

**GENDER DIFFERENCES IN MARITAL EXPECTATION SUBSCALES AMONG THE
PREMARITAL COUPLES IN NAIROBI, KENYA****Biruk Gebretsadik Haile***

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ABSTRACT

Marital commitment is essential for the development and stability of marriage and family systems. This study examined gender differences in marital expectations among premarital couples across five areas. This include, love and affection, sex and intimacy, emotional security, spirituality and religion, and conflict and happiness. The main objective of this study was to establish the Gender Differences of marital expectations among the premarital couples from selected churches in Nairobi, Kenya. Unrealistic marital expectations were also determined by use of frequency across various sociodemographic characteristics such as age, gender, year of education and dating period. Purposive sampling method was used to select participants of the study (n=118) who were screened for marital expectations at baseline. Data was collected using Marital Expectations Questionnaire (MEQ) which was a self-administered questionnaire. The findings of the study showed that participants hold high (unrealistic) expectations, especially regarding love and affection (74.6%), emotional security (75.4%), spirituality and religion (84.7%), and conflict and happiness (77.1%). However, expectations in sex and intimacy are more realistic at 66.1%. Further, males exhibited higher expectations in sex, intimacy, and conflict resolution, while females emphasized love, emotional security, and spirituality. These discrepancies highlight the need for addressing gender- specific expectations in premarital counseling. The study recommends implementing strategies such as open communication, participation in workshops on relational expectations, and the provision of gender-sensitive relationship education to better prepare couples for marriage. The study recommends implementing strategies such as open communication, participation in workshops on relational expectations, and the provision of gender-sensitive relationship education to better prepare couples for marriage.

KEYWORDS: Gender Differences, Marital Expectations, Premarital Couples.**INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND**

Choosing a spouse is a complex decision and deeply personal decision influenced by various motivations such as love, pleasure, family desires, sexual needs, and the pursuit of companionship to overcome loneliness and social challenges (Liu et al., 2017; Ozguc & Tanriverdi, 2018). Many individuals enter marriage with idealistic expectations, envisioning a flawless partner and a perfect life together. However, these expectations often clash with reality of married life leading to disappointment in areas such as communication, shared responsibilities, and financial management (Fawad et al., 2022). These unmet expectations frequently stem from unrealistic or dysfunctional beliefs shaped by societal myths about

romantic relationships such as the idea that “true love means no conflict” or that partners should intuitively understand each other’s needs (Fincham & Beach, 2010; Zagefka & Bahul, 2021).

Premarital counseling (PMC) plays a critical role in helping couples build realistic marital expectations and prepare for marriage life. PMC encourages open discussions on essential topics, including communication, finances, intimacy, parenting, and roles (Teal, 2018). A central aim is to enhance emotional intimacy which fosters responsiveness and strengthens feelings of care and connection between partners (Hawkins, 2016). Moreover, PMC facilitates discussions around sexual

expectations, which are strongly associated with marital satisfaction.

Effective communication and conflict resolution are essential in shaping realistic marital expectations. Couples who lack these skills are more likely to cling to dysfunctional beliefs become more entrenched over time and fuel dissatisfaction (Lavner et al., 2016). In contrast, couples who develop conflict resolution skills adapt better to changing dynamics and evolving relationship expectations. When left unaddressed, unrealistic beliefs and poor communication can increase dissatisfaction, especially in the later stages of marriage when unmet expectations have accumulated (Fincham et al., 2007; Davoodvandi et al., 2018; Rajaei et al., 2019).

Although intimacy is another vital component in marital satisfaction, it is often perceived differently by men and women. Research suggests that early childhood experiences and relationships shape adult capacities for emotional closeness Czyżowska et al. (2019) and emotional warmth is a key factor in long term commitment (Schmiedeberg & Schröder, 2016). While sexual intimacy is important, it alone may not meet the need for emotional connection. Strengthening both emotional and physical intimacy enhances relationship quality across genders (Blatterer, 2015; Prause et al., 2021).

Gender expectations further complicate marital dynamics. Men often emphasize financial security, while women value emotional support and shared domestic responsibilities (Karney, 2021; Leonhardt et al., 2022; Rhoades et al., 2010; Waller & McLanahan, 2005). These differing priorities, if not openly discussed, can lead to conflict. Traditionally, men have been seen as providers and women as caregivers, but this binary is shifting. Younger, urban, and educated couples increasingly favor egalitarian relationships (Doss et al., 2013; Kagaba, 2015; Kowalewska & Vitali, 2024). Nonetheless, the transition away from traditional roles can be challenging particularly for men who may struggle with unmet expectations and declining relational satisfaction (Goldscheider et al., 2015; Schrod et al., 2014).

Cultural background, socio-economic status, and religious beliefs all influence what individuals expect from marriage (Doss et al., 2019; Karney, 2021). In African contexts such as Kenya, religious institutions play a significant role in shaping premarital preparation and marital values.

While much of the literature is based in Western contexts, similar themes appear in African research, especially around gender roles, parenting expectations, and the spiritual dimension of commitment (Kagaba, 2015). Across cultures, research consistently shows that men and women differ in their marital expectations. Women generally seek emotional intimacy, shared

responsibilities, and relational support, while men prioritize practical and financial stability (Casad et al., 2015; McNulty & Karney, 2004; Rhoades et al., 2010). Unrealistic or overly high expectations common in both genders are linked to greater conflict, lower satisfaction, and reduced commitment (Fowers & Olson, 1992; McNulty et al., 2018; Willoughby et al., 2021). This underscores the need for premarital interventions, particularly in faith-based settings like Nairobi churches, where religion, culture, and community values intersect.

Participation in premarital education programs has been shown to improve relationship health and emotional well-being. Couples who engage in such programs are more likely to seek support during their marriage and experience fewer signs of relational distress (Duncan et al., 2020; Hamamci, 2018). As such, PMC is not only a preventative measure but a foundation for long-term marital satisfaction.

METHODOLOGY

The study was approved by School of Applied Human Sciences (SAHS), Daystar University, Institutional Scientific Ethics Research Committee (DU-ISERC), and National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation (NACOSTI). Additionally, permission was obtained from the participating churches prior to data collection. Participants were informed of their rights, including the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without losing access to any benefits, such as access to church based counseling services. This study employed quantitative method of data collection to investigate marital expectations among premarital couples in selected churches in Nairobi Kenya. The sample consisted of 59 (118 individuals) premarital couples who were attending premarital church counseling. Participation was voluntary, and all participants signed the consent form prior to inclusion in the study. Participants were recruited through coordination with Premarital Counseling Coordinators in the selected churches. The researcher then booked an appointment with the help of Premarital Counseling Coordinators in selected churches to meet with premarital couples who had registered for church premarital counseling before commencement of the study. On the first and consecutive days of screening, the premarital couples sat at the respective church halls where the screening was done. Couples were screened at baseline, and the sample size was determined using the Casagrande et al. (1978).

Two primary instruments were used for data collection. Socio demographic questionnaire which was developed by the researcher was administered to capture participants age, gender, occupation, years of formal education achieved and how long they have been dating was administered. The Marital Expectation Questionnaire (MEQ) was used to measure individuals' expectations across various domains of marital relationships (Ngazimbi, 2009). This included love and affection, sex

and intimacy, emotional security, spirituality and religion, and conflict and happiness. The Marital Expectation Questionnaire (MEQ) is based on Juvva and Bhatti's epigenetic model of marital expectations (2006) and examines individuals' expectations regarding marriage, their partners, their partner's family of origin, their views on marriage as an institution, and their ideas about the ideal partner.

The MEQ used in this study employed a Likert scale ranging from Disagree (1), Strongly, disagree (2), neutral (0), agree (4), strongly agree (5). The internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha) was .76, indicating acceptable reliability (Ngazimbi et al., 2014). Data collected using sociodemographic questionnaire and MEQ was checked for completeness and accuracy before participants left the church hall. Responses for each domain were summed and divided by the number

of items to compute mean scores for each subscale. The data was then coded, cleaned and double entered by the researcher to ensure accuracy before being analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), version 31. Descriptive statistics of continuous variables which included frequency and percentages were applied and it was presented using tables. Additionally, the chi-square test (χ^2) was used to assess whether there were statistically significant differences in marital expectations across gender.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the frequency distribution of marital expectations among premarital couples in selected churches in Nairobi, Kenya, covering five subscales: love and affection, expectations regarding sex and intimacy, emotional security, spirituality and religion, and conflict and happiness.

Table 1: Frequency of Marital Expectation Subscales.

Variables	Realistic Expectation	High (Unrealistic) Expectation
Expectation on love and affection	30 (25.4%)	88 (74.6)
Expectation on sex and intimacy	78(66.1)	40(33.9)
Expectation on emotional security	29(24.6)	89(75.4)
Expectation on spirituality and religion	18 (15.3)	100(84.7)
Expectation on conflict and happiness	27(22.9)	91(77.1)

Table 1 indicates that 88(74.6%) of participants in a marital expectation questionnaire demonstrated unrealistic expectations concerning love and affection, while 30 (25.4%) had realistic views. Such unrealistic expectations are frequent among singles and can stem from psychological needs, cultural factors, and limited relationship experience. Additionally, early attachment patterns influence individuals' perceptions of love. For example, those with anxious attachment may seek intense closeness, whereas avoidant individuals might have unrealistic ideals of independence or perfection in relationships.

The study found that 40(33.9%) of participants held unrealistic expectations about sex and intimacy, whereas 78(66.1%) maintained realistic expectations. This suggests that Christian singles may be influenced by a combination of theological beliefs, cultural messages and personal experiences. Teachings that frame sex as sacred and emphasize abstinence until marriage often promote restraint in sexual expression. Additionally, the tendency to spiritualize intimacy can hinder open, healthy discussions about sex, making it more difficult for individuals to develop realistic expectations for marital intimacy. Regarding expectations about emotional security, the data indicate that 89 (75.4%) of participants held unrealistic expectations, while only 29 (24.6%) reported realistic expectations. They may be influenced by their beliefs and values emphasizing deep connection and commitment. In Christian theology, marriage is framed as a sacred covenant reflecting unconditional love and mutual submission, which transforms emotional security into a spiritual necessity.

Consequently, many anticipate that marriage will be a source of vulnerability, forgiveness, and grace, providing emotional stability and spiritual companionship.

Results indicated that 100(84.7%) of participants held unrealistic expectations regarding spirituality and religion, while 18 (15.3%) had realistic expectations. This discrepancy suggests that high expectations are influenced by a desire for alignment in beliefs and values, shaped by theological teachings and community norms. For many, spirituality is crucial to concepts of love and marriage, leading them to seek partners who share similar faith and practices. They aim for relationships based on biblical principles like sacrificial love and mutual growth, perceiving marriage as a spiritual partnership requiring maturity and compatibility.

The study found that 91(77.1%) of Christian singles hold unrealistic expectations regarding conflict and happiness in relationships, with only 27(22.9%) having realistic views. This suggests a desire for emotionally safe, spiritually aligned partnerships, resulting in a conflict between idealism and reality. Singles often envision conflict-free relationships resolved through prayer and biblical guidance, leading to disappointment when disagreements arise. Biblical teachings emphasize peaceful resolutions, yet singles may prioritize emotional safety and spiritual compatibility over physical attraction, which can make it challenging to cope with imperfections and develop resilience necessary for enduring relationships.

Table 2: Distribution of expectation subscales and gender differences.

Variables	Gender Differences & Expectation Subscales				Chi-Square Test		
	Male (Husband)		Female (Wife)		χ^2	df	Sig.
	Low	High	Low	High			
Love and Affection	48 (40.7%)	11 (9.3%)	11 (9.3%)	48 (40.7%)	46.407	1	.000
Sex and Intimacy	7 (5.9%)	52 (44.1%)	48 (40.7%)	11 (9.3%)	57.246	1	.001
Emotional security	43 (36.4%)	16 (13.6%)	12 (10.2%)	47 (39.8%)	32.727	1	.001
Spirituality and Religion	47 (39.8%)	12 (10.2%)	7(5.9%)	52(44.1%)	54.630	1	.001
Conflict and happiness	8 (6.8%)	51(43.2%)	43 (36.4%)	16 (13.6%)	42.303	1	.001

Table 2 indicates that among Christian singles, male participants showed a higher frequency of low expectations for love and affection 48(40.7%), while female participants reported high expectations 48(40.7%). Chi-square test revealed a significant relationship between gender and expectations around affectionate love ($p = 0.000$). These findings suggest that traditional socialization influences this divergence; males often suppress emotional vulnerability, viewing affection as secondary, while females are encouraged to prioritize emotional closeness and nurturing relationships. This divergence shapes individuals' expressions and expectations of love, affecting relational dynamics and marital aspirations.

Regarding sex and intimacy, the data showed a higher frequency of high expectations among male participants 52(44.1%) compared to low expectations 7(5.9%). In contrast, female participants showed a higher frequency of low expectations 48(40.7%) compared to high expectations 11(9.3%). A significant Chi-square test ($p = 0.001$) revealed a relationship between gender and these expectations. Biologically, higher testosterone levels in men correlate with increased sexual desire and spontaneous arousal, leading to expectations of more frequent sexual activity. Socially, men are encouraged to express their desires, while women are often taught to be more reserved, reinforcing cultural narratives of men as "pursuers" and women as "gatekeepers." These norms shape expectations related to intimacy frequency, entitlement, and emotional significance.

Regarding emotional security, the results showed that male participants had a higher frequency of low expectations 43 (36.4%), while only 16 (13.6%) reported high expectations. In contrast, female participants demonstrated a higher frequency of high expectations 47(39.8%), with only 12 (10.2%) reporting low expectations. A Chi-square test revealed a significant relationship between gender and expectations around emotional security ($p = 0.001$). This suggests that marital expectations regarding emotional security were

significantly higher among female Christian singles compared to their male counterparts. socialization, and relational psychology on individuals' marriage aspirations. Women, particularly within this group, prioritize emotional availability, empathy, and effective communication, seeking partners who support emotional well-being and foster vulnerability and spiritual intimacy. This aligns with psychological research suggesting women value relational depth and emotional closeness more than men, especially in committed relationships.

In addition, the study found a notable gender differences in expectations regarding spirituality and religion, with 47(39.8%) of male participants expressing low expectations compared to 12(10.2%) with high expectations. In contrast, 52(44.1%) of female participants reported high expectations, while only 7(5.9%) had low expectations. A Chi-square test confirmed a significant relationship between gender and expectations ($p = 0.001$). This suggests that women, influenced by sociocultural and psychological factors, typically have higher expectations for spiritual alignment in relationships than men, who may emphasize leadership and doctrinal knowledge over emotional or spiritual intimacy.

The study found that male participants had higher expectations regarding conflict and happiness, with 51(43.2%) reporting high expectations compared to 8(6.8%) of females. Conversely, a larger proportion of females exhibited low expectations 43(36.4%) compared to high expectations 16(13.6%). A statistically significant relationship was found between gender and these expectations ($p = 0.001$). These findings indicate that men have higher marital expectations regarding conflict and happiness, particularly in traditional contexts. Men value relationships free of conflict as they fulfill emotional needs and see conflict as a threat to stability, leading them to invest in harmonious relationships that feel safe and affirming.

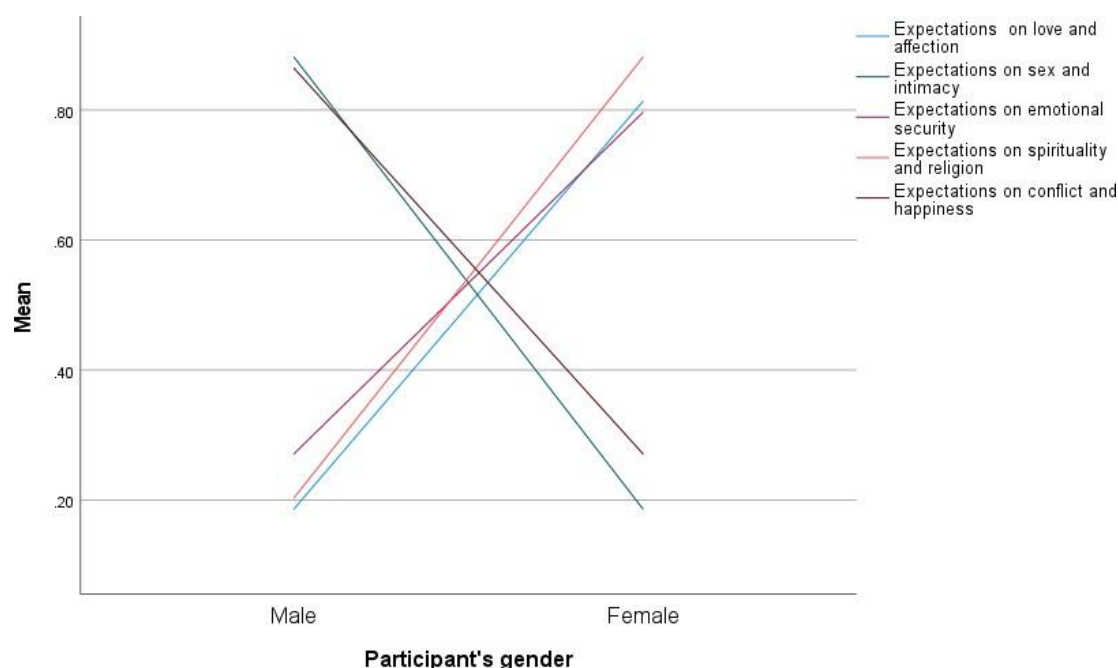


Figure 1: Frequency of gender differences in marital expectation subscales.

Figure 1 presents the mean scores of marital expectation subscales for male and female participants. The results indicated that male participants reported higher expectations in sex and intimacy as well as conflict and happiness, while lower expectations were noted in love and affection, emotional security, and spirituality. Conversely, females reported higher expectations in love, emotional security, and spirituality, but lower in sex and intimacy and conflict. This illustrates a gender-based divergence where men prioritize physical and external stability, while women focus on emotional, spiritual, and relational depth, as depicted by the intersecting lines forming an "X" shape in the figure.

DISCUSSION

Participants across various relationship dimensions predominantly hold high (unrealistic) expectations, particularly in love and affection (74.6%), emotional security (75.4%), spirituality and religion (84.7%), and conflict and happiness (77.1%). Only in sex and intimacy do individuals maintain more realistic expectations (66.1%). These idealized perceptions may lead to dissatisfaction, unmet needs, and relational tension. Based on these results, improving relationship satisfaction requires strategies such as relationship education, open communication, and premarital or couples counseling to help partners develop more realistic and aligned expectations. As Lacey et al (2017) and Vaterlaus et al. (2017) suggested that media portrayals often set unrealistic standards, creating vulnerability in marriages.

Unmet expectations frequently stem from poor communication. Research shows couples who use positive communication and express appreciation report higher marital satisfaction (Kayabol & Sumer, 2020). Conflict is inevitable, but how it is managed matters.

Healthy strategies such as active listening, compromise, and win-win approaches to enhance satisfaction (Stinson et al., 2017; Tong et al., 2021). Premarital and couples counseling can equip partners with these skills. Duncan et al. (2020) found even brief participation improves relationship quality, while Hahlweg and Richter (2020) highlight that couples are particularly open to feedback during engagement.

Intimacy plays a crucial role in sustaining love and trust. Aman et al. (2021) found it significantly influences marital commitment by reducing the likelihood of separation. Emotional security and shared vulnerability are essential foundations for long-term satisfaction. Religion and spirituality deeply shape marital values, expectations, and behaviors (Paloutzian & Park, 2021; Aman et al., 2021). Religious commitment is linked to increased satisfaction, stronger marital boundaries, and reduced divorce risk (Rusu et al., 2015; Karimi et al., 2019). Positive religious coping like seeking strength from a higher power enhances emotional resilience (Lai et al., 2022). However, differences in religious beliefs can also create instability, particularly in early relationship stages (Martinez et al., 2016; Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004).

The study explored gender differences in relationship expectations across five dimensions. Namely, love and affection, sex and intimacy, emotional security, spirituality and religion, and conflict and happiness. The findings reveal that females generally have higher expectations in love and affection, emotional security, and spirituality and religion, while males focus more on sex and intimacy and prioritize reducing conflict and maximizing happiness. All differences were statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), underscoring the need for mutual understanding of these

expectations to improve relationship satisfaction through interventions like couples counseling or couple's therapy. This is consistent with other prior research has shown that gender can play an important role in shaping marital ideals. For example, Keshavarz et al. (2013) argue that irrational romantic expectations, particularly among men, can lead to dissatisfaction in marriage. Similarly, Mansfield (2007) found that both men and women often enter marriage with unrealistic expectations and misconceptions about marital life. However, some studies have reported nuanced gender-based differences. These clearly show that both men and women often enter relationships with unrealistic expectations, men's expectations may lean more toward romantic idealism (Keshavarz et al., 2013; Mansfield, 2007). While both men and women often enter relationships with unrealistic expectations, men's expectations may lean more toward romantic idealism (Keshavarz et al., 2013), and women's toward emotional fulfillment (Baber & Tucker, 2006; Blakemore et al., 2005). However, the literature also shows mixed results, with some studies finding no significant gender differences in marital attitudes (Servaty & Weber, 2011) and others reporting that women are more likely to endorse marrying for love (Blakemore et al., 2005). Fallahchai and Fallahi (2019), along with Ogletree (2015), emphasize the importance of examining how men and women differ in their expectations of marriage and partners.

Religiosity and spirituality have been widely linked to marital satisfaction and commitment. Studies show that shared faith provides couples with a framework for managing conflicts, reinforcing values, and building emotional intimacy (David & Stafford, 2013; Gholipour & Farzanegan, 2015). For example, religious beliefs often guide moral decisions and promote forgiveness, which strengthens long-term relational bonds (Aman et al., 2019; Juvan & Dolnicar, 2017). Spiritual alignment between partners such as shared rituals and joint religious activities has also been shown to predict better conflict resolution and marital quality (Rauer & Volling, 2015). Importantly, the effects of religion may be gendered. Women tend to be more religiously engaged (Cooper et al., 2019), and a husband's strong religious faith has been positively linked to his wife's satisfaction (Rose et al., 2019). Nevertheless, while many studies highlight the protective role of religiosity, some suggest the need for further gender-specific research to understand how religious involvement impacts both partners over time (Li et al., 2018).

Couples' intimacy significantly influences marital satisfaction, relationship quality, marital stability, and individual well-being (Lee et al., 2021; Masoumi et al., 2017; Kamali et al., 2021). Various factors shape intimacy, such as communication and conflict resolution, physical touch, acts of service, words of affirmation, quality time, and gift-giving (Mozas Alonso, 2020; Rashidi, 2022). Beyond these, emotional understanding, peace, social support, emotional

understanding, spiritual guidance, and religious alignment also play a crucial role in nurturing intimacy (Aman, 2022). However, defining intimacy in universal terms is challenging, as individual needs and desires vary widely (Arno, 2012; Wang et al., 2021). Recent research identifies various factors influencing individual universal needs, including religion and conflict, sexual fulfillment, companionship, and the importance of trust and respect (Cao et al., 2018; Hoover & Snyder, 1991; Hwang et al., 2019; Lee & McKinnish, 2017).

Another major factor influencing marital satisfaction is gender expectations and traditional roles within relationships. These expectations often relate to parenting responsibilities, family values, division of household labor, and relational dynamics such as trust, emotional expression, sexual needs, communication, and conflict resolution (Kincaid, 2021; Rodriguez-Stanley et al., 2020; Herrington et al., 2012; Helms et al., 2019; Jibeen, 2019). Research suggests that men and women often express different relational needs, with men placing greater emphasis on sexual fulfillment, while women more frequently prioritize emotional connection (Boerner et al., 2012).

CONCLUSION

This study explored gender differences in marital expectations among Christian singles across five areas: love and affection, sex and intimacy, emotional security, spirituality and religion, and conflict and happiness. Statistically significant differences emerged, with males showing higher expectations in sex and intimacy and conflict and happiness, while females emphasized love and affection, emotional security, and spirituality. The findings, illustrated by a distinct "X-pattern," suggest how gendered socialization and faith inform relationship expectations, indicating potential mismatches that could lead to unmet needs if unaddressed.

Therefore, the study recommended that premarital counseling should focus on addressing gender-specific expectations by helping couples explore and align their emotional needs, spiritual values, intimacy, and conflict resolution. Programs should promote realistic expectations, viewing marriage as a dynamic partnership that requires growth and adaptation. Open communication is crucial; couples should engage in workshops to discuss their relational desires and concerns, particularly around sensitive topics. Gender-sensitive education is necessary to understand how gender affects emotional expression and conflict navigation. Finally, future research should track participants into marriage to evaluate how initial expectations influence marital satisfaction, also considering cultural influences.

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