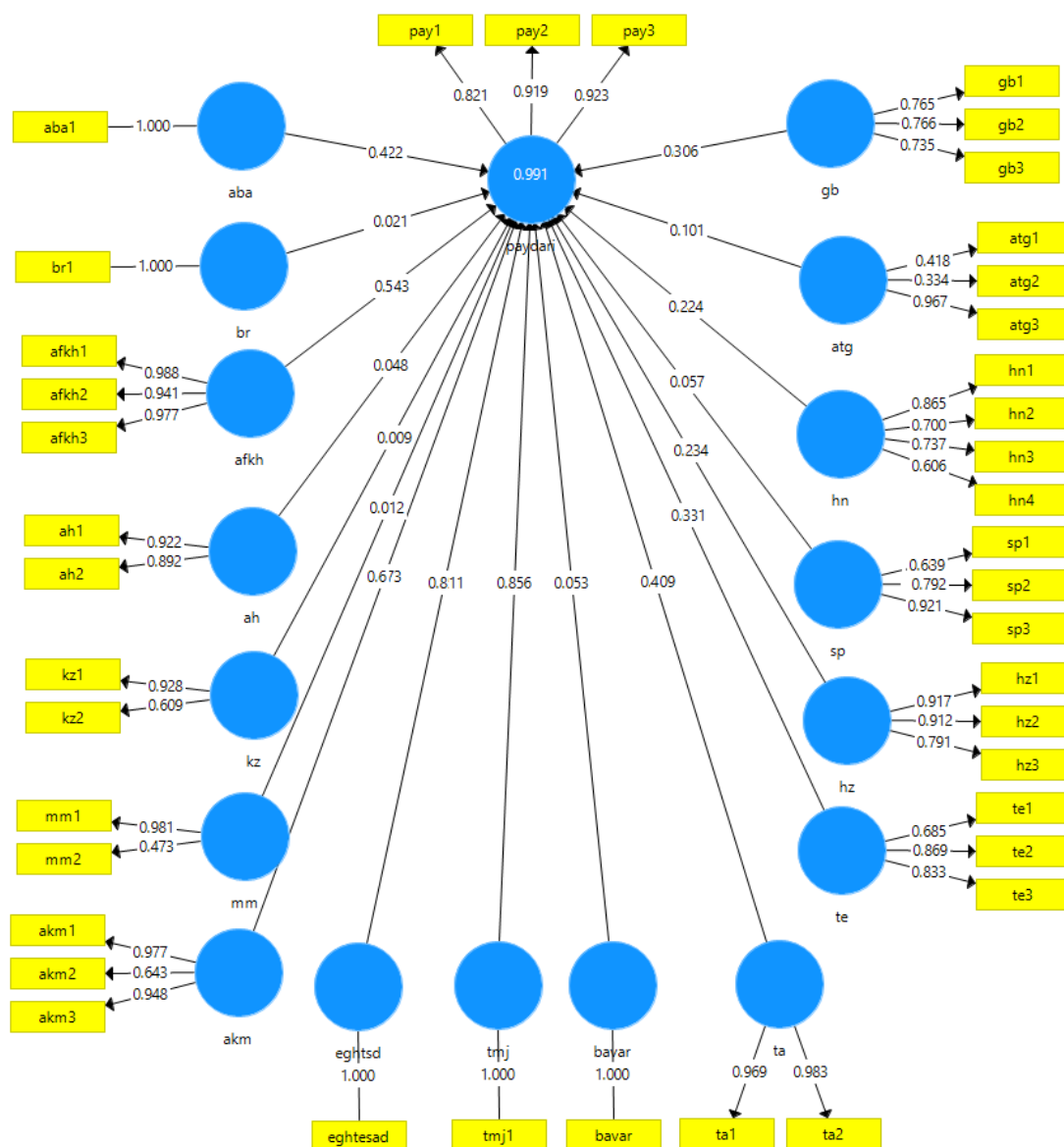


Figure 3. Measurement model of marital sustainability among couples without children

Analysis of the Model for Couples without Children

The structural model for couples without children indicated a different prioritization of influencing factors compared to couples with children. In this model, preference of collective over individual interests (0.856), economic factors (0.811), mutual interaction (0.673), life attitude (0.543), and commitment (0.409) were identified as the most significant predictors of marital sustainability. These findings suggest that in families without children, the durability of marital life relies more on interaction styles, attitudes, and life skills rather than on traditional structures and family dependencies. In other words, financial and psychological factors tend to substitute for the central role of childbearing in sustaining marital relationships.

Comparison of the Two Models

Couples with and without Children

The measurement model (outer model) of the study included both outer and inner loadings, which were estimated using SmartPLS. Path coefficients were analyzed through the F-Square statistic, where values greater than 0.35 were considered significant. Moreover, the higher the path coefficient, the stronger the effect of the independent variable on the dependent construct. The estimated coefficients are presented in Table 2. For couples with children, the most influential variables on marital sustainability were, in order: childbearing, economic factors, honor and reputation, family relations, value crisis, preference of collective over individual interests, commitment, forgiveness and sacrifice, social exchanges, and mutual interaction. These findings emphasize the pivotal role of children, along with economic, social, and cultural factors, in strengthening marital life. For couples without children, the priority of influencing variables shifted to: preference of collective over individual interests, economic factors, mutual interaction, life attitude, value crisis, commitment, social exchanges, and forgiveness and sacrifice. In this model, financial and psychological determinants replaced the central role of childbearing in marital sustainability. Overall, the comparison indicates that for couples with children, family and social structures play a dominant role, whereas for couples without children, psychological factors and lifestyle-related variables are more decisive. This distinction may extend beyond family sustainability to influence consumption patterns, resource management, and environmental responsibility. In other words, the factors driving marital stability can create different pathways for

family engagement in achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and contributing to environmental protection.

Table 2. Path Coefficients of the Measurement Model for Couples with and without Children

| Variable | Couples with Children (Path Coefficient / t-statistic) | Couples without Children (Path Coefficient / t-statistic) |
|--|--|---|
| Value Crisis | 0.615 / 0.957 | 0.422 / 3.007 |
| Life Attitude | 0.042 / 0.011 | 0.543 / 3.471 |
| Honor & Reputation | 0.717 / 1.054 | 0.048 / 0.021 |
| Mutual Interaction | 0.513 / 0.754 | 0.673 / 4.550 |
| Socialization & Power Distribution | 0.055 / 0.013 | 0.101 / 0.081 |
| Family Relations | 0.619 / 0.069 | 0.053 / 0.057 |
| Negative Beliefs and Attitudes | 0.213 / 0.112 | 0.122 / 0.202 |
| Economic Factors | 0.812 / 1.156 | 0.811 / 8.284 |
| Childbearing | 0.942 / 1.855 | 0.306 / 1.258 |
| Forgiveness & Sacrifice | 0.516 / 0.801 | 0.224 / 1.188 |
| Investment | 0.109 / 0.208 | 0.234 / 1.279 |
| Goal Orientation | 0.014 / 0.001 | 0.009 / 0.002 |
| Marital Quality | 0.074 / 0.020 | 0.012 / 0.005 |
| Financial Management Skills | 0.033 / 0.005 | 0.057 / 0.039 |
| Reward Structure | 0.032 / 0.003 | 0.409 / 2.487 |
| Commitment | 0.539 / 0.835 | 0.331 / 2.525 |
| Social Exchanges | 0.515 / 0.793 | 0.856 / 10.539 |
| Preference of Collective over Individual Interests | 0.563 / 0.841 | 0.422 / 3.007 |

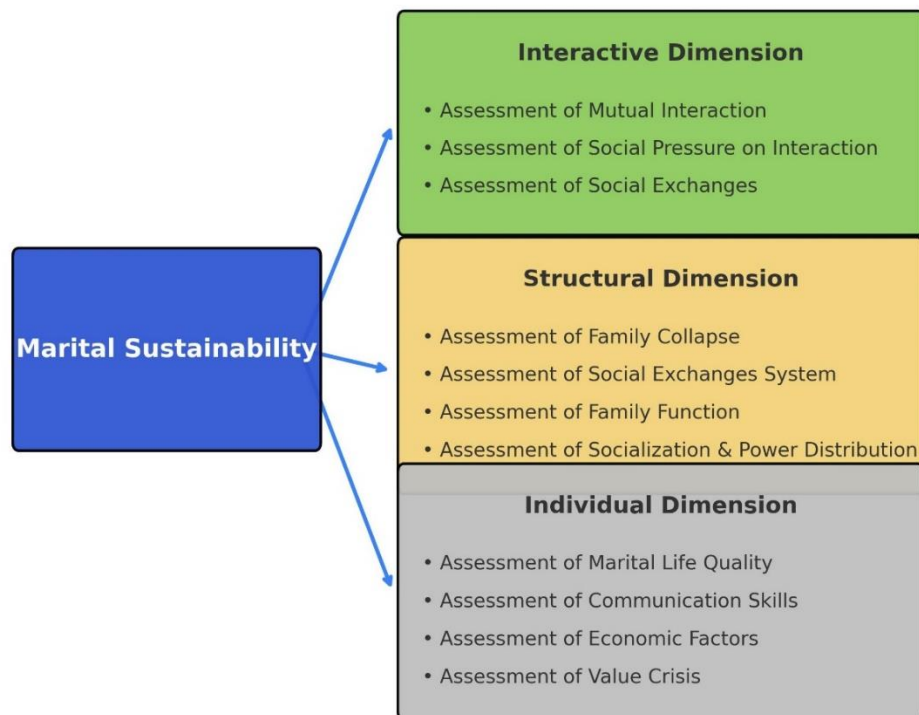


Figure 4. Dimensions of Marital Sustainability: Interactive, Structural, and Individual Factors

Results

Based on the good fit of both models and the identified determinants of marital sustainability, the present study concludes that marital stability is a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by the interaction of individual, interactive, and structural factors (Fig. 4). The findings demonstrated that a set of core variables—including value crisis, mutual interaction, economic difficulties, forgiveness, commitment, and social exchanges—were common to both groups of couples (with and without children). This highlights that in the urban context of Mashhad, certain fundamental variables remain decisive in ensuring marital continuity regardless of parenthood status. At the same time, specific variables emerged in each group: among couples with children, honor and reputation, family relations, and preference for collective over individual interests were more significant; whereas in couples without children, life attitudes and personal independence played a stronger role. At the individual level, communication skills, conflict management, emotional and psychological investment, and value orientation were identified as critical factors. Couples with higher levels of self-awareness, mutual acceptance, and problem-solving ability reported more stable and satisfying marriages. From an environmental perspective, this level is particularly important because families equipped with such interpersonal competencies are more likely to adopt sustainable lifestyles, including reduced consumption of resources, greener consumption choices, and the transmission of ecological responsibility to their children. At the interactive level, positive family role models, shared goals, joint decision-making, and division of household responsibilities emerged as key drivers of stability. This dimension also intersects with sustainable development, as collaboration and collective thinking in family matters facilitate joint participation in pro-environmental and social activities. Couples who embody the principle of “preference for collective over individual interests” in their marital relationships are also better prepared to make sustainable choices in areas such as energy use, waste reduction, and reliance on renewable resources. At the structural level, social support, economic conditions, employment, and education exerted a significant influence on the quality and sustainability of marital relationships. Families with greater economic stability showed higher levels of marital endurance. From the perspective of sustainability, economic resilience enables families to shift toward greener consumption patterns and to invest more in environmental education for their children. Conversely, economic crises not only strain marital relationships but also reduce the likelihood of environmentally responsible behaviors, as families under financial stress tend to prioritize immediate needs over

long-term ecological concerns. The findings also highlighted the mediating role of childbearing in fostering marital commitment and continuity. However, parenthood did not necessarily translate into higher marital satisfaction; in the absence of strong communication skills, children could even become a source of additional stress. Nevertheless, from an environmental standpoint, parenthood can heighten awareness of future generations and motivate couples to embrace sustainable practices to secure a healthier environment for their children. In contrast, childless couples often enjoy greater flexibility in terms of time and resources, allowing them to actively engage in community-based environmental initiatives and voluntary sustainability projects. From a sustainable development perspective, all of these findings can be integrated into a broader analytical framework. Preference for collective interests fosters pro-environmental behaviors; economic challenges encourage resource conservation and efficiency; constructive mutual interaction creates a basis for informed environmental decision-making; forgiveness and tolerance facilitate cooperation in adjusting household practices toward greener habits; value crises stimulate reflection on the long-term consequences of lifestyle choices for the planet; and social exchanges create opportunities for diffusing environmental values and norms within the family and across communities. In sum, the study demonstrates that marital sustainability is not only a social and cultural phenomenon but also has environmental implications. Families, as the primary social units, hold immense potential to act as agents of sustainable development by embedding ecological awareness within their daily lives. Strengthening marital sustainability can thus be viewed as a strategic pathway to improving quality of life, reducing ecological pressures, transmitting sustainable values to future generations, and contributing meaningfully to the protection of natural resources and the realization of global sustainability goals.

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