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## Title of research article

# The Demographic Scissor: A Socio-Demographic Analysis of the Contradictory Transformations in Marriage and Divorce in Algeria (2014–2023)

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## Abstract

Over the past decade, Algeria's family institution has undergone profound structural transformations, reflecting the broader social and economic realignments shaping Maghreb and Arab societies. This paper advances the concept of the "demographic scissor" as a novel analytical framework to capture the contradictory trajectories of marriage decline and divorce escalation between 2014 and 2023. Drawing upon official data from the National Office of Statistics (ONS) and the Ministry of Justice, the study identifies a structural contraction in nuptiality (-27.7%) alongside an accelerated rise in divorce (+53.5%), resulting in the doubling of the national divorce-to-marriage ratio—from 15.7% to 33.5%. This divergence, the paper argues, embodies a dual structural transformation in Algerian society: an economic "entry crisis", rooted in youth unemployment, housing constraints, and the extended transition of waithood; and a cultural-legal "stability crisis", driven by women's educational expansion, legal empowerment, and the rise of individualistic marital expectations. Rather than viewing these developments as signs of moral decline, the analysis interprets them as symptoms of socio-demographic modernization, marking the emergence of a new family paradigm characterized by delayed formation and fragile persistence. The study thereby contributes an integrated socio-demographic interpretation of family change in contemporary Algeria, bridging economic structure and cultural agency within a unified explanatory model.

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## Introduction

Across the past decade, the Algerian family has been undergoing profound and multidimensional transformations that reflect the broader socio-economic and cultural shifts sweeping through Maghreb and Arab societies (Nasr, 2015). These transformations have destabilized traditional marriage patterns and redefined the very foundations of family life, raising complex questions about the interplay between economic precarity, legal reform, and changing social values. In Algeria, as in much of the region, the family remains both a moral institution and a sociological mirror of modernity, encapsulating tensions between continuity and change.

Sociological and demographic literature has long documented these shifts along two analytically distinct yet empirically interconnected trajectories: the “entry” into marriage and the “stability” within marriage. The first trajectory—entry into marriage—has been theorized through the lens of waifhood (Singerman, 2007), a state of prolonged social and economic liminality in which young adults remain unable to achieve key markers of adulthood, notably marriage and residential independence. In Algeria, this condition is not rooted in cultural disinterest but in structural incapacity: persistent youth unemployment, housing shortages, and stagnant wages that collectively delay the transition to family life (Boutefnouchet, 2018; World Bank, 2024). The average age at first marriage—30.5 years for men and 27 years for women (ONS, 2022)—illustrates this postponement as a forced adaptation to structural constraint rather than a voluntary departure from tradition (Cheriet, 2020).

The second trajectory—marital stability—has evolved in an opposite direction. Since the 2005 reform of the Algerian Family Code, which expanded legal mechanisms for marital dissolution (including khul', or wife-initiated divorce), Algerian society has witnessed a rapid normalization of divorce as a socially legitimate and legally accessible option (Charrad, 2010). Simultaneously, the expansion of higher education, particularly among women—who now constitute 63% of university enrollment (MESRS, 2024)—has introduced new cultural expectations and forms of agency. Education, even when not translated into full economic independence, has elevated women’s aspirations for emotional satisfaction, equality, and autonomy within marriage (Khalifoune, 2019). This transformation has produced what might be termed an “expectation gap” between the cultural ideals of partnership and the economic realities of daily life, contributing to an increase in marital dissolution.

Despite extensive scholarship on waifhood and on the rise of divorce separately, few studies have analyzed these processes as two sides of the same structural transformation. This gap obscures the interdependence of economic and cultural logics shaping Algerian family change. To address this omission, the present paper introduces the concept of the “demographic scissor”—a socio-demographic framework that captures the simultaneous yet divergent evolution of marriage and divorce over time. The metaphor of the scissor reflects two interrelated temporal trajectories: one descending (declining nuptiality) and the other ascending (rising divorce), diverging to form an open, symbolic “scissor” that quantifies the growing disjunction between entry and stability within the family institution.

Using official datasets from the National Office of Statistics (ONS) and the Ministry of Justice, this study empirically examines the demographic scissor in Algeria between 2014 and 2023. It seeks to answer the following central research question:

How can the concurrent decline in marriage and escalation in divorce be theoretically and empirically interpreted within the Algerian socio-demographic context?

Specifically, the paper asks whether this demographic scissor represents a dual structural crisis—combining economic barriers to entry (waithood) with legal and cultural transformations accelerating exit—or whether it signals the emergence of a new family model shaped by delayed formation and conditional stability.

By integrating demographic trends with sociological interpretation, the study aims to contribute to the comparative literature on family change in the Global South. It positions the Algerian case as a revealing laboratory for understanding how economic precarity and cultural individualization interact to reshape the meanings and trajectories of marriage in the twenty-first century.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Research Design

This study adopts a **descriptive-analytical research design** grounded in quantitative secondary data analysis. The approach aims to trace, quantify, and interpret macro-level demographic trends related to marriage and divorce in Algeria during the decade 2014–2023.

The design integrates two complementary analytical logics:

1. **Longitudinal (trend) analysis** – to examine temporal changes and detect the divergent trajectories that constitute the “demographic scissor”; and
2. **Cross-sectional analysis** – focusing on the most recent year available (2023) to explore the internal structure and qualitative composition of divorce patterns.

This dual-level strategy enables both **diachronic interpretation** (how the phenomena evolved over time) and **structural interpretation** (how social, economic, and legal dimensions intersect within a single temporal frame). By combining statistical description with sociological reasoning, the design aims to move beyond mere enumeration toward a **structural reading** of family change.

### 2.2. Data Sources

To ensure **validity, reliability, and triangulation**, all quantitative data were collected exclusively from verified and official institutional sources. These include:

- (1) **National Office of Statistics (ONS):**  
The ONS provided the core demographic time series, comprising:
  - Annual records of registered marriage contracts (2014–2023).
  - Annual counts of divorce cases (2014–2023), with disaggregated data for 2021–2023.
  - Complementary demographic indicators, such as the *mean age at first marriage* (latest available, 2022).
- (2) **Ministry of Justice (Algeria):**  
Official statistics on *types of marital dissolution* as reported in the **2023 Annual Activity Report**, distinguishing between unilateral divorce (husband-initiated), *khul'* (wife-initiated), and mutual-consent divorce. These data illuminate the legal and gendered dynamics of marital breakdown.
- (3) **Contextual Socioeconomic Data:**  
Supplementary indicators were drawn from reputable international and national databases:
  - **World Bank (2024)** – Youth unemployment (ages 15–24) and female unemployment (ages 15+) rates, capturing structural economic constraints.
  - **MESRS (2024)** – Gender-disaggregated university enrollment data (2024–2025 academic year), representing educational expansion and female empowerment.

These sources collectively provide a **multi-dimensional dataset** linking demographic behavior (marriage/divorce) to its **economic, legal, and cultural context**.

All data were cross-validated across sources to ensure internal consistency and reduce measurement bias.

### 2.3. Method of Analysis

The analytical process proceeded in **four cumulative stages**, moving from descriptive quantification to interpretive synthesis:

1. **Trend Analysis:**

Computation of percentage change in the total number of marriages and divorces between 2014 and 2023 to detect long-term trajectories forming the “demographic scissor.”

2. **Ratio Analysis:**

Calculation of the **Crude Divorce-to-Marriage Ratio (CDMR)**, defined as:

$$100 \times \frac{\text{Total Divorces}}{\text{Total Marriages}} = \text{CDMR}$$

This index provides a standardized measure of **marital fragility** and allows temporal comparison of instability levels.

3. **Structural Analysis:**

Disaggregation of 2023 divorce cases by **legal mechanism** (unilateral, *khul'*, mutual consent) to interpret gendered agency and legal empowerment in marital dissolution processes.

4. **Explanatory Integration:**

In the discussion section, statistical trends (Stages 1–3) are interpreted through the lens of **socio-economic constraints** and **cultural transformation**, allowing for a comprehensive theoretical explanation that links macro-structural forces with micro-level behavioral change.

By combining these procedures, the methodology provides a **holistic analytical framework** capable of revealing both the quantitative magnitude and the sociological meaning of the demographic scissor phenomenon in contemporary Algeria.

## 3. Results: Statistical Analysis of the Demographic Scissor

### 3.1. The First Blade – The Decline in Nuptiality

Over the decade 2014–2023, Algeria recorded a persistent and significant decline in marriage formation. As shown in **Table 1**, the total number of registered marriages decreased from **386,000** in 2014 to **279,000** in 2023 – representing a **-27.7% contraction**

*Table 1. Evolution of Registered Marriages in Algeria (2014–2023)*

Year	Number of Marriages (000s)	Crude Marriage Rate (% per 1,000 inhabitants)
2014	386	9.88
2015	369	9.24
2016	357	8.73
2017	340	8.14
2018	332	7.97
2019	315	7.26

Year	Number of Marriages (000s)	Crude Marriage Rate (% per 1,000 inhabitants)
2020	285	6.43
2021	315	7.01
2022	286	6.26
2023	279	6.01

Source: ONS, 2024.

The **Average Annual Rate of Change (AARC)** across the decade was approximately **-3.4% per year**, confirming that the decline is structural rather than cyclical.

This downward trajectory coincides with the continued rise in the mean age at first marriage – **30.5 years for men** and **27 years for women** (ONS, 2022) – reinforcing the interpretation of marriage as a **postponed life project** rather than a culturally abandoned institution.

In sociological terms, this “first blade” of the demographic scissor reflects the demographic translation of *waithood*—a prolonged suspension of adulthood produced by economic immobility and structural precarity.

### 3.2. The Second Blade – The Rise in Divorce

In sharp contrast, the number of divorces exhibited a continuous and substantial increase during the same period. As presented in Table 2, total divorces rose from 60,844 in 2014 to 93,402 in 2023 – a +53.5% increase

*Table 2. Evolution of Divorce Cases in Algeria (2014–2023)*

Year	Number of Divorces	Crude Divorce Rate (%)	Divorce-to-Marriage Ratio (%)
2014	60,844	1.56	15.75
2015	59,909	1.50	16.23
2016	62,128	1.52	17.42
2017	65,637	1.57	19.32
2018	65,690	1.54	19.80
2019	65,967	1.52	20.92
2020	66,791	1.51	23.47
2021	76,201	1.70	24.20
2022	84,072	1.84	29.44
2023	93,402	2.02	33.52

Source: ONS, 2024.

The **Average Annual Rate of Increase (AARI)** in divorces is **+4.9%**, exceeding population growth and indicating a real, not relative, escalation.

When measured as the **Crude Divorce-to-Marriage Ratio (CDMR)**, the index more than doubled from **15.75% in 2014** to **38.52% in 2023**, meaning that approximately **one out of every three marriages** now ends in legal separation.

To quantify the divergence between these two opposing trends, we computed a **Coefficient of Divergence (CD)**, defined as:

$$\frac{(+53.5) - (-27.7)}{2} = 40.6\%$$

Substituting the values (+53.5% and -27.7%), we obtain  $CD = 40.6\%$ , representing the average rate of divergence between the two series – a clear empirical expression of the *demographic scissor effect*.

### 3.3. Structural Decomposition of Divorce Patterns (2023)

The internal composition of divorce cases reveals important gendered and legal dynamics.

According to Ministry of Justice data (2024), marital dissolution in 2023 was distributed as follows

*Table 3. Distribution of Divorce Mechanisms in Algeria (2023)*

Legal Mechanism	Share of Total (%)
Unilateral divorce (husband-initiated)	42
<i>Khul</i> (wife-initiated)	27
Mutual consent divorce	31
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>

*Source: Ministry of Justice, 2024.*

This structure shows that nearly **one-third (31%)** of dissolutions occurred through mutual consent, while **over one-quarter (27%)** were initiated by women. These proportions indicate a **growing normalization of female legal agency** and an increasing recourse to negotiated marital exit, reflecting a broader cultural shift toward **individualized decision-making** within family relations.

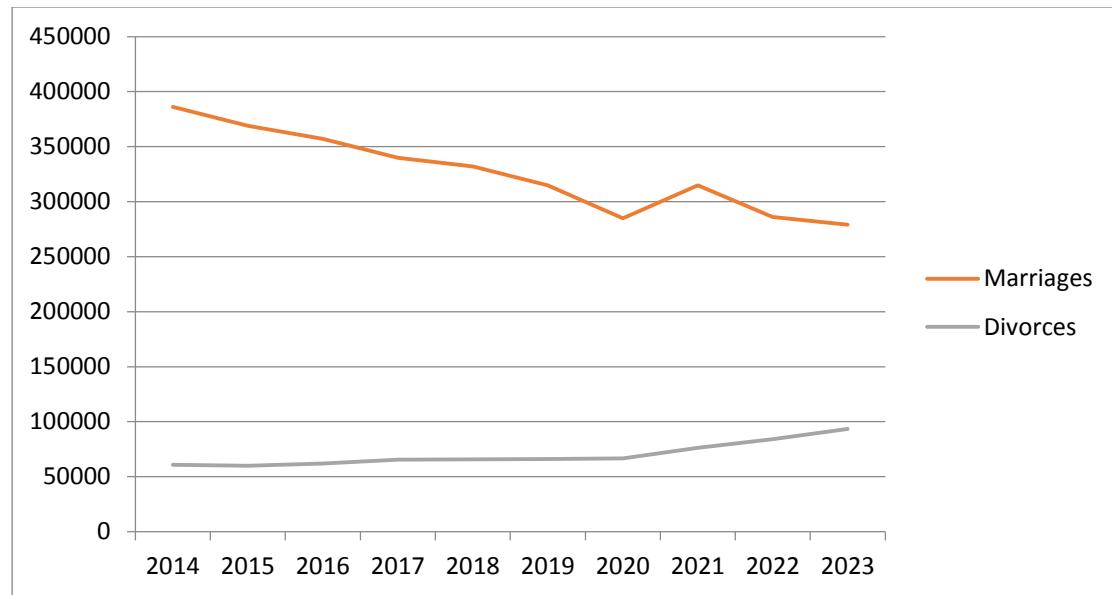
### 3.4. Visualizing the Demographic Scissor

When the two time series—marriages and divorces—are plotted on the same graph (see *Figure 1*), the resulting pattern forms a striking visual “scissor.”

The lower blade (marriage) slopes downward, while the upper blade (divorce) ascends sharply, with the gap between them widening progressively from 2014 to 2023.

- **Blade A (Divorce)** → upward trajectory (+53.5%)
- **Blade B (Marriage)** → downward trajectory (-27.7%)
- **Divergence Gap** → widened by ~81.2 percentage points over the decade

This visualization captures not only a statistical phenomenon but a **sociological dislocation**—a widening structural gap between the ability to form a family and the capacity to sustain one



### 3.5. Interim Interpretation

The dual trajectories quantified above reveal the core paradox of Algeria's family transformation: as **economic barriers** increasingly delay marriage entry, **cultural empowerment and legal accessibility** accelerate marital exit.

This paradox is not random; it reflects the intersection of two structural processes operating in opposite directions—one restrictive (economic) and one liberating (cultural–legal)—which jointly generate what this study conceptualizes as the **Demographic Scissor Effect**

	Formula	Computed Value	Interpretation
Percentage Change in Marriages (PC <sub>1</sub> )	$(279,000 - 386,000) / 386,000 \times 100$	<b>-27.7%</b>	Overall contraction in marriage formation over the decade
Percentage Change in Divorces (PC <sub>2</sub> )	$(93,402 - 60,844) / 60,844 \times 100$	<b>+53.5%</b>	Overall increase in divorce cases during the same period

	Formula	Computed Value	Interpretation
<b>Average Annual Rate of Change – Marriage (AARC)</b>	$[(279,000 / 386,000)^{(1/9)} - 1] \times 100$	<b>-3.4% per year</b>	Mean annual decline in marriage numbers
<b>Average Annual Rate of Increase – Divorce (AARI)</b>	$[(93,402 / 60,844)^{(1/9)} - 1] \times 100$	<b>+4.9% per year</b>	Mean annual increase in divorce cases
<b>Crude Divorce-to-Marriage Ratio (CDMR, 2023)</b>	$(93,402 / 279,000) \times 100$	<b>33.5%</b>	Proportion of divorces per 100 marriages (national fragility index)
<b>Coefficient of Divergence (CD)</b>	$ +53.5 - (-27.7)  / 2$	<b>40.6%</b>	Average divergence rate between marriage decline and divorce increase

The indicators summarized above quantitatively confirm the widening of Algeria's *demographic scissor* between 2014 and 2023. The -27.7% contraction in marriage formation, coupled with a +53.5% surge in divorces, signifies not a temporary fluctuation but a structural reconfiguration of the family institution. The Coefficient of Divergence (40.6%) reveals the accelerating gap between nuptiality decline and marital dissolution, while the Crude Divorce-to-Marriage Ratio (33.5%) indicates a level of fragility unprecedented in Algeria's modern demographic history. Together, these metrics demonstrate that the Algerian family is increasingly shaped by dual structural pressures—economic *waithood* limiting entry into marriage and cultural-legal empowerment facilitating exit from it.

#### 4. Discussion and Analysis of Findings: Interpreting the Demographic Scissor

The statistical evidence presented in the previous section demonstrates, with empirical precision, that the Algerian family has undergone a decade-long structural bifurcation: a **27.7% contraction in marriage formation** and a **53.5% surge in divorce cases** between 2014 and 2023. This widening divergence—captured by the **40.6% Coefficient of Divergence**—constitutes more than a demographic curiosity; it reflects a deep sociological transformation in the institution of marriage itself.

At its core, the *demographic scissor* symbolizes a **dual structural crisis**:

- an *entry crisis*, restricting access to marriage, and
- an *exit crisis*, facilitating marital dissolution.

Both crises operate simultaneously, reshaping the life course, family norms, and gender relations within Algerian society.

##### 4.1. The Entry Crisis: Marriage as a Deferred Project

The sustained decline in nuptiality is not the result of changing moral values or cultural indifference toward marriage. Rather, it emerges from **structural economic constraints** that have transformed marriage into a deferred and conditional life project.

The phenomenon of *waithood*—first theorized by Singerman (2007)—accurately encapsulates this reality. In Algeria, youth face a prolonged transition to adulthood marked by unemployment, housing shortages, and job precarity.

According to World Bank data (2024), the **youth unemployment rate (ages 15–24)** remains alarmingly high at **29.3%**, while housing affordability has deteriorated sharply (Cheriet, 2020). These constraints postpone not only marriage but also residential and economic independence, producing a generation structurally unable to achieve adult status through family formation.

From a sociological perspective, this “delayed entry” represents a form of **structural exclusion**—an involuntary postponement of social adulthood. The declining marriage figures (−3.4% average annual rate) thus reflect not voluntary retreat but **involuntary waiting**, where social aspirations remain intact but economic feasibility collapses.

#### 4.2. The Stability Crisis: Marriage as a Reviewable Contract

In contrast, the exponential rise in divorce (+4.9% annually) signifies a **cultural and legal transformation** of marriage from a sacred duty to a reviewable partnership.

Since the 2005 amendment of the Algerian Family Code, legal access to marital dissolution has expanded dramatically, especially through **khul'** (wife-initiated divorce) and **mutual consent divorce**, which together accounted for **58% of all cases in 2023** (Ministry of Justice, 2024).

This pattern reflects the rise of **female legal agency** within a redefined moral economy of family life. Education has amplified this transformation: women now represent **63% of university students** (MESRS, 2024), producing a generation with heightened cultural capital and expectations of equality and emotional reciprocity within marriage.

These expectations, however, often clash with economic dependency and persistent gender asymmetries in the labor market. The outcome is not passive endurance but **active exit**—a rational, legally supported decision to dissolve unfulfilling unions.

The result is a **paradox of empowerment**: the very structural gains that enable women’s autonomy (education, legal rights) also destabilize the traditional bases of marital cohesion. Marriage becomes contingent, negotiated, and reversible—a phenomenon consistent with the global trend of **family deinstitutionalization** (Cherlin, 2020).

#### 4.3. Intersecting Forces and Structural Coupling

The simultaneous decline of marriage and rise of divorce are not independent processes but **structurally coupled** phenomena.

Economic stagnation delays marriage entry; cultural and legal modernization accelerates marital exit. Together, they create a feedback loop that erodes both the entry threshold and the stability threshold of family formation.

This dynamic can be represented schematically as follows:

Dimension	Structural Mechanism	Sociological Effect
Economic	Youth unemployment, precarious employment, housing shortage	Delayed entry into marriage ( <i>waithood</i> )
Cultural-Legal	Educational expansion, legal empowerment, individualism	Accelerated exit from marriage (ease of dissolution)
Combined Effect	Dual structural crisis	Institutional fragility of the family system

Thus, the *demographic scissor* does not merely describe two opposing demographic curves—it captures a **systemic desynchronization** between the economic and cultural subsystems of Algerian society.

While economic structures remain traditional and exclusionary, cultural norms evolve toward autonomy and self-realization. The result is a family institution pulled in opposite directions by contradictory logics: **structural dependency vs. individual autonomy**.

#### 4.4. The Sociological Meaning of the Divergence

Beyond its numerical representation, the *demographic scissor* signifies a shift in the social meaning of marriage itself.

Marriage is increasingly privatized, emotionalized, and individualized. Its function as a collective rite of passage or social obligation is eroding, replaced by a **project of self-fulfillment** conditioned on compatibility and personal satisfaction.

When these subjective expectations are unmet, divorce is no longer stigmatized but normalized as an **adaptive strategy**.

Consequently, the demographic divergence mirrors a broader cultural transition: from **institutional permanence** to **contractual flexibility**, from **collective duty** to **individual agency**.

This shift challenges not only demographic models but also the normative foundations of social cohesion. The Algerian case thus exemplifies the paradox of modernization: material constraints hinder family formation, while cultural modernization undermines family persistence.

#### 4.5. Integrative Interpretation

Synthesizing the above dynamics, the Algerian family appears to be navigating a **transitional demographic regime**, where modernization unfolds unevenly across economic, cultural, and legal dimensions.

The *demographic scissor* is therefore best interpreted as a **structural indicator of social transition**—quantitatively visible in the numbers, but qualitatively rooted in the collision between economic stagnation and value modernization.

In this sense, the observed divergence is both **a symptom and a signal**: a symptom of unresolved socio-economic constraints, and a signal of an emerging post-traditional family paradigm characterized by delayed formation and accelerated dissolution.

### 5. Conclusion

#### 5.1. Summary of Findings

This study has provided a comprehensive socio-demographic analysis of the transformations that have reshaped the Algerian family institution between 2014 and 2023.

Drawing upon official data from the National Office of Statistics and the Ministry of Justice, the research revealed a profound **structural divergence** between the trajectories of marriage and divorce.

The key findings can be summarized as follows:

1. **Marriage Contraction:** Registered marriages declined by **-27.7%**, with an average annual decrease of **-3.4%**, confirming a long-term structural contraction rather than a temporary fluctuation.
2. **Divorce Expansion:** Divorce cases increased by **+53.5%**, at an average annual rate of **+4.9%**, indicating a sustained acceleration in marital dissolution.
3. **Rising Fragility:** The **Crude Divorce-to-Marriage Ratio (CDMR)** more than doubled from **15.7%** to **33.5%**, suggesting that approximately one in three marriages now ends in divorce.
4. **Widening Divergence:** The **Coefficient of Divergence (40.6%)** quantifies the magnitude of the “demographic scissor,” confirming a deepening disjunction between the two indicators of family formation and stability.

Collectively, these findings portray a family institution experiencing dual structural stress: an **entry crisis** rooted in economic constraints and an **exit crisis** driven by cultural and legal change.

### 5.2. Answer to the Research Question

The central research question asked how the simultaneous decline in marriage and rise in divorce could be theoretically interpreted within the Algerian context.

The results demonstrate that this apparent contradiction is, in fact, **structurally consistent** – the product of two interconnected yet oppositely oriented processes:

- **Economic Waithood:** Persistent unemployment, job precarity, and housing scarcity prevent young adults from fulfilling the material prerequisites of family formation. Marriage is therefore postponed, not rejected.
- **Cultural-Legal Individualization:** Expanding education, legal empowerment (especially through *khul'* and mutual consent divorce), and the rise of individualistic expectations transform marriage into a reviewable partnership conditioned on personal satisfaction.

These two logics – **structural restriction** and **cultural liberation** – operate concurrently, producing what this study conceptualizes as the *Demographic Scissor Effect*: a family institution that is simultaneously *delayed in entry* and *accelerated in exit*.

### 5.3. Theoretical Implications

Algeria's case illustrates how modernization is asymmetric: economic modernization lags behind cultural transformation, creating tensions between material feasibility and symbolic aspiration.

The “demographic scissor” thus emerges as both a quantitative indicator of demographic transition and a qualitative signal of shifting values.

### 5.4. Limitations of the Study

Despite its analytical depth, the study remains constrained by several methodological limitations:

1. **Data granularity:** Available statistics are aggregate; they do not disaggregate by age, duration of marriage, urban-rural residence, or presence of children – variables crucial for multivariate modeling.
2. **Temporal scope:** The analysis covers only one decade (2014–2023). Including earlier periods would allow for testing whether the divergence is cyclical or long-term.
3. **Lack of qualitative insight:** The study explains “how much” the change occurred, but not “why” in terms of subjective meanings, emotional factors, and negotiation processes within couples.

These limitations invite further **mixed-methods research** integrating demographic data with qualitative fieldwork and life-course interviews.

### 5.5. Policy and Research Recommendations

Given the empirical evidence of dual structural strain, policy responses must address both sides of the demographic scissor:

- **Economic Dimension:**
  - Integrate youth employment and housing programs into national family policy frameworks.
  - Promote accessible credit and housing incentives for young couples to reduce structural waithood.

- **Cultural-Legal Dimension:**
  - Strengthen family counseling and mediation centers at the municipal level.
  - Encourage community-based educational programs on marital communication and shared responsibilities.
- **Research Dimension:**
  - Develop longitudinal surveys that track marriage and divorce cohorts to measure duration and determinants.

These combined strategies can help policymakers move beyond moral discourse to **evidence-based family policy** grounded in socio-demographic reality.

### Ethical Considerations

Participation in this study was voluntary and anonymous, with no identifying information collected. Respondents were informed about the study's purpose. Procedures complied with the ethical standards of the Department of Sociology Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences University of Blida 2 - Lounici Ali.

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