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The Demographic Aspects of the Gray Divorce Phenomenon in Türkiye

Abstract

This study aims to analyze the gray divorce phenomenon, which has increased in Türkiye in recent years, through the lens of demographic indicators. Gray divorce refers to the dissolution of marriages among individuals aged 50 and over, and it shows an increasing trend in both European countries and Türkiye. The research draws from the Turkish Statistical Institute's (TÜİK) divorce data for the period 2001-2024, providing indicators at the age, gender, and regional levels. Findings indicate that gray divorces in Türkiye have increased significantly in both number and proportion during this period. As of 2024, approximately one-fifth of divorces in Türkiye are individuals aged 50 and older, with the highest proportion of gray divorces belonging to the 50-54 age group. Among gray divorces, the number of men on a gender basis is significantly higher than women. In addition, there are remarkable differences between geographical regions. Gray divorce rates are generally low in the provinces of the Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia Regions, while they are comparatively higher in certain provinces within the Eastern Black Sea, Western Anatolia, Aegean, and Marmara Regions. Data show that the phenomenon of gray divorce in Türkiye is a part of social transformation.

Keywords: Divorce, Gray Divorce, Late-life Divorces, Demographic Indicators, Türkiye.

Türkiye'de Gri Boşanma Olgusunun Demografik Görünümleri

Öz

Bu çalışma, son yıllarda Türkiye'de artış gösteren gri boşanma olgusunu demografik göstergeler ışığında analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Gri boşanma olgusu 50 yaş ve üzerindeki bireylerin evliliklerini sonlandırma sürecini ifade etmekte olup hem Avrupa ülkelerinde hem de Türkiye'de artan bir eğilim göstermektedir. Araştırma, Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu'nun (TÜİK) 2001-2024 dönemine ait boşanma verilerinden yararlanarak yaş, cinsiyet ve bölgesel düzeyde göstergeler sunmaktadır. Bulgular, söz konusu dönemde Türkiye'de gri boşanmaların hem sayıca hem de oransal olarak belirgin bir biçimde arttığını göstermektedir. 2024 yılı itibarıyla Türkiye'de boşanmaların yaklaşık beşte biri 50 yaş ve üzeri bireylerden oluşurken gri boşanmalar içerisinde en yüksek oran 50-54 yaş grubuna aittir. Gri boşanmalar içerisinde cinsiyet bazında erkeklerin sayısı kadınlardan belirgin bir biçimde yüksektir. Ayrıca coğrafi bölgeler arasında dikkat çekici farklılıklar bulunmaktadır. Doğu ve Güneydoğu Anadolu Bölgesindeki illerde gri boşanma oranları genel olarak düşük düzeylerdeken Doğu Karadeniz, Batı Anadolu, Ege ve Marmara bölgelerindeki bazı illerde gri boşanma oranları nispeten daha yüksektir. Veriler Türkiye'de gri boşanma olgusunun toplumsal dönüşümün bir parçası olduğunu göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Boşanma, Gri Boşanma, Geç Yaşı Boşanma, Demografik Göstergeler, Türkiye.

1. Introduction

The transformation of social structures strongly affects the institution of the family and the phenomenon of marriage. One of the most striking reflections of this transformation is the phenomenon of gray divorce. The concept of gray divorce, which refers to divorces after middle age, is used to express the phenomenon of ending marriages, especially for individuals aged 50 and over. The concept was first inspired by the report titled *The Divorce Experience: A Study of Divorce at Midlife and Beyond*, published by the *American Association of Retired Persons (AARP)* in 2004 (Montenegro, 2004). In this report, attention was given to the increase in the divorce rates of individuals over the age of 50. Later, on the basis of the analogy of graying hair, the expression gray divorce first became widespread in the media and popular literature and then became the subject of demographic research and academic studies. The article titled *The Gray Divorce Revolution: Rising Divorce Among Middle-Aged and Older Adults, 1990-2010*, authored by Brown & Lin (2012), is the first study to use the concept of gray divorce in the academic literature. This study uses gray divorce to describe the phenomenon of divorce among adults aged 50 and older and introduces this concept to the literature.

The growing importance of gray divorce stems from dynamics such as divorce becoming more socially acceptable since the 1960s, women's increasing levels of education and economic independence, and the increase in average life expectancy (McKinley, 2023). The aging of individuals, particularly those referred to as the Baby Boomer generation (those born before 1965), has led to fundamental changes in the dynamics of marriage in middle age and beyond, accelerating the examination of this concept as a separate phenomenon (Montenegro, 2004: 2).

The first empirical studies on the phenomenon of gray divorce in an international context emerged in the United States (US) in the 1980s (Uhlenberg & Myers, 1981; Berardo, 1982; Hammond & Muller, 1992). Although these pioneering studies did not directly use the concept of "gray divorce", they showed that divorce rates increased among older adults but did not discuss in detail the causes and social reflections of divorce in older individuals (Brown & Lin, 2012: 732). Between 1990 and 2010, the divorce rate among individuals aged 50 and over in the United States doubled, and by the early 2020s, divorces in this age group accounted for approximately one quarter of all divorces (Brown & Lin, 2022: 1710). Similar trends in gray divorce rates have been observed in European countries such as the United Kingdom, Sweden, and Germany (Tosi & van den Broek, 2020; Bildtgård & Öberg, 2022; Buyukcececi & Leopold, 2024). The striking upward trend in divorce rates among middle-aged and older individuals has led to a concentration of research on the causes and consequences of gray divorce (Sayer & Bianchi, 2000; Canham et al., 2014; Crowley, 2019a; Högnäs, 2020).

The upward trend in divorce rates observed in the United States and European countries has also been evident in Türkiye in recent years. One of the key indicators of demographic transformation in Türkiye in recent years has been the aging of the population. According to data from the Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK), the increase in average life expectancy and the decline in total fertility rates have also opened up discussions on changes in marriage and divorce dynamics. In this context, when the statistical data published in recent years are examined, a serious decrease in marriage rates and a regular increase in divorce rates draw

attention. The increase in divorces, especially among middle-aged and older individuals, has recently started to be the subject of news in the national press. In such news reflected in the press, the number of divorces aged 50 and over in Türkiye increased by 44.53% between 2020 and 2024 (Milliyet, 2025; NTV News, 2025). According to 2024 data, approximately one-fifth (19%) of divorces occur between individuals aged 50 and over (TÜİK, 2025). These data show that the phenomenon of gray divorce is becoming an increasingly prominent demographic reality in Türkiye and present a new area of study for both policymakers and academics working on the subject.

Although the phenomenon of gray divorce has been extensively addressed in the international literature, the absence of academic studies focusing on the divorce experiences of individuals aged 50 and over in Türkiye is noteworthy. In this context, as of July 2025, there are no postgraduate theses on the concept of "gray divorce" in the records of the Higher Education Council National Thesis Center. Similarly, there are no academic articles published in the national article database DergiPark that directly address the concept of gray divorce.

This study aims to examine the phenomenon of gray divorce in Türkiye in light of demographic data and to make a modest contribution to the national literature. In this context, using divorce statistics from the Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK) for the period 2001-2024, gray divorce rates in Türkiye over the last quarter-century and the upward trend in these rates have been identified. The study is limited to the period 2001-2024, as the divorce statistics data made available by TÜİK are limited to the last 25 years. Within the scope of the research, divorce rates over the age of 50, which can be called gray divorces in Türkiye, were obtained from the data set of divorce statistics, and the data obtained were evaluated at the level of gender, age groups and provinces. In addition, statistical data on gray divorce figures were visualized with graphs, and the findings were interpreted within the framework of the literature. Thus, this study aims to provide a holistic perspective on the phenomenon of gray divorce in Türkiye by making use of both theoretical discussions in the literature and current statistical findings.

2. Causes of Gray Divorce

Gray divorce refers to the tendency of adults aged 50 and over to end their marriages, and it has become an increasingly common social phenomenon in the United States over the past five decades (Brown & Lin, 2012). This trend, also known as late-life divorce, is increasing in parallel with the increase in the elderly adult population and is particularly noticeable among individuals aged 65 and older (Canham et al., 2014; Brown & Lin, 2022). According to the data, one in four people who divorce in the U.S. is over the age of 50. While divorce rates among middle-aged adults remain relatively stable, the upward trend continues among older age groups (Lin et al., 2016: 1031). In this context, current statistics show that individuals aged 50 and over account for approximately 36% of all divorces (Brown & Lin, 2022: 1710). Similar trends in the increase in divorce rates among older age groups are also observed in European countries. In Germany, crude divorce rates for individuals aged 60 and over rose from 3.7-15.6 for men and from 2.1-9.3 for women between 1991 and 2020 (Buyukkececi & Leopold, 2024: 1). The findings obtained in Sweden show that divorce between the ages of 50-60 is becoming increasingly common. According to data, divorce rates for individuals over the age of 60 in Sweden have more than doubled since the millennium (Bildtgård, 2022: 40). These increases make it necessary to examine the causes of gray divorce separately in the case of divorce.

Divorce is a multidimensional social phenomenon, and theoretical frameworks to explain this phenomenon have transformed over time in line with changing demographic structures and social trends. The current literature shows that women's increasing education level and labor force participation opportunities provide economic independence and security; this is an important factor in increasing divorce rates by allowing women to end unsatisfactory marriages without financial concerns (Gigy & Kelly, 1993; Amato & Previti, 2003; Hawkins et al., 2012).

Undoubtedly, the determinations listed above as the main grounds for divorce are also valid for divorces after middle age. However, gray divorce is a complex social phenomenon shaped by multidimensional factors such as individuals' health status, economic resources, social networks and family relationships (Canham et al., 2014: 592). Some researchers note that marital dissatisfaction is a more determining factor than economic independence is, especially in women's decision to divorce (Sayer & Bianchi, 2000; Apostolou et al., 2019). In this context, studies focusing on marital dissatisfaction show that such dissatisfaction often occurs together with problematic behavior patterns such as gambling, abuse (emotional, verbal, or physical), infidelity, and financial problems (Sayer & Bianchi, 2000: 937). In general, verbal, physical or emotional violence is one of the leading reasons for the termination of marriage; this is followed by value and lifestyle differences, cheating and alcohol or drug use (Montenegro, 2004: 2).

Undoubtedly, the findings listed above as the main reasons for divorce also apply to divorces after middle age. However, gray divorce is a complex social phenomenon shaped by multidimensional factors such as individuals' health status, economic resources, social networks, and family relationships (Canham et al., 2014; Benson et al., 2022). This is because deciding to divorce after a long-term marriage is not easy, and the decision to divorce is often postponed due to the intertwining of positive and negative experiences in the relationship (Canham et al., 2014: 591). A study conducted in the United States (Crowley, 2019a) revealed that divorce is generally not a quick or easy decision for middle-aged couples. According to previous studies, the majority of couples value the responsibility of marriage and decide to divorce only after serious relationship tensions have accumulated (Crowley, 2019a: 66). The presence of children is one of the main factors that makes it difficult for couples to decide to divorce. Both young adults and middle-aged and older individuals think long and hard about how divorce affects not only their own future but also their children's well-being. Even in the presence of serious problems, such as domestic violence, the most important reason some people delay their decision to divorce for so long is the desire to maintain marriage for the sake of their children (Montenegro, 2004: 2). Therefore, individuals with children are less willing to divorce an abusive spouse than are those without children (Apostolou et al., 2019: 27).

In some cases, divorce stems from choices based on a quest for personal growth, whereas in older age groups, marriages mostly end due to serious relationship conflicts and tensions (Crowley, 2019a: 49). In this context, factors such as incompatible life goals, personality changes, the search for romantic fulfillment, inequalities within the relationship, and the desire to escape abuse are seen to play a role in older age divorces (Bildtgård & Öberg, 2022: 40). On the other hand, some studies reveal that a quarter of divorces among middle-aged and older adults occur without any problematic behavior or obvious issues, mostly due to the gradual fading of love and changes in family life over time (Montenegro, 2004: 2). In another study conducted on individuals aged 46-59 years, participants cited insufficient emotional communication, the existence of alternative relationships such as long-term adultery, short-

term infidelities, and physical or emotional abuse as the main relationship problems affecting their decision to divorce (Crowley, 2019a: 54).

Studies focusing on the causes of gray divorce in terms of marriage numbers and marriage durations have revealed that individuals who divorced early in life view divorce as an easier option in subsequent marriages; therefore, individuals who remain in their second or third marriage have a greater probability of divorce than those in their first marriage (Canham et al., 2014: 592). Similarly, gray divorce is approximately three times more common among couples who remarry after long-term marriages (40 years or more) than among couples who remain in their first marriage. Furthermore, the duration of marriage does not serve as a protective factor against divorce for remarried couples to the same extent as it does for first-time married couples (Lin et al., 2016: 1027).

According to the results of another study (Lin et al., 2016) containing interesting findings on the causes of gray divorce, contrary to popular belief, the empty nest syndrome¹ that emerges later in life, as well as life transitions such as retirement or health problems, does not constitute a significant risk factor for gray divorce. The study determined that marriage duration, marriage quality, home ownership, and financial asset levels have a risk-reducing effect on gray divorce. Conversely, gray divorce is more common among socially and economically disadvantaged couples, suggesting that marital history and economic resources are key determinants of late-life divorce (Lin et al., 2016: 1022). Furthermore, more than half of the divorced couples did not have children in their households (53.73%), and there was no significant difference between divorced couples and married couples in terms of the proportion of retired spouses and the prevalence of chronic diseases (Lin et al., 2016: 1028).

In their pioneering work on divorce after middle age, Uhlenberg and Myers (1981) identified four main factors that explain the increase in divorce rates among older adults. First, a significant proportion of older individuals have experienced divorce in earlier periods of their lives and have therefore remarried. Remarriages are more likely to end in divorce than first marriages. Second, the fact that divorce has become a common social phenomenon leads older adults to view both their own likelihood of divorce and examples of divorce in their surroundings as more normal and acceptable. Third, the increase in women's participation in the workforce strengthens their economic independence and enables them to support themselves outside of marriage. This also makes divorce more feasible. Finally, a longer life expectancy reduces the likelihood of marriages ending due to death, thereby extending the period of exposure to the risk of divorce (Uhlenberg & Myers, 1981: 278).

The phenomenon of gray divorce has numerous interconnected causes that cannot be reduced to a single reason. The factors influencing couples' decisions to divorce, particularly those aged 50 and above, exhibit a complex and multidimensional structure. Moreover, certain aspects of social reality can sometimes be observed more closely by professionals directly involved with the relevant phenomenon than by those in academic circles. Divorce is one of

¹ As the number of children increases, the family structure expands, but it begins to shrink as children leave home during young adulthood to marry or live independently. When the last child leaves home, a new phase called the "empty nest period" begins in the family. This phase leads to significant changes in family dynamics and can become a source of psychological crisis for some parents. In particular, feelings of sadness and depression triggered by the children's departure can lead to a condition known as the "empty nest syndrome" (Kalkandeler Özdiç, 2024: 132-134).

the main areas that exemplifies this situation. In this context, divorce lawyers, by virtue of their professional practice, have the opportunity to directly witness and repeatedly experience the dynamics that shape the divorce decisions of thousands of clients. In this context, according to the accounts of some divorce lawyers informed by practical observations regarding the gray divorce phenomenon, the main reasons for gray divorces can be summarized under the following six headings (McKinley, 2023; O'Mara, 2025):

1. *Empty Nest Syndrome*: The loneliness parents experience when their children leave home can lead to the emergence of marital problems that were previously hidden due to the distraction of raising children.
2. *Adjustment to Retirement*: With retirement, significant changes occur in couples' daily routines and roles; after many years of working life, uncertainty regarding identity and time management can create new areas of tension in the marital relationship.
3. *Financial Variables*: Financial factors such as retirement, loss of income or unexpected expenses can strain the marital relationship by causing differences in opinions on financial management.
4. *Personal growth and value changes*: Over time, individuals' personal development processes, value judgments and priorities may change. This situation can trigger emotional distancing between couples, paving the way for the emergence of irreconcilable differences and the decision to divorce.
5. *Increased Life Expectancy*: Thanks to advances in healthcare, it has become possible for individuals to live longer and healthier lives. This reduces the tendency for individuals to remain in unhappy marriages and strengthens their desire to spend their remaining years in a more fulfilling manner.
6. *Greater social acceptance*: The greater social acceptance of divorce and the reduction in stigma surrounding it have alleviated the pressure on couples to maintain unsatisfactory marriages solely for the sake of social expectations, making divorce a more accessible option later in life.

3. Potential Consequences of Gray Divorce

Although gray divorce provides happiness, independence and freedom for some at the individual level, it also presents very important social, psychological and economic problems (Crowley, 2019b: 1455). Individuals who have experienced divorce, whether at a young age or at an older age, describe the most distressing aspect of divorce in both cases as concerns about children. While women cite this reason more frequently than men do, children are a primary concern for both genders. Men, in particular, are intensely concerned about the sustainability of their relationships with their children after divorce, as they are often unable to obtain custody rights (Montenegro, 2004: 2). Additionally, it appears that there are gender differences in the factors influencing the decision to divorce. In this respect, women are more willing to divorce a harmful spouse, whereas individuals with children are less willing to separate than individuals without children are (Apostolou et al., 2019: 27). This suggests that parenthood is a significant limiting factor in the decision to divorce.

Parent-child relationships also play a decisive role in the postdivorce adaptation process; it can be said that parent-child disconnection further exacerbates the negative psychological effects

of gray divorce for both mothers and fathers (Lin et al., 2023: 95). After a gray divorce, older individuals face a significant increase in the risk of social isolation, which suggests that in the absence of a spouse, adult children become a critical source of solidarity and support for elderly parents. However, gray divorce can have negative effects on parent-adult-child relationships, and the weakening of these relationships can significantly reduce the functionality of family-based safety nets for older individuals. Moreover, gray divorce significantly transforms relationships with adult children, particularly by strengthening solidarity with mothers while pushing fathers into a higher risk group in terms of social isolation (Buyukkececi & Leopold, 2024: 7). On the other hand, childless adults experience faster postdivorce adaptation than parental individuals do (Tosi & van den Broek, 2020: 6).

When examining the psychological aspects of divorce occurring in midlife and beyond, both men and women experience emotional loneliness; however, this experience of loneliness appears to have more pronounced effects on men than on women (Högnäs, 2020: 162). According to a recent study, approximately half of U.S. adults continue to live alone after a gray divorce, while one-third share a household with other people, and the remaining 14% live with a new partner (Brown et al., 2023: 1396). As observed, the phenomenon of gray divorce can leave behind a large number of middle-aged individuals who have fallen into a psychology of loneliness, whereas a very small percentage can start new relationships.

Changes in depression levels among individuals who experience gray divorce are similar to patterns observed in younger age groups. Therefore, it can be argued that the ability to adapt after divorce does not decrease with increasing age (Tosi & van den Broek, 2020: 6). Conversely, while gray divorce can lead to negative short-term consequences for both parties, such as increased depressive symptoms and financial concerns, many older adults adapt over time and experience positive outcomes such as greater independence and increased happiness (Crowley, 2019b; Tosi & van den Broek, 2020). In terms of such outcomes, the crisis model of divorce gains validity, and individuals' mental health often returns to baseline levels after separation (Tosi & van den Broek, 2020: 6).

The findings of a study on the emotional and psychological process after gray divorce (Montenegro, 2004) reveal that the individuals who approach this process in the most optimistic way are largely religious people. On the other hand, individuals who do not have religious affiliation approach the divorce process from a more pessimistic perspective and have a higher level of anxiety, especially with respect to their financial situation. This situation is not limited to the effect of religious belief on an individual's attitudes but may also be related to other variables that may be related to the level of belief. One of these variables is the age factor; individuals' tendency to turn to religious beliefs and spiritual values frequently increases with age (Montenegro, 2004: 4-5).

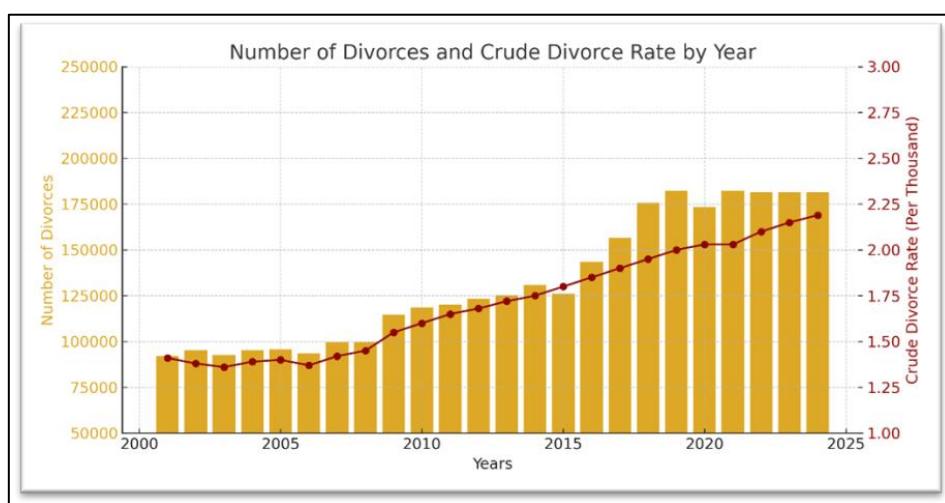
From an economic perspective, gray divorce also leads to a significant decline in people's standard of living. Data show that women's standard of living decreases by approximately 45% and that men's standard of living decreases by 21% after divorce and that both genders experience a decrease in wealth of approximately 50% after gray divorce (Lin & Brown, 2020: 2073). However, gray divorced women's limited access to alternative economic resources puts them at a much higher risk of poverty than widows. This clearly demonstrates that gray divorce has the potential to cause serious financial devastation, especially for women (Lin & Brown, 2020: 2082). In addition, especially for women, negative consequences such as food insecurity

and the risk of disability arise that can persist for many years after divorce (Zhao et al., 2024: 7). However, although re-establishing a relationship with a partner can compensate for some of these economic losses for women, the rate of forming a new partnership after a gray divorce is quite low (Lin & Brown, 2020: 2082).

A study examining the effects of divorce occurring later in life on labor supply (Slavov & Wei, 2021) revealed that women experience increases in both employment rates and weekly working hours after divorce, whereas men experience decreases in these indicators. Furthermore, women experience a significant decline in their per capita wealth and nonwage income sources after divorce, whereas men experience no similar economic decline (Slavov & Wei, 2021: 66). As previously stated, the increase in gray divorce rates has serious negative impacts on food security and overall health, especially for women who are seen as less financially prepared for the end of marriages at an older age (Zhao et al., 2024: 13). The findings from field studies conducted in many different countries indicate that the effects of gray divorce are shaped by the interaction of multidimensional dynamics (social, psychological, and economic), with negative consequences particularly detrimental to women.

4. The Divorce Phenomenon in Türkiye

Divorce rates in Türkiye have been increasing in recent years, and despite this increase, these rates remain relatively low compared with those in Western countries (Koç, 2019: 1115). However, the increase in women's participation in the labor force and the transformation in social value judgments with industrialization and urbanization processes paved the way for the increase in divorce rates (Ersöz, 2011: 249). Among the main factors shaping the phenomenon of divorce in Türkiye are severe incompatibility, domestic violence, abandonment, adultery and socioeconomic inadequacies (Yıldırım, 2004: 76). In terms of geographical differences, the regions with the highest divorce rates are concentrated in the western and southwestern parts of Türkiye. In this context, a negative relationship was found between fertility rates and divorce rates in the analyses conducted at the provincial level. The majority of the provinces with the lowest crude divorce rates are located in the Eastern and Southeastern Anatolian Regions, where fertility rates are the highest (Şahbaz, 2022: 53).



Graph 1: Number of Divorces and Crude Divorce Rates 2001-2024 (TÜİK, 2025a)

Graph 1, created in line with data for the 2001-2024 period, reveals the changes in the number of divorces and crude divorce rates in Türkiye. The data indicate that divorce has increased

both numerically and in proportion to the population. The number of divorces, which was 91,194 in 2001, reached 187,343 as of 2024; in the same period, the crude divorce rate increased from 1.41 per thousand to 2.19 per thousand (TÜİK, 2025a). This increase shows that divorce has become more common and visible over time. In 2020, there was a temporary decrease in the number of divorces due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic; however, a rapid increase was observed in 2021 with the lifting of restrictions (Şahinalp, 2024: 1126). The crude divorce rate reached in 2024 (2.19 per thousand) reveals that divorce is becoming increasingly evident as a social phenomenon in Türkiye and that the transformation in family structure is supported by quantitative indicators.

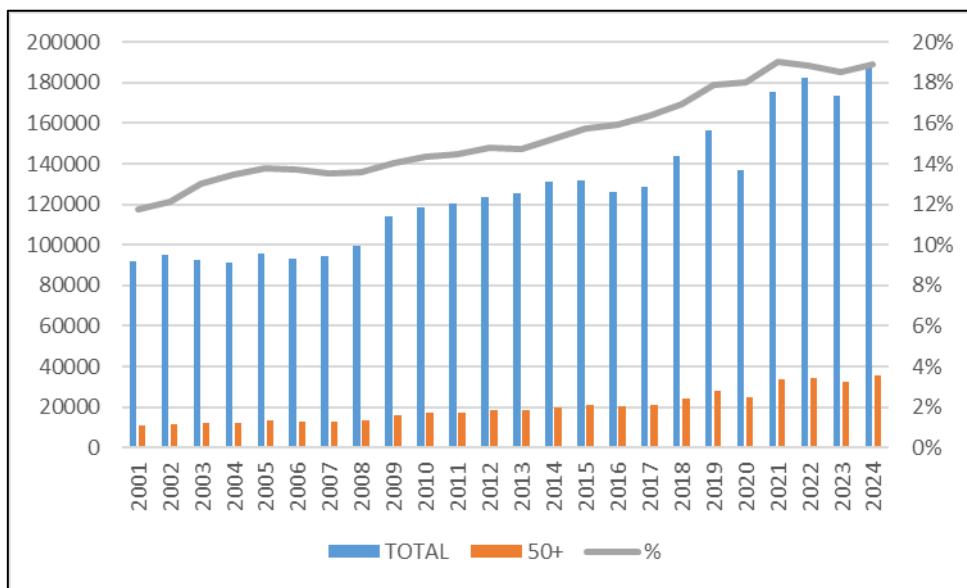
According to data from 2024, the largest portion of marriages in Türkiye end within the first five years. Accordingly, 33.7% of divorces occurred during this period, and more than 55% of total divorces occurred within the first ten years of marriage (TÜİK, 2025a). This reveals that the first five years of marriage are a critical period in terms of stability (Yıldırım, 2004: 60). When the demographic and socioeconomic variables that affect divorce rates are examined, it is observed that higher education levels increase the likelihood of divorce; on the other hand, a high crude birth rate and lack of literacy reduce the probability of divorce (Koç, 2019: 1111; Şahbaz, 2022: 21). In other words, there is an inverse proportionality between divorce and education level. On the other hand, the presence of children is an important factor in ensuring family stability; half of all divorces occur in families without children (Yıldırım, 2004: 60). In families with children, determining which parent will retain custody after a divorce is a significant issue. According to 2024 data, 74.4% of custody decisions made following finalized divorce cases were in favor of the mother, whereas 25.6% were in favor of the father (TÜİK, 2025a). This distribution demonstrates that the responsibility for childcare after divorce falls predominantly on mothers.

Domestic violence against women is cited as one of the major causes of divorce in Türkiye (Ersöz, 2011: 261). However, there are both commonalities and gender-based differences in the reasons for divorce between men and women. While economic difficulties and family problems are common reasons for both genders, women, in particular, cite domestic problems and domestic violence as the primary reasons for divorce. In contrast, behavioral and external factors, such as a spouse's indifference and irresponsibility, insults, and third-party interference in family relations, are prominent among men's reasons for divorce. In line with these findings, socioeconomic factors such as income level and education play a determining role in the decision to divorce for both genders (Elmas & Adak, 2023: 95). Increased family time during the COVID-19 pandemic, fear of infection, economic hardship, stress, and traumatic experiences paved the way for the prevalence of domestic violence. While the restriction of access to services due to the pandemic in 2020 led to a temporary decrease in divorce rates, an increase in divorce rates was observed again with the removal of restrictions in 2021 (Şahinalp, 2024: 1126).

5. Demographic Indicators of Gray Divorce in Türkiye

In recent years, parallel to the increase in the overall number of divorces in Türkiye, a notable increase has also been observed in the crude divorce rate. Within this general trend, divorces among individuals aged 50 and over, defined as "gray divorces", have also increased significantly. According to data from the Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK), approximately one-fifth (19%) of divorces in 2024 involve individuals aged 50 and older. This rate reveals that

divorce at an advanced age is no longer a limited phenomenon but has become an indicator of a significant transformation in the social structure. According to the data, there has been a 44.53% increase in the total number of divorces aged 50 and over in Türkiye in the last five years (2020-2024) (TÜİK, 2025a).

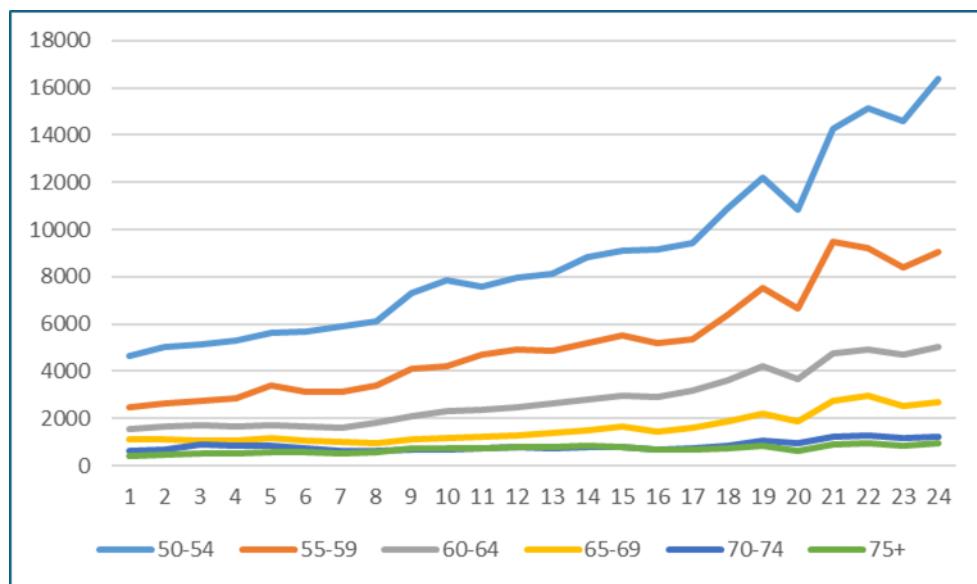


Graph 2: Gray Divorce Rates 2001-2024², (TÜİK, 2025a)

The graph shows the total number of divorces in Türkiye between 2001 and 2024 (blue columns), the number of divorces made up of individuals aged 50 and over (orange columns), and the proportion of this age group in total divorces (green line). The graph clearly reveals how the phenomenon of "gray divorce" shows an increasing trend over time, both numerically and proportionally. According to the data, the total number of divorces in 2001 was approximately 92 thousand, while the number of divorces made up of individuals aged 50 and over was just over 10 thousand, and the gray divorce rate was approximately 10%. However, over time, both the total number of divorces increases, and the number and rate of divorces over the age of 50 increase significantly. By 2024, the total number of divorces exceeded 187 thousand, while the number of divorces over the age of 50 reached 35 thousand, and the proportion of this age group of total divorces increased to approximately 19%. In other words, as of 2024, at least one out of every five divorced couples in Türkiye is in the group over the age of 50. These data show that gray divorce has become more common in society proportionally beyond the numerical increase. In this sense, not only do more divorces occur, but the proportion of older individuals among divorced couples also increases. This trend suggests that divorce in middle-aged and older people is no longer exceptional but has become part of a structural transformation that affects society's marital dynamics. Notably, both the numerical and proportional increases accelerated, especially in the post-2015 period. This

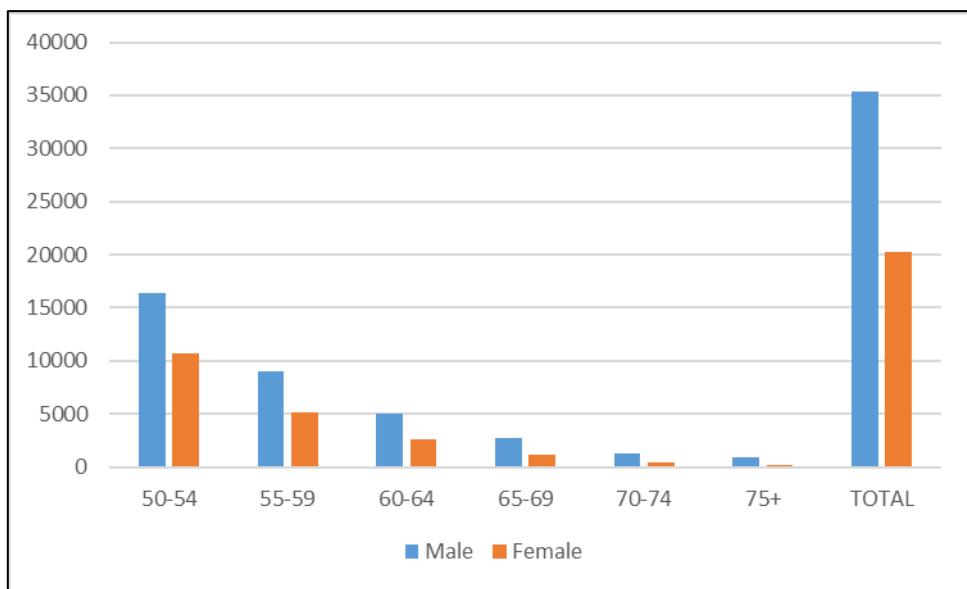
² In this study, divorce statistics for the last 25 years (2001-2024) published by the Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK) were used. TÜİK classifies divorce data in detail at the level of province, age groups and gender. Although the total number of divorces is the same, this situation causes differences in the number of divorces for men and women in terms of age groups. Since the data vary on the basis of gender, the data of the gender with the highest number of gray divorces for each year, regardless of whether it is male or female, was taken as the basis for the annual gray divorce number.

shows that perceptions of the continuity of marriages in old age have changed and that divorce has become an option for older individuals as well.



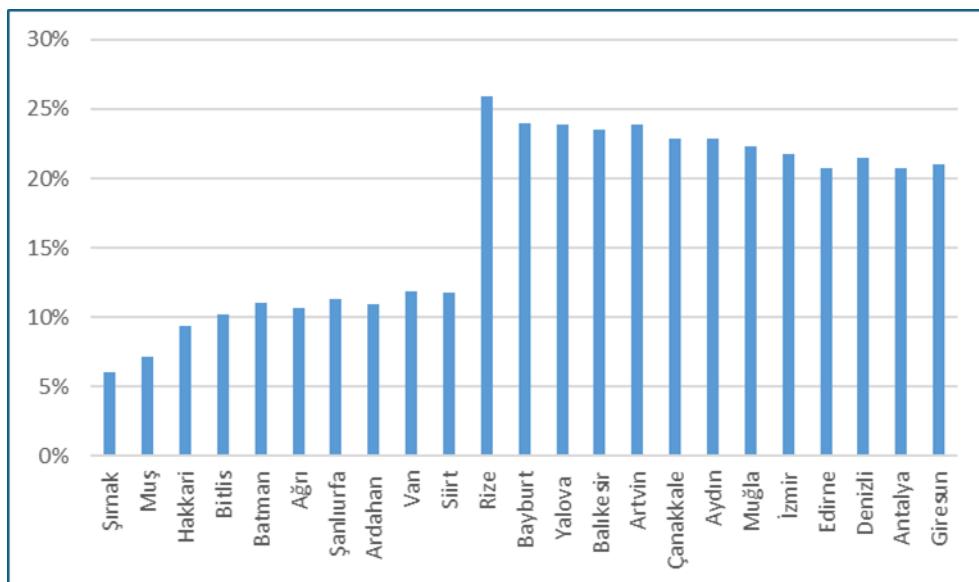
Graph 3: Number of Gray Divorces by Age Group 2001-2024, (TÜİK, 2025a)

Graph 3, which shows the number of divorces among individuals aged 50 and over at the age group level between 2001 and 2024, reveals interesting data on the gray divorce phenomenon in Türkiye. In the graph, a remarkable increase in the number of divorces is observed over time, especially in terms of the 50-54 and 55-59 age groups. The number of divorces in the 50-54 age group has more than tripled, from 4,632 in 2001 to over 16,000 by 2024. However, the 50-54 age group has the highest percentage of all gray divorces (46%). Similarly, the number of divorces in the 55-59 age group has increased from 2448-9,000 (TÜİK, 2025a). Since these two groups generally cover both middle-aged and preretirement periods, they show that marital dissatisfaction is carried over to later periods. This shows that the tendency for marriages to end in the postmiddle-age period has strengthened and that gray divorce has become a social phenomenon that can no longer be ignored in Türkiye. According to the data, gray divorces in Türkiye are relatively lower in the age groups of 60 and over, but there is a steady upward trend in all age groups. The fact that the number of divorces has increased from 1500 to over 5,000, especially in the 60-64 age group, shows that the rate of termination of marriages has increased at older ages. Although the increases are more limited in the 65-year-old and older groups, the steady rise over the years can be considered a reflection of the transformation in social norms and the change in the expectations of older individuals from marriage.



Graph 4: Divorce Numbers Among Older Adults by Gender 2024, (TÜİK, 2025a)

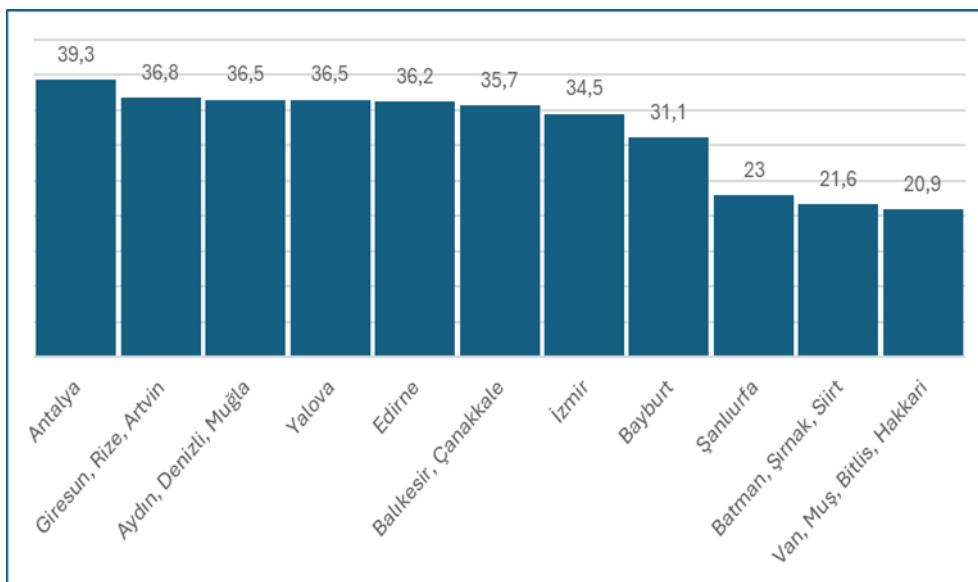
When gray divorce statistics are examined by gender (Graph 4), the number of men who divorces among individuals aged 50 and over is significantly greater than that among women. According to the data, the number of divorces for women aged 50 and over increased from 6,305 in 2001 to 20,217 in 2024. The number of divorces for men in the same age group was recorded as 10,807 in 2001, and this number reached 35,378 as of 2024 (TÜİK, 2025a). These data indicate an increase of approximately three times for both sexes.



Graph 5: Provinces with the Lowest and Highest Gray-Divorce Rates 2024, (TÜİK, 2025a)

Graph 5, prepared on the basis of TUİK divorce data for 2024, shows the provinces with the lowest and highest divorce rates among individuals aged 50 and over. Notably, gray divorce rates vary significantly across provinces in the graph. Gray divorce rates are particularly low (below 10%) in Eastern and Southeastern Anatolian provinces such as Şırnak, Muş, Hakkari, Bitlis, and Batman. This suggests that traditional family structures and patriarchal values continue to influence divorce in these regions (Kutlar et al., 2016: 2991). Moreover, the fact that women's labor force participation rates in these provinces are well below the Turkish

average (see Graph 6) may lead to women having limited economic independence and a lower willingness to end their marriages. According to Kutlar et al. (2016: 2991), there is a strong correlation between the crude divorce rate, average value added, and female labor force participation rates. Accordingly, both female labor force participation rates and divorce rates are lower in low-value-added regions, whereas both indicators are higher in high-value-added regions.



Graph 6: Female Employment Rates in Provinces with the Lowest and Highest Gray Divorce Rates 2024, (TÜİK, 2025b)

In provinces such as Rize, Artvin, Yalova, Balıkesir, and Çanakkale, where gray divorce rates are highest in Türkiye, gray divorce rates are greater than 20%, and in Rize, this rate reaches the highest level, exceeding 26%. The female employment rates are relatively higher in these provinces (see Graph 6). In this context, the greater economic independence of women in these provinces may have enabled them to make the decision to leave marriage at a later age (Caarls & De Valk, 2018, p. 632). Conversely, in provinces with coastal areas and high tourism, the transformation in socioeconomic structure, particularly the diversification of individual lifestyles and the increase in female employment rates, affects the stability of the institution of marriage and increases divorce rates (Üçler & Kızılkaya, 2014: 40; Kutlar et al., 2016: 2989; Erkan & Yamak, 2017: 91). According to the data, the fact that gray divorce rates are above 20% in western provinces such as İzmir, Muğla and Antalya, where female employment rates are relatively high, may be a striking indicator of this relationship. The gray divorce rates tend to increase in regions where women's economic independence increases through participation in employment, urbanization becomes widespread, and traditional family norms are relatively weakened. On the other hand, in provinces such as Şırnak, Muş, Hakkari, Bitlis, Batman and Siirt, where gender roles are more strictly protected and where women play a more limited role in economic and social life, the incidence of gray divorce is relatively low.

When examined at the geographic level, gray divorce rates are relatively higher in western regions, such as the Marmara, Aegean, and Mediterranean regions, as well as in some provinces in the Eastern Black Sea Region. On the other hand, these rates remain at relatively lower levels in the majority of provinces in the Eastern and Southeastern Anatolian regions.

Previous studies on the phenomenon of divorce in Türkiye have also revealed significant differences at the regional level (Üçler & Kızılkaya, 2014; Kutlar et al., 2016; Erkan & Yamak, 2017; Caarls & De Valk, 2018). Accordingly, the regional differences previously determined in terms of general divorce rates are also valid to a large extent for the gray divorce phenomenon.

In the background of the increasing trend reflected in the figures in terms of gray divorces in Türkiye, there are multilayered sociological factors such as women's participation in the workforce and economic independence, the prolongation of life expectancy compared with the past, empty nest syndrome and the prominence of the search for individual happiness, which are frequently stated in the literature. Furthermore, the increasing social acceptability of divorce may pave the way for questioning marriages at older ages. However, considering the social structure, cultural norms and traditional family values specific to Türkiye, it should not be forgotten that the phenomenon of gray divorce may have reasons and consequences specific to Türkiye. For this reason, there is a need for more comprehensive, qualitative and quantitative field studies that can evaluate the unique appearances of gray divorce in Turkish society together with individual and structural factors. In this context, it would be appropriate for researchers to focus on different dimensions of gray divorce and make important contributions to a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of gray divorce.

6. Conclusion

This study aims to integrate conceptual discussions in the literature with empirical findings in the context of Türkiye by considering the phenomenon of gray divorce, which has become increasingly visible in Türkiye in the last quarter century, in light of sociodemographic data. Analyses based on TÜİK 2001-2024 data clearly reveal that divorce rates among individuals aged 50 and over have increased significantly, both numerically and proportionally. As of 2024, one in five divorced couples falls into this age group, indicating that gray divorce has become not only an individual but also a reflection of societal transformation.

The reasons behind the gray divorce phenomenon are shaped by multidimensional factors, from relational dissatisfaction at the individual level to transformations in social norms and from women's increasing economic independence to prolonged life expectancy. In the context of Türkiye, the striking finding is that gray divorce rates differ regionally and are based on gender. It has been observed that gray divorce rates are higher in Western Anatolian provinces where female employment rates are high, whereas this rate remains low in provinces in the Eastern and Southeastern regions where the patriarchal structure is more pronounced. This finding shows that divorce decisions are closely related to economic and cultural factors.

The present findings reveal that the phenomenon of gray divorce in Türkiye needs more attention at both the academic and political levels. In this direction, the necessity of implementing various social policy tools emerges to cope with the social, psychological and economic effects of divorces that occur in middle age and beyond. In particular, for women, compensating for the economic losses experienced after divorce, reducing employment problems caused by regional differences, strengthening social support networks while considering increasing vulnerability after retirement, expanding psychological counseling services for older persons and taking measures to reduce the risk of loneliness are highly important. Research shows that older individuals often seek support they need after divorce through their close social circles, family members, and religious affiliations. In contrast, it appears that the rate of application to institutional support mechanisms such as public

institutions and nongovernmental organizations remains quite low (Montenegro, 2004: 5). In Türkiye, it is a common practice for the care of elderly individuals to be largely undertaken by their children. However, with demographic and social changes, this situation is expected to transform in the future, and the state is expected to assume a more active role in elder care policies. Therefore, to effectively combat the social, economic, and psychological problems that late-age divorces can cause and to provide adequate social support to individuals affected by this process, public institutions must establish the necessary institutional and service infrastructure.

With the declaration of 2025 as the "Year of the Family" by the Turkish Presidency, social policy tools and academic studies have largely focused on strengthening families and increasing the number of children. However, the fact that some news about the phenomenon of gray divorce has begun to appear in the national press, albeit limited, through current statistics indicating an increase in divorce rates, indicates that there is limited awareness of this issue at the social level. However, the level of knowledge and sensitivity toward the concept of gray divorce is still insufficient in both academic circles and policy makers.

The study examined the phenomenon of gray divorce in Türkiye in the context of demographic indicators and revealed that there has been a remarkable increase in gray divorce rates in parallel with general divorce trends, especially in recent years. However, demographic analyses based on numerical data can only make certain aspects of the gray divorce phenomenon visible; more in-depth and multifaceted research is needed to comprehensively understand the sociopsychological, cultural and structural dimensions of the phenomenon. In this context, the national literature on gray divorce in Türkiye is quite limited, and the need for qualitative field studies comes to the forefront. Data obtained through such studies will provide decision-makers with a scientific basis for developing family policies and contribute to the creation of more inclusive and effective interventions.

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