

Qualitative Study of the Factors Influencing Remarriage Attitudes in Widowed Women in Isfahan

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to qualitatively investigate the factors influencing remarriage attitudes in widowed women in Isfahan.

Methods: The research employed a qualitative approach using thematic analysis. The research population consisted of widowed women from Isfahan who had experienced the death of their spouse at least three years prior to 2024. The sample size for this qualitative study was 17 participants, determined based on theoretical saturation, and a snowball sampling method was employed. To analyze the data obtained from the interviews, coding was performed using MAXQDA software. After organizing the initial codes, 13 organizing themes and 4 overarching themes were identified.

Findings: Based on the findings, the factors influencing remarriage attitudes were classified into four main themes: cultural and social issues, perceptions of the future, emotional and sexual issues, and economic issues. The subthemes under these categories were as follows: the economic issues theme included two subthemes: living below the poverty line and job limitations. The emotional and sexual issues theme included four subthemes: the need for companionship with the opposite sex, the need for sexual relationships, availability of sexual partners, and the duality of fear and need. The perceptions of the future theme included three subthemes: uncertain outcomes, marital stability, and hopelessness about future marriages. The cultural and social issues theme included four subthemes: social deprivation, cultural stereotypes, rebuilding after the loss of a spouse, and gender stereotypes.

Conclusion: This study highlights the complex factors influencing widowed women's inclination towards remarriage, including economic, emotional, social, and cultural challenges, underscoring the need for tailored support and societal change.

Keywords: Remarriage attitudes, widowed women, marriage.

1. Introduction

Marriage and family formation are actions aimed at creating a haven for comfort, happiness, and natural vitality, fulfilling the sexual instinct, enjoying life, receiving love, cooperation, assistance, and ultimately the blending of two souls in the horizon of affection and harmony, and the merging of two seas of strength and power to achieve a higher goal (Almasi & Aslani, 2023). Unfortunately, today, there are many women who have lost their husbands and are now widows. The loss of a husband occurs for various reasons, such as death, martyrdom, and divorce, with death and divorce being the most common. The conditions of individuals following the loss of a husband vary; some may become permanently incapacitated and may not be able to continue their lives, while others manage their affairs but not with the same happiness they had when their husbands were present. Some choose their first job in life, while others opt for remarriage (Shorer et al., 2022).

Becoming a widow is one of the most stressful events a woman can experience, leading to significant changes in her psychological, social, and economic situation (Molaei Nejad et al., 2019). Numerous studies examining the conditions and situations of widowed women confirm this claim, highlighting the absence of a man in the family as a major stressor for family members, especially women, challenging their quality of life (Lakatos, 2023). Furthermore, clinical reports and controlled studies indicate that stressful life events (such as the death of a spouse, divorce, separation, etc.) can play a crucial role in both the onset and exacerbation of mental disorders such as depression and anxiety, as well as physical illnesses like cancer and immune system-related diseases (Mohammadi, 2020).

Widowhood in women differs according to factors such as the widow's age, gender, financial status, employment, and the number of children, and can serve as the basis for various studies. From another perspective, with the rapid changes in healthcare services, urbanization, and decreasing birth rates since the early 20th century, life expectancy has been increasing. In Iran, the cultural, social, economic, and demographic changes in recent decades have contributed to the growth of the widowed population (Ghanbari Barzain et al., 2023). Remarriage can be associated with various conditions that affect women's lives and may be met with reactions from children and society. When examining the factors that influence the success or failure of remarriage in widowed women, aspects such as age, the duration of

marriage, the number of children, age difference with the second spouse, the relationship with the second spouse, and education level all play a role in the success or failure of remarriage (Lyna, 2024).

When we listen to the concerns of women who became widows at a young age and became heads of their households while living under the same sky in this city, they speak of problems that require the mobilization of all organizations to alleviate some of the burdens from their shoulders. Despite the economic and livelihood difficulties faced by these families, which could be seen as the concern prompting many widows to consider remarriage, one of the main challenges for these women is the heavy judgment they face from their families and others, who seem to view them as having committed a grave error. In fact, just months ago, they were like many other women, living normal lives and facing no issues. However, many of their close relatives and supporters now see them as burdens and not only do they fail to alleviate their problems, but they also significantly damage their self-esteem (Balali & Ramazani, 2023).

Family support for these women eventually diminishes or ceases because everyone is caught up in their own problems. Moreover, the changing attitudes and stigmas attached to widowed women, such as notions of bad luck, susceptibility to mistakes, and suspicion, contribute to the growing distance between these women and their social circles. This all reflects the special and precarious situation faced by widows, where overcoming these challenges requires various forms of support from family, friends, support organizations, and even the state and legal frameworks. If the necessary support is not provided, they may eventually consider or decide to remarry (Davidson, 2020).

In Iranian society, as in all patriarchal societies, a woman's social status is tied to the presence of men, and being alone in society is seen as a sign of incompleteness for a woman. In Iran, widowed women are referred to as "lonely" or "headless," implying a lack of male support (Khosravan et al., 2013). The effects of widowhood in Iranian society differ for women, as one of the main features of the family system in Iran is the limitation of women's roles to family roles such as being a wife and mother. Girls are socialized into domestic roles like housework and childbearing, and cultural foundations support the idea that a woman's primary responsibility is within the family. As a result, many women do not assume other roles until their husbands pass away, and the death of a husband forces widows to take on new roles that they are not familiar with,

which can feel like a crisis, potentially increasing their desire for remarriage (Aghajanian, 2020).

Some widows eventually consider remarriage at some point in their lives, and research shows that the chances of remarriage are higher for widowed men and younger widows. Important factors influencing remarriage attitudes in widowed women include the age at widowhood and the availability of a suitable spouse, which also clarifies the reasons for widowed women's failure to remarry (Salkind, 2015). There have been few studies on the factors influencing remarriage after the death of a spouse. Studies (Cooney, 2001; Gentry, 1988) showed that widows who had remarried expressed fewer concerns than widows who had not remarried (Molaei Nejad et al., 2019). Many cultural and social factors may discourage women from pursuing remarriage. Remarriage for both divorced and widowed women in Iran is difficult, as virginity is considered a crucial factor in marriage, and it is frowned upon for a single man to marry a woman who is not a virgin. Therefore, young widows may have fewer chances to marry men who are marrying for the first time, which reduces their inclination toward remarriage. Additionally, men who are willing to marry such women often wish to take them as second wives, and many of these widows prefer to remain unmarried rather than being chosen as second wives (Haeri, 2014). Widowed women are often viewed with disdain due to poverty and sexual deprivation (Hennon & Brubaker, 2018), and especially in Iranian culture, they are seen as a threat to other marriages and families. In these conditions, only a few widows may decide to remarry, hoping to integrate into another family unit (Hamidi & Moeidfard, 2010). Therefore, the inclination to remarry among widowed women may vary due to various social, individual, and cultural reasons.

As a result, the aim of the present research is to qualitatively explore the lived experiences of widowed women based on their inclination to remarriage in order to fulfill their emotional and sexual needs, and subsequently, their economic and social needs, as defined by themselves and without considering any specific theoretical framework. This approach will help gain a more objective understanding of this phenomenon. Clearly, understanding the strengths and weaknesses of widowed women in facing this significant individual, family, and societal event is important, as it is essential to define and identify the meaning each woman experiences when facing such a major life event. By understanding the similarities and differences in their experiences, we can gain a better understanding of why widowed women consider remarriage. Finally, the research

aims to provide practical solutions and support for addressing the issues and challenges faced by these women. Undoubtedly, a better understanding of the conditions and situations of widowed women will lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the issue and better support from families, society, officials, and the women themselves. Therefore, the present research intends to qualitatively study the lived experiences of widowed women regarding their inclination toward remarriage.

2. Methods

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This research is qualitative and was conducted using thematic analysis. Due to the significant challenges faced by widowed women regarding remarriage, the study population consisted of widowed women in the city of Isfahan who had been widows for at least three years as of the year 2024. The sample size was determined based on purposive sampling for qualitative studies, and 17 participants were selected. Due to the specific conditions of the sample group and limited access to the entire population, snowball sampling was used, and participants were recruited through health centers and clinics throughout the city.

The inclusion criteria for the study were: the loss of a spouse due to death, residence in Isfahan, no history of remarriage after the spouse's death, willingness and interest in voluntarily participating in the study, ability to discuss questions and concerns, and literacy skills (reading and writing). The exclusion criteria included prominent signs of psychosis, suicidal thoughts as documented in health records, and substance abuse at the time of entering the study.

To enhance the validity and reliability of the findings, the researcher's continuous contact and communication with the participants helped establish trust and understanding of their experiences. Participants were also invited to review the reports and clarify any ambiguities in the coding process. The researcher provided participants with parts of the interview and coding to ensure that common meanings were achieved. Data saturation was also utilized to increase credibility. The stability of the findings was ensured through immediate transcription after recording the interviews, consulting with colleagues, re-examining the data, and conducting interviews with different participants.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Semi-Structured Interview

Semi-structured interviews, observation, and professional note-taking were used for data collection. The duration of each interview ranged from 90 to 120 minutes. In semi-structured interviews, questions are included in an interview guide, which focuses on the issues or areas to be covered and the paths to be followed. In this type of interview, the interviewer maintains control over the data-gathering process while having the flexibility to pursue new avenues based on the interviewee's responses. Thus, the interview began with a broad and general question, such as: "Tell me about the factors and conditions that you think would lead you to remarry," followed by exploratory questions to encourage widowed women to provide deeper insights. Additionally, relevant scientific sources and literature were reviewed to address these questions and concerns. The interviews were recorded digitally, and verbatim transcriptions were made immediately after recording.

2.3. Data Analysis

Due to the interest in researching the inclination toward remarriage among widowed women, a request was submitted to the Isfahan Medical Sciences Organization. Efforts were made to adhere to ethical considerations throughout the research. The women interviewed in this study had been widowed for at least three years. Before each interview, the purpose of the study was explained to the participant. After an initial discussion and clarification of the goals, trust-building efforts were made to ensure the interviewee's confidence. Permission was granted for audio recording and note-taking during the interview. The interviews were transcribed and entered into MAXQDA software for coding. After coding, the qualitative data obtained from the interviews were analyzed and interpreted, leading to the formation of initial codes. The next stage involved identifying and defining themes, followed by the construction of a thematic network, which was analyzed in the final step.

Thematic analysis is a method for analyzing qualitative data, particularly text. It involves identifying patterns or themes within the data. This method provides the essential skills needed for many qualitative analyses, particularly when working with non-numeric data such as sound, image, or text. A more detailed explanation of the data collection steps is provided below.

Stage 1: Familiarization with the Data

The first step involves gaining an overview of the collected data before starting separate analyses of individual units such as interviews. This may include transcribing audio recordings, reading through texts, taking initial notes, and generally reviewing the data to become familiar with it.

Stage 2: Coding

In the next step, the data were coded. Coding refers to highlighting parts of the text—usually phrases or sentences—and assigning brief labels or "codes" to describe their content. Each code essentially describes the idea or sentiment expressed in that portion of the text. In this stage, the interview text was reviewed more carefully, and anything related to the research question or potentially interesting was highlighted. In addition to highlighting phrases and sentences that matched these codes, new codes were continuously added to the text. After reviewing the text, all the data were collected in groups identified by the codes. These codes allowed for a compressed overview of the main points and common meanings that appeared repeatedly throughout the data.

Stage 3: Generating Themes

Next, the created codes were reviewed, patterns among them were identified, and themes began to emerge. Theme analysis generally provides broader insights than individual codes. Sometimes, multiple codes are combined into a single theme.

Stage 4: Reviewing and Refining Themes

At this stage, it was ensured that the identified themes accurately and effectively represented the data. The dataset was revisited, and the themes were compared with it. The following questions were addressed: Is something missing? Do these themes genuinely exist in the data? What can be changed to make the themes more effective? Issues in the themes were resolved by splitting, combining, discarding, or creating new themes to improve clarity and accuracy.

Stage 5: Defining and Naming Themes

At this stage, the final list of themes was established, and each theme was named and defined. Naming the themes involved providing a concise and clear label for each theme.

Stage 6: Writing

Finally, the data analysis was written up. The findings section addressed each theme, explaining how often each theme occurred and what its meaning was. The conclusion summarized the main points and demonstrated how the analysis answered the research question.

The data analysis method in this research is thematic network analysis, a suitable technique for thematic analysis

introduced by Attride-Stirling (2001). Thematic network analysis involves primary, organized, and overarching themes, providing an orderly structure for the data. In this study, primary themes consisted of initial points and codes from the text, and through their combination and summarization, organized themes emerged. The most significant themes were the overarching themes. Ultimately, the results from these themes were depicted at four levels,

and the most coherent and comprehensive themes and their relationships were presented. The thematic network was visually displayed as a web.

3. Findings and Results

Table 1 presents the distribution of study participants based on their demographic characteristics.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants

Participant Code	Occupation	Duration of Marriage	Duration of Widowhood
1	Employee	9 years	3 years
2	Housewife	8 years	4 years
3	Hairdresser	12 years	3.5 years
4	Freelance	16 years	3 years
5	Tailor	8 years	5 years
6	Housewife	14 years	3.5 years
7	Freelance	21 years	10 years
8	Carpet Weaver	25 years	15 years
9	Home-based Art Work	5 years	3.5 years
10	Housewife	6 years	4 years
11	Housewife	9 years	4 years
12	Freelance	10 years	5 years
13	Freelance	12 years	4 years
14	Employee	16 years	7 years
15	Employee	15 years	6 years
16	Housewife	8 years	4.5 years
17	Employee	10 years	3.5 years

As shown in Table 1, the demographic characteristics of the widow participants in this study are provided. These characteristics include their occupation, duration of marriage, and duration of widowhood.

This study aimed to explore the real-life experiences of widowed women to gain a deep understanding of the factors influencing their willingness to remarry. The research sought to answer the question: "What are the real-life experiences of widowed women regarding their willingness to remarry, and what categories and themes emerge from these experiences?" In this section, after a thorough and detailed

review of the interview sentences, long sentences containing important concepts were condensed and converted into initial codes. There were 1336 codes, which, after analysis, were organized into themes. These organizing themes were then consolidated into 4 main themes and 13 sub-themes.

Based on the experiences of the participants, the first main theme identified in this study was economic issues, which led to the identification of two sub-themes. Table 2 shows the extraction of initial concepts and their classification into main and sub-themes.

Table 2

Main and Sub-Themes Related to Economic Issues

Main Theme	Sub-Themes	Initial Concepts
Economic Issues	Survival Below the Line	Food insecurity, inability to pay for medical expenses, renting a home, poor housing conditions, frugality and depriving oneself of needs
	Employment Limitations	Caring for family members, physical incapacity, wage discrimination, employer distrust, insecurity in the workplace, inability to perform work, illiteracy, informal employment

As shown in Table 2, the main theme of economic issues includes two sub-themes: survival below the line and employment limitations, which were derived from a summary of the initial concepts obtained from the interviews.

1. Survival Below the Line

This sub-theme includes concepts such as food insecurity, inability to pay for medical expenses, renting a home, poor housing conditions, and frugality and depriving oneself of needs. The basic needs approach is very common in development studies and quality of life. This approach does not deal with abstract values and is connected to real-life matters. In the basic needs approach, income is not the absolute necessity for quality of life, but survival is emphasized through access to a basic level that includes life expectancy, absence of malnutrition, and access to education.

The main focus of this sub-theme is on the dimensions of deprivation and poverty. Everyone has the right to a minimum adequate life, and thus, benefiting from basic needs such as nutrition, healthcare, shelter, and educational opportunities, which are prerequisites for other aspects of life, was a major concern for the interviewees. Many of them, living below the poverty line, face various diseases due to poor nutrition, inadequate housing conditions, and the physical and emotional stress they endure. However, medical costs take up a significant portion of their income. As a result, despite being ill, they either settle for superficial treatments or completely abandon medical care. These conditions have led them to suffer from various health issues, including digestive, respiratory, neurological, and musculoskeletal diseases, or sometimes a combination of these. Many rely on various support networks such as family, friends, charity organizations, or welfare services, but these contributions only help them survive and have not significantly improved their quality of life.

"I have to cook less food, so I always wait for the kids to eat, and if there's anything left, I eat it myself." (Participant 1)

"I can't buy fruits often, only when the vendors offer discounts, I buy some." (Participant 9)

"I have lung problems and asthma. The chemicals in the salon make me feel terrible. Each spray costs 80 Tomans." (Participant 3)

"I used to be addicted. To continue treatment, I need to attend counseling classes for addiction, but I can't afford it." (Participant 4)

"I couldn't rent an independent house, so I live with my brother, which has caused many problems with his wife." (Participant 10)

"I live in a 24-meter garage, sharing a bathroom with the landlord." (Participant 12)

"I live in a 12-meter garage with my three children." (Participant 16)

"I don't buy clothes for myself or the kids; most of the clothes we wear are donated." (Participant 17)

2. Employment Limitations

This theme results from limitations in concepts such as caring for family members, physical incapacity, wage discrimination, employer distrust, insecurity in the workplace, inability to perform work, seasonal unemployment, illiteracy, and informal employment. Considering the undeniable role of employment in human life dynamics, the insignificant contribution of women in the job market can significantly affect their social welfare. However, this becomes a problem when the woman is the sole breadwinner for her family, and due to cultural or physical reasons, she cannot work. The research findings indicate that illiteracy or low literacy, cultural barriers preventing employment, working in the informal sector (at home) without any legal protection, and lack of security in workplaces all pose significant challenges for widowed women regarding their employment capabilities.

Participant 15, who is self-sufficient, states: "I took care of an elderly woman for about five months, working from 7 AM to 4 PM. But when the landlord found out I was a welfare child, he gradually added other household chores, even though our initial agreement was just for me to take care of the elderly woman."

Participant 2 says: "I really want to work, but there are no jobs. Working in people's homes has its issues, and my family doesn't let me work in other people's homes because they say it's unsafe."

Participant 7 shares: "When you work in people's homes, they treat you in ways that make you hate working. I've often told myself I won't work anymore, but I still need to, so I have to go. For instance, the landlord tells me, if you come by and see my husband hasn't gone to work yet, wait outside until he leaves, then come in. Or when her husband comes home, they quickly push me out of the house through the back door so he doesn't see me. They don't trust people and fear something might happen."

Based on the participants' experiences, the second main theme identified was emotional and sexual issues, which led to the identification of four sub-themes. Table 3 shows the

extraction of initial concepts and their categorization into main and sub-themes.

Table 3

Main and Sub-themes Related to Emotional and Sexual Issues

Main Theme	Sub-themes	Initial Concepts
Emotional and Sexual Issues	Need for companionship from the opposite sex	Need for support, need for affection, need for companionship in troubles, need for conversation, need for admiration from a man
	Need for sexual relationship	Need for a relationship in the first months after the spouse's death, sexual feelings after watching a film and talking about it, sexual fantasies
	Accessible sexual partners	Continuous sexual propositions, priority of men in establishing sexual relationships
	Ambivalence of fear and need	Sexual abstinence, feelings of guilt and pleasure, fear of exploitation

As shown in Table 3, the main theme of emotional and sexual issues consists of four sub-themes: need for companionship from the opposite sex, need for sexual relationship, accessible sexual partners, and the ambivalence of fear and need, which emerged from the summary of the initial concepts derived from the interviews with participants.

1. Need for Companionship from the Opposite Sex

Participants stated that after some time following the death of their spouse, they felt the need for the companionship of a man. This man did not necessarily need to be in a marital relationship with them, but rather could serve as a social friend and companion. One participant said:

"I wanted to have a friend with whom I could talk, because you can't talk to your children about everything. You can't talk to anyone, but I wanted a relationship where we wouldn't have a sexual relationship. Just talk, go out together, be together, talk with each other. Sometimes you need a friend, for example, when you don't have enough money and you want to talk to a friend about it, feel at ease. If you talk to someone of the opposite sex, even just a few words, it really changes the atmosphere. That's how I feel, and I have reasons for it" (Participant #2).

All participants indicated that emotional needs took priority over sexual ones, a need that became evident after some time following the death of their spouse. Participant #4 shared:

"About six months later, I really wanted to talk to someone. Usually, you want to talk to someone of the opposite sex. I wanted to talk to someone. I wanted to feel that someone, for example, was concerned about me. But I was very afraid. About 8 or 9 months later, I really wanted to have a sexual relationship with someone." Many participants expressed the need for a man's companionship in dealing with life's challenges, such as raising children. Some of them extended their emotional needs beyond

companionship to include the desire for non-sexual touch, interaction, and even admiration from a man. Participant #16 said about her non-sexual emotional needs:

"After my husband passed away or after a divorce, I didn't want sex, but I wanted to be together, to be affectionate, go on trips. I wanted someone to tell me I was pretty, just being together, going to a restaurant, holding hands, or being caressed. Even having my hand in his hair. It's the kind of thing you can't even do in a working situation. I still wanted to have someone" (Participant #16).

2. Need for Sexual Relationship

Some participants reported a decrease in sexual desire and a lack of need for sexual relationships for a period after the death of their spouse. This sense of disinterest was often associated with sexual and marital consent, where some participants tried to suppress their sexual needs with the hope of eventually reuniting with their spouse in the afterlife. Participant #16 described her experience:

"After my husband's death, I said I wouldn't talk to anyone. I started wearing thick socks, not looking at anyone, thinking I would be with my husband in the afterlife. I felt that way. But now, I laugh when I think about it, realizing that these feelings, like sexual feelings, are real and can't be ignored. They can be consciously controlled."

Widows, after some time following the death of their spouse, reported a renewed sexual need and sexual arousal, sometimes expressed in the form of orgasmic dreams. One participant said:

"If I thought about it, sometimes I would get wet or dream about it, but if it wasn't discussed, I didn't have any problems. I tried not to get into those conversations because just listening to it is a kind of arousal" (Participant #17). Most participants described these dreams as pleasant:

"Sometimes I had sexual memories. I had this feeling especially at night, when I was alone, or when I thought about the days we lived together. Even when I dreamed

about my husband, it felt like I was being satisfied" (Participant #3). Participant #7 mentioned:

"I dreamed about it once or twice. I really didn't want to wake up. I think despite what people say about these not being good dreams, I feel that these are human needs that remain alive. After my spouse passed away, I was very interested in sex. I missed him. At night, when I slept, I really felt the need. I was very confused. I was afraid it would cause psychological problems. I really felt the need. You couldn't talk to anyone about it, and you couldn't suppress it. I had to hide my desires and feelings" (Participant #10).

3. Accessible Sexual Partners

All participants, after the death of their spouse, encountered direct or indirect sexual propositions from men. These proposals were sometimes disguised as offers to help the woman fulfill her financial needs. In some cases, these propositions occurred almost immediately after the spouse's death, even during the funeral or the inheritance proceedings. One participant recalled:

"One of my husband's relatives was at the mourning ceremony, standing behind me, repeatedly giving me his phone number and saying, 'Here's my number.' Then my sister-in-law pulled me aside and said, 'Do you see how men are? I have my cousin's number and I know. He repeated the number for you so that you could call him.'" (Participant #4).

"I believe in sexual relationships within the family framework, and I made a promise to God that I would keep my dignity. Maybe I have sexual needs, but I will never pay attention to the proposal of a man who is driven by a fleeting desire" (Participant #1).

"I was a young and beautiful widow, but I wanted to live purely and not let my body be an object of temptation for random men. So I limited my relationships and firmly showed men that they shouldn't even think about making improper proposals" (Participant #6).

Widows explained these experiences as a result of differing priorities between men and women when

establishing relationships with the opposite sex, attributing such proposals to the opportunism of some men who are eager to satisfy their sexual needs without commitment through a widow. Participant #4 stated:

"Maybe widows want someone to show them affection, hold their hand, but unfortunately, once men hold a woman's hand, they expect something else. They can't just keep it at that level. They want to talk on the phone, hold your hand, do something for you, but there is always another request."

4. Ambivalence of Fear and Need

In some cases, widows who sought to fulfill their sexual needs entered temporary and religious relationships with men. They initially described these relationships as pleasant and enjoyable, but over time, due to concerns about the possible consequences of such a relationship being exposed, they ended it. One participant shared:

"There was someone I talked to. After getting to know each other better, he was single. Then, for example, we decided to become religiously committed. We did that. For a while, we had a relationship. It was really nice. But because I had children, I was so worried about being exposed that our relationship didn't continue" (Participant #17).

"I talked to someone, I liked him, and he liked me too. We went out together. It felt like I was 14-15 years old. My body trembled, and I was afraid of many things. But later, I remembered how beautiful that feeling was. It was a fear, but a very pleasurable one. I wanted our relationship to stay that way, but I ended up getting married temporarily and didn't feel good about that relationship. I ended it" (Participant #7).

Based on the participants' experiences, the third main theme identified was related to expectations about the future. An analysis of the participants' experiences led to the identification of three sub-themes. Table 4 shows the extraction of primary concepts and their categorization into main and sub-themes.

Table 4

Main and Sub-Themes Related to Future Expectations

Main Theme	Sub-Themes	Primary Concepts
Expectations About the Future	Ambiguous Outcome	Ideal Partner
		Companion for Childrearing
	Sustainability of Remarriage	Companion for Participation in Problems
		Exploitation of Women's Situation
		Rejection as a Wife Alongside the First Wife
		Exploitation of Women's Financial Status
	Disillusionment with the Outcomes of Remarriage	Separation Due to Children
		Disillusionment with Financial Support

As shown in Table 4, the main theme of "Expectations About the Future" includes three sub-themes: Ambiguous Outcome, Sustainability of Remarriage, and Disillusionment with the Outcomes of Remarriage. These were extracted from the summarization of the primary concepts gathered during the interviews with participants.

1. Ambiguous Outcome

All participants expressed hesitation regarding remarriage. They identified certain conditions and obstacles that would affect their decision to enter into a new marriage. Time, the conditions of the potential partner, and mistrust of men were cited as key factors influencing their decision-making regarding remarriage. Participant 4 states: "When a person is heartbroken, they can't decide if this person is suitable. If someone values themselves and knows who they should be with, that's great. I don't want to insult men because there are always exceptions, but men are usually always ready to be in a relationship. The question is, which of them is worthy of being with. Men see women as someone they can have relationships with, while women view men as someone they can have an emotional relationship with."

2. Sustainability of Remarriage

For the participants, being accepted as the sole woman in a man's life was of significant importance. They were unwilling to accept being a secondary wife or part of a polygamous or temporary relationship. Participant 9

describes this: "There was a situation where a man's wife had MS and was in a wheelchair, and I absolutely did not accept it. Women who go into the periphery of another woman's life, they just become the second wife, and everything gets trampled. Because everything goes back to the husband and children's home. They always justify it saying that the woman wanted to stay, and they wanted to do this for God's sake. They always make up excuses."

3. Disillusionment with the Outcomes of Remarriage

In many cases, the understanding of the obstacles to remarriage led the participants to a sense of hopelessness about marriage and to becoming accustomed to loneliness. Participant 17 reflects: "I got used to being alone and accepted the situation, it doesn't matter to me anymore. You see, I'm still young, but I've given up on everything. Maybe when the boys settle down, they'll get married and have children, and my spirit will change. I've been crushed and destroyed by life without being prepared for it. Now, I don't feel anything, even when emotional feelings come and go, I ignore them."

Based on the experiences of the participants, the fourth main theme identified was related to cultural and social issues, which resulted in the identification of four sub-themes through the analysis of the participants' experiences. Table 5 shows the extraction of initial concepts and their categorization into sub-themes and main themes.

Table 5

Main and Sub-themes Related to Cultural and Social Issues

Main Theme	Sub-themes	Initial Concepts
Cultural and Social Issues	Social Exclusion	Exclusion from family gatherings Exclusion from social relationships Exclusion from travel
	Cultural Stereotypes	Not accepting women as independent families Fear of others due to remarriage Widow is seen as harmful to the family
	Post-Widowhood Reconstruction	Finding a job and financial stability Overcoming previous negative experiences Developing individual abilities Improving mental health
	Gender Stereotypes	Women should not be in male environments Women cannot have any job Women are emotionally and psychologically dependent

As shown in Table 5, the main theme of cultural and social issues includes four sub-themes: social exclusion, belief in cultural stereotypes, post-widowhood

reconstruction, and gender stereotypes, which were extracted through the summarization of initial concepts from the interviews with participants.

1. Social Exclusion

Social exclusion is a process in which certain social groups and individuals are ostracized and marginalized, making it difficult for them to find opportunities to improve their conditions. In terms of relationships with family and acquaintances, as well as at work and socially, divorced women experience social and economic exclusion. When people marry, their communication networks become smaller and are more connected to their spouse's network. After divorce or the death of a spouse, many women find it difficult to form a new social network and expect this network to be rebuilt through remarriage. One participant (Participant 4) states: "I really love socializing, going out, traveling, and having fun with others, but there's a very negative view of widows. Married women don't like having us in their fun gatherings. With the slightest joke or laughter, they start giving us hard time."

2. Belief in Cultural Stereotypes

Negative stereotypes are part of the social exclusion process that deprives widowed women of social relationships and networks. Cultural stereotypes refer to beliefs and attitudes in popular culture that prevent women from real participation in society and perpetuate notions of weakness and incapacity. Women who believe in such cultural stereotypes about themselves develop negative attitudes and doubts about remarriage. This variable has been operationalized in three dimensions: (1) acceptance of negative beliefs about widowed and divorced women, (2) fatalism, and (3) generalization of negative attitudes towards men. One major and serious obstacle to the success of women in second marriages is the opposition from families. Sometimes this opposition is implicit, but at other times it is explicitly expressed. Participant 8 mentions, "I had a shared life experience before, and now that I want to remarry, I feel like no one accepts it."

3. Post-Widowhood Reconstruction

According to role theory, women who actively engage in their lives after divorce and widowhood and make good use of available resources can overcome limitations and problems and reconstruct their lives. Post-widowhood reconstruction refers to how well a woman has adapted to her new situation and how capable she is of solving life problems after losing her spouse. This variable has been

operationalized in four dimensions: (1) developing individual abilities, (2) overcoming difficult conditions after widowhood, (3) overcoming unpleasant experiences from previous marriages, and (4) satisfaction with current life. Widowed women who do not reconstruct their lives become disillusioned and pursue their lives with despair. Participant 15 states, "Back when I was young and educated, I had so many suitors, and now look at how my life turned out. Do you think anything will happen with these suitors now?"

4. Gender Stereotypes

Sociological studies show that gender stereotypes, which have been entrenched in society, are formed through the family, media, and education systems. Until these patterns are reformed, gender stereotypes will continue. A gender stereotype refers to attitudes or prejudices related to gender concerning tendencies or traits that men or women should embody as roles. Therefore, gender stereotypes can be understood as a set of shared cultural and social beliefs that assign specific capabilities and characteristics to individuals. Family and educational institutions, peer groups, the media, and other cultural and social organizations play a significant role in reproducing these stereotypes. Society considers many jobs and behaviors to be exclusive to men, and women who engage in these roles are often criticized. Widows, due to the absence of a man by their side, are forced to do many tasks and sometimes have to be present in male-dominated environments, which can cause harm and a negative perception from others. Participant 9 shares, "I have to do everything myself. When I enter a car repair shop or places like that, people look at me strangely, like I'm committing a crime." Participant 17 also mentions, "Things should be done like the average person does and avoid male-dominated environments, or else people think badly of you. It's enough to see you in a male environment, and they will say a thousand things about you."

In summary, in response to the research question regarding the factors influencing remarriage tendencies in widowed women, a total of 1,336 initial codes were selected after initial coding. Then, by analyzing these codes, the organizing themes were derived, which, after being consolidated, were categorized into four main themes and 13 sub-themes.

Table 6

Factors Influencing Remarriage Preferences

Main Themes	Sub-themes
Economic Issues	Living below the survival line Job limitations
Emotional and Sexual Issues	Need for companionship with the opposite sex Need for sexual relations Accessible sexual partners Duality of fear and need
Perception of the Future	Uncertain future Stability of marriage Pessimism about the future of remarriage
Cultural and Social Issues	Social deprivation Cultural stereotypes Rebuilding after spousal loss Gender stereotypes

As shown in Table 6, the factors influencing remarriage tendencies in widowed women were categorized into four main themes: cultural and social issues, future outlook, emotional and sexual issues, and economic issues. The sub-themes were as follows: the economic issues theme included two sub-themes: living below the survival line and job limitations. The emotional and sexual issues theme included four sub-themes: need for companionship with the opposite sex, need for sexual relationships, available sexual partners, and the ambivalence of fear and need. The future outlook theme included three sub-themes: unclear outcomes, stability of remarriage, and disillusionment with remarriage. The cultural and social issues theme included four sub-themes: social exclusion, cultural stereotypes, post-widowhood reconstruction, and gender stereotypes.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of the present study was to qualitatively investigate the factors influencing the tendency toward remarriage among widowed women in Isfahan. Despite the positive aspects of these women's lives, remarriage also presents challenges that may influence their inclination to remarry. This study aimed to comprehensively examine this phenomenon, considering both the positive and negative aspects that compel these women to remarry. After conducting the necessary interviews, the factors influencing remarriage were categorized into four main themes: cultural and social issues, perceptions of the future, emotional and sexual issues, and economic issues. The sub-themes were as follows: the theme of economic issues included two sub-themes, living below the poverty line and job limitations. The theme of emotional and sexual issues included four sub-

themes: the need for male companionship, the need for sexual relations, availability of sexual partners, and the duality of fear and need. The theme of perceptions of the future included three sub-themes: ambiguous future, marital stability, and hopelessness about remarriage. The theme of cultural and social issues included four sub-themes: social deprivation, cultural stereotypes, reconstruction after the loss of a spouse, and gender stereotypes.

These findings suggest that remarriage, as also highlighted in Iranian studies, carries risks and challenges that every woman considers before deciding to remarry. In many cases, these factors prevent remarriage. Part of the findings of this study align with Pasley et al.'s research on relational challenges, child-rearing, financial issues, and family expectations. Although the findings of this study are broader and specific to the Iranian society, the interpretations and interviews indicate that Cherlin's theory of incomplete institution can help explain the factors influencing remarriage in widowed women. Cherlin suggests that the lack of social norms for remarried families leads to challenges regarding role fulfillment, a lack of acceptable social methods for problem-solving, and the absence of institutionalized social support, all of which reduce the inclination toward remarriage in these women. Many widowed women with children have less inclination toward remarriage because they fear that their future spouse might harm their child, especially if the child is a daughter or very young. They believe that the person who enters their lives as a spouse may not have a paternal view of their children and might harm them either sexually, physically, or psychologically. Due to this fear and concern about their own right to have a spouse and secure their future, they often forgo remarriage for the sake of their children and to protect

them. Many women, due to the unpleasant experiences from their previous marriages, are afraid that if they remarry, their past life might repeat. These fears and concerns lead them to distance themselves from society, resulting in isolation, which further leads to depression and damage to their self-esteem.

The results of the study revealed that widowed women face numerous challenges within their families and in society, which often disrupt their personal and social lives and seriously threaten their health. However, becoming the head of a household is not only associated with negative consequences for women but can also lead to positive outcomes such as positive self-concept and social maturity. Therefore, to enhance the health and empowerment of widowed women, multidimensional programs are required that address all aspects of their well-being. These women can also be prepared to adapt to new, multifaceted, and sometimes contradictory roles through training in necessary techniques. They should also receive more economic support to break the cycle of poverty and disability within their families, enabling their children to have better lives. From a social perspective, providing appropriate education and helping to change gender stereotypes can improve the social status of widowed women, so that their role as the head of a household is more easily accepted in society. This would prevent them from being pressured into remarriage under psychological strain and allow them to marry when they find the right person.

The theme of economic issues included two sub-themes: living below the poverty line and job limitations. Many women in disadvantaged areas face significant challenges after the death of their spouse and the assumption of the head of the household role. In some cases, the children in these families are forced to work as child laborers and are removed from school. This situation creates a cycle of poverty within the family, which is passed down to the next generation, leading to an uncertain future for them. Economic issues are, in fact, the most critical concern that widowed women face in their daily lives, and the intensity of this issue is such that, at times, other people primarily recognize widowed women through their economic struggles. One of the reasons for their inclination to remarriage is the desire to escape these economic difficulties. This issue becomes more severe as the number of dependents increases. Even if these women are employed and earn an income, they often face more challenges than other women in securing economic resources. Several reasons may explain this phenomenon, including the fact that women in our society do not receive

economic socialization from a young age and cannot benefit from the supportive networks and friendships that often provide economic advantages for men. Thus, even if they are employed or have a job, after the husband's death, they solely rely on their own salary and are excluded from this support network, which can influence their decision to remarry. This issue becomes more challenging for widowed women who are the primary caregivers for children. Many widowed women, especially those of older age, have lower levels of education and fewer job opportunities. Furthermore, due to the increasing needs of their children and adolescents, they face even greater economic difficulties, which progressively worsen their situation and lead them to consider remarriage as a solution to escape these problems.

The way expenses are allocated in households headed by widowed women reveals that they only meet the basic needs of life. Approximately two-thirds (61.5%) of the family expenses are spent on food and clothing, while 27.1% is spent on matters such as children's education, housing costs, and medical care. Most of the women interviewed considered economic issues as their primary concern and the most significant factor influencing their inclination to remarriage. The economic challenges faced by widowed women, including the issue of returning to their father's household, taunts and insinuations from relatives, the lack of child care within the paternal home, inappropriate interactions with others, and, most importantly, the crisis of loneliness and the absence of emotional support, collectively contribute to their inclination toward remarriage. The findings of this study align with the prior research that identified economic issues as significant factors affecting remarriage (Faridi Dastjerdi, 2023; Mohammadi, 2020; Nasri, 2024).

The theme of emotional and sexual issues included four sub-themes: the need for male companionship, the need for sexual relationships, the availability of sexual partners, and the duality of fear and need. In most cases, due to the loss of their spouse and the subsequent dissolution of their social relationships, such as friendships, neighborly ties, and to a lesser extent, familial connections, widowed women experience significant emotional challenges in their daily lives. They are deprived of basic rights such as remarriage and forming emotional relationships with others. In most cases, they become solely dependent on their children, and this excessive emotional attachment later affects their children's independence, particularly when their children leave for marriage, education, or other reasons. The emotional issues of widowed women are exacerbated.

Although social acceptance of remarriage is increasingly evident in interactions among individuals, and widowed women form stronger social bonds, this leads to greater inclination toward remarriage. In fact, societal acceptance of remarriage facilitates the process for widowed women. Consequently, women are more likely to remarry without hesitation when their emotional, sexual, and security needs are met. Studies also indicated that emotional pressures are one of the primary obstacles to remarriage for women (Ghanbari Barzain et al., 2023; Pothisiri et al., 2024; Sari Rahmaini et al., 2024).

Widowed women are forced to play multiple roles that often conflict with one another. A large number of these women face poverty, incapacity, and a lack of power, especially in managing family finances, which negatively impacts their self-esteem and mental health, leading to depression, other disorders, and feelings of loneliness. This situation creates a desire for companionship and emotional support from a man (Raymo et al., 2024; Ridha et al., 2024). Low self-esteem may also be another cognitive trait of widowed women. Numerous studies have examined loneliness, and although these studies have shown that low self-esteem plays a significant role in perpetuating loneliness, there appears to be a bidirectional relationship between low self-esteem and loneliness. In other words, a vicious cycle exists where low self-esteem and loneliness mutually reinforce each other. Lonely individuals often believe that they are inferior, worthless, unattractive, undesirable, and unable to interact socially. Given the psychological effects of loneliness, it can be concluded that many of the emotional and psychological challenges faced by widowed women stem from their feelings of loneliness, which may influence their inclination toward remarriage. The results of this study align with the prior research that discussed the relationship between satisfaction, remarriage quality, and the need for affection and companionship (Yekleh, 2019; Yekleh et al., 2018).

The results of this study also support the prior findings that examined the impact of future perceptions on the inclination toward remarriage (Emami et al., 2022; Ghanbari Barzain et al., 2023).

The theme of the perception of the future includes three sub-themes: uncertain outcomes, marriage stability, and hopelessness about future marriage. Many widows, due to unpleasant experiences in their past lives, are filled with fear and worry that if they marry again, their previous life may repeat itself. They make no effort to resolve these fears and concerns and, in many cases, are unaware that these issues

are solvable. Because of these fears and anxieties, they distance themselves from society, and this isolation leads to depression and a deterioration of their self-esteem. The fear of incompatibility with a potential spouse and the possibility of a failed marriage causes these women to feel hopeless and undeserving of a good life. As a result, they make no effort to marry or form a quality life. Sometimes, societal views further exacerbate this issue. In addition to all the previously mentioned problems, the loss of a spouse, especially at a young age, and the unfortunate consequences of widowhood, lead to various mental health issues such as depression and pessimism for these women. Furthermore, the overwhelming concern about their future and loneliness after their children leave is distressing, which worsens their mental health. The self-blame experienced by widows brings nothing but feelings of despair, frustration, and loss of self-confidence. Eventually, this overwhelming sense of frustration and loss of dignity causes them to retreat from social activities. The emotional needs of widows are related to their attitudes toward marriage.

According to functional structural theory, widows are fundamentally at odds with the traditional and natural structure of dual-parent families. The existence of this group of families is viewed as a deviation from the norm. "Life chances" for children in these families decrease significantly due to the absence of the father and the lack of parental authority to organize family life, which leads to crises. With women entering the labor market instead of performing traditional roles (housekeeping), the consequences manifest in improper child-rearing, poor academic performance, and delinquency. These crises may lead women to consider remarriage. However, these concerns and lack of trust in the future can cause doubt in this decision, and in many cases, they may endure these crises and decide against remarriage. Those who intend to remarry understand that replacing a lost partner (due to divorce, abandonment, or death) does not restore the family to its original state. Instead, remarriage brings unforeseen challenges, including loyalty issues with children, undermining parental responsibilities, and merging different family cultures, all of which influence their attitude toward remarriage.

The theme of cultural and social issues includes four sub-themes: social deprivation, cultural stereotypes, rebuilding after the loss of a spouse, and gender stereotypes. The findings of this study align with the research of Balali and Ramazani (2023) on the challenges related to children and family (Balali & Ramazani, 2023); Naseri and Yazdkhasti (2019) on cultural changes and the rise of individualistic

values (Naseri & Yazdkhasti, 2019); and Sadeghi et al. (2019) on ethnic prejudices hindering remarriage and marriage rituals (Sadeghi et al., 2019).

Widows represent a vulnerable and defenseless group in society, and they may sometimes face abuse and find it difficult to re-enter social life. As a result, they encounter various social insecurities. Widows attract more public attention than other women and often find themselves in the spotlight. Due to the fear of being stigmatized, they may be compelled to appear less in society. These women experience social neglect due to their status as widows and are marginalized by society. They are not accepted and are rejected as individuals who do not adhere to social norms. The loss of a husband creates a negative perception of women among their colleagues, which impacts their social relationships.

As many gender stereotypes still exist in the studied society, the notion of a woman as a widow is unacceptable to many people, so widows are often seen as uncared for, and a stigma of neglect surrounds them. Although the economic pressures on widows are significant, this is not the only issue that threatens them. In societies like ours, where a woman's social credibility and security are tied to the men in her family, a woman without a man is perceived by many men as an opportunity or an unclaimed body to be possessed and exploited. This issue manifests in various forms, ranging from undesirable marriage proposals to requests for temporary marriages or even sexual assault. Several of the women interviewed described the constant pressure from men who would persistently offer temporary marriages. The absence of a man, as a guardian and companion, exposes a widow's body to threats from other men. This information is also shared among other women. Therefore, they try to maintain as much distance as possible between their families and such women. Even if a widow had a relationship with their family prior to losing her spouse, they will distance themselves once she is left alone and without a guardian, fearing that their men may try to exploit her, ultimately betraying their own wives. In fact, a widow who lives alone, without the presence of men, is viewed by other women as a threat, a threat that must be avoided by distancing themselves and severing social ties. It is clear, therefore, that such women in our society do not have the right to engage in relationships with men. If they form even the slightest social relationship with a man, they are labeled as prostitutes or temporary wives, which results in the complete tarnishing of their social relationships.

Many widowed women seek to regain their lost freedoms by seeking divorce; however, a significant percentage of these women are dissatisfied with the limitations and intrusions imposed by their family members, viewing them as hindrances to their security and freedom. The traditional perspective prevalent in society does not allow families to regard their daughters as single and free once they return from married life. Instead, these families impose even more restrictions on their movements and employment opportunities.

The gender differences in experiencing psychological pressures and difficulties are certainly not fully inherited; rather, it is the differing roles expected of women and men that lead to varying psychological outcomes. Women are typically expected to be responsive to the needs of others and to provide physical, emotional, and psychological support to family members (spouses, children, and elders). Furthermore, women are generally responsible for managing the household (shopping, cleaning, cooking, child care, and addressing children's health, educational, and behavioral issues). The tasks women perform at home are unstructured, without fixed starting and ending times, and they receive no compensation for their work and activities. This may explain why depression and anxiety are significantly higher in women who have several young children, especially those who are the head of their households, compared to men and other groups of women. This pressure is related to the multiple roles these women must bear. In fact, women with young children are often full-time workers who must juggle multiple, sometimes conflicting roles, all while having little power and control within the family. Generally, role conflict occurs when a person is faced with incompatible demands and expectations that cause conflict in fulfilling them, and simultaneously attempts to meet all of them, even though this is not practically possible. Role ambiguity arises when a person lacks a clear and definitive understanding of the expected behaviors, demands, and expectations. In widowed women, role conflict occurs due to the inability to reconcile their own needs with those of their children and other relatives. One of the main sources of stress for widowed women is their concerns about the financial and educational future of their children. As a result, the level and intensity of stress are significantly higher in younger mothers with young children compared to older mothers with adult children or those without children.

In societies like Iran, where women's social status and security are often dependent on male family members, a woman without a man is seen by many men as an

opportunity, a body without ownership, which they seek to possess or exploit. This issue manifests in various forms, starting with proposals for undesirable marriages and inappropriate conditions, and sometimes leading to requests for temporary marriages or even sexual assault (Mahat Shamir & Leichtentritt, 2024; Mahdi et al., 2023). These women, due to their multiple roles and responsibilities, often have no spare time for social interactions. Over time, this leads to their social ostracization. Furthermore, the lack of full participation from these women negatively affects their children, while the women themselves are exposed to social harm due to their efforts to support their families (Haeri, 2014). All of these factors contribute to these women's increased tendency to remarry.

Interviews with widowed women were conducted under a set of specific ethical guidelines. These guidelines ensured that the women were not psychologically pressured and that they could freely choose not to answer any questions they did not wish to respond to. According to ethical standards, the participants' identities were kept confidential. This made it challenging to re-contact participants for additional data collection or clarification. The resistance of some women who had lost their husbands to participating in the study also posed limitations in data collection. Due to the social and familial conditions of the participants, finding individuals from the sample group was particularly challenging. The majority of widowed women were unwilling to cooperate and be interviewed. It is recommended that workshops be held for families with members who have lost their spouses and returned to the family to improve communication with them.

5. Suggestions and Limitations

The sample of this study consisted of women visiting nutrition clinics in Shiraz, and the findings of this study cannot be generalized to men. A limitation of the study was the difficulty in selecting and coordinating with the participants to take part in the test and the large number of questions. Another limitation of this study was that it was conducted among visitors to nutrition clinics in Shiraz. Therefore, caution should be exercised when generalizing the results of this research to individuals in other cities. One other limitation was the assessment of participants' honesty in answering questions, which was beyond the researcher's control. Given that the study was limited to visitors to a few nutrition clinics in Shiraz, the generalization of the findings to other samples should be done with caution. This study was

cross-sectional and was not longitudinal. Naturally, cross-sectional studies are subject to fundamental and cultural changes because the researchers had no control over the recent life events of the participants. Another limitation of the present study is that, given that the sampling method used was convenience sampling, the generalizability of the results should be made with caution. This study was descriptive and non-experimental, so causal inferences about the results are not permissible. Since the study was cross-sectional and the researchers had no control over the recent life events of the participants, it is recommended that future studies be conducted longitudinally and with larger sample sizes. It is also recommended that future research use simple random sampling methods to reduce sampling error. The data in this study were collected using questionnaires; it is recommended that future studies employ other measurement methods, such as semi-structured interviews, continuous observations, and other qualitative methods. Based on the findings of this study, binge eating can seriously be influenced by body checking behaviors, body image, cognitive emotion regulation, and coping styles in patients. Therefore, it is recommended that future studies examine the role of cognitive emotion regulation and coping strategies in experimental designs regarding binge eating. This study was conducted in nutrition clinics in Shiraz, but since Iran has a different cultural, ethnic, and religious background, similar studies should be conducted in different communities and cultures across the country.

Authors' Contributions

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

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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