

**Regional Differences in the Marital Dissolution by Divorce
and Separation in Northern Mexico****Diferencias regionales de la disolución conyugal por divorcio
y separación en el norte de México**Norma Ojeda¹ & Raúl González²

ABSTRACT

This is a descriptive socio-demographic study of the marital dissolution by divorce and separation in the northern border region of Mexico. The objective is to provide a general view of the level of this type of dissolutions in the region and some of its differences among the federal entities that form it. For this purpose, it is used information from the National Survey of the Demographic Dynamics 2018 (ENADID) and secondary sources of information. The analysis is based on the indicators about the dissolution of the first conjugal union of ever-married women that were calculated through the life table technique and logistic regression models. The results evidence that the northern region has one of the highest levels of marital dissolution in the country, but with interesting differences between the states located in the northwest and the northeast generating a dual pattern in the region.

Keywords: 1. divorce, 2. marital dissolution, 3. family instability, 4. northern border, 5. Mexico.

RESUMEN

A partir de un estudio sociodemográfico, se describe la disolución conyugal por divorcio y separación, en familias de la región fronteriza del norte de México. Se proporciona una visión general acerca del nivel de frecuencia de la inestabilidad conyugal a nivel regional y algunas de las diferencias entre las entidades federativas que la componen. Se utiliza la Encuesta Nacional de la Dinámica Demográfica (Enadid) de 2018 y otras fuentes de información secundaria. El análisis se basa en los indicadores obtenidos de las disoluciones de la primera unión conyugal de mujeres alguna vez unidas, mediante el uso de la técnica de tablas de vida y los modelos de regresión logística. Entre otros resultados, se encontró que la región nortea tiene uno de los niveles más altos de disolución conyugal en el país, pero con interesantes diferencias que destacan entre los estados del noroeste y el noreste, generando un patrón dual en la región.

Palabras clave: 1. divorcio, 2. ruptura de uniones conyugales, 3. familias disueltas, 4. frontera norte, 5. México.

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INTRODUCTION

Sociodemographic research on divorce and marital separation provides a comprehensive lens through which to understand the broader societal implications of family instability in Mexico. While this phenomenon encompasses various aspects of individuals' lives, the numerical data derived from such studies serves as the empirical foundation for understanding sociodemographic trends and disparities related to the two primary drivers of marital instability: divorce and separation. In contemporary Mexico, these two causes, rather than death, significantly contribute to the dissolution of marital bonds for many families. Notably, the measurement of separation poses a particular challenge due to the scarcity of empirical data on informal separations in national statistics.

Mexican demographic surveys have stood as the sole source of available and reliable information for studying marital family instability, especially concerning families formed through *de facto* unions, also known as consensual, free, cohabiting, and visiting partnerships. Despite this constraint, there is a recognized importance in furthering sociodemographic research on this matter and continually updating our understanding, particularly regarding the prevalence of such instability within Mexican families. Additionally, ongoing documentation of its occurrence across different regions of the country is essential, taking into account contextual social factors that may contribute to it, as well as individual predictive elements influencing the likelihood of divorce and marital separation.

With this aim in mind, this paper presents a descriptive sociodemographic study focusing on the voluntary dissolution of women's initial marital unions through divorce and separation in the northern border region of Mexico. Additionally, an effort is made to delve into the significance of contextual factors by examining the legislative framework that aims to regulate the establishment and dissolution of families via marriage and divorce, respectively. However, notable legal gaps exist within this framework concerning alternative forms of marital unions and the prevalence of informal separations. This prompts reflection on how such legal loopholes might indirectly contribute to marital instability, particularly affecting a substantial number of families in the northern region of the country. Analyzing the phenomenon of family instability, particularly through marital dissolution in this geographical area, is crucial not only due to its economic implications but also because of the significant shifts observed in marital arrangements, especially among the younger population, over the past two decades.

The methodology of this study relies on a multi-sourced approach and employs demographic and statistical analysis techniques. Data from the 2018 Encuesta Nacional de la Dinámica Demográfica (ENADID) (National Survey of Demographic Dynamics), conducted by the Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI, 2018) (National Institute of Statistics and Geography), forms the basis for calculating the probabilities of dissolution via divorce and separation, considered collectively, for women's first marital unions as reported in the survey. Utilizing the life table technique, information on women's marital union history is analyzed. Furthermore, secondary data analysis is conducted using information provided by INEGI and published by the Consejo Nacional de Población (CONAPO) (National Population Council).

Finally, odds ratios are independently calculated to assess the likelihood of divorce and separation based on specific social and demographic characteristics of women residing in the northern region.

BACKGROUND OF VOLUNTARY MARITAL DISSOLUTION IN MEXICO

Voluntary marital dissolution in Mexico is a sociodemographic phenomenon extensively documented in various studies. Some research, like the works of Ojeda de la Peña (1986), Ojeda and González (2008), and Pérez and Ojeda (2016), undertakes a comprehensive examination by jointly analyzing divorces and de facto separations. Conversely, other studies, such as those by Suarez (2004) and Pallares (1980), focus solely on divorce. Moreover, research delves into the ramifications of marital dissolution on family dynamics, exemplified by the seminal work of Potter and Ojeda (1984) within Mexican demography and studies like that of Tamez-Valdés and Ribeiro-Ferreira (2016) across related disciplines. These investigations shed light on recurring patterns in the phenomenon, including its frequency, differentials based on social and demographic characteristics of heterosexual couples (particularly women) and marital unions themselves, as well as key sociodemographic determinants.

Trends in the phenomenon show a gradual and sustained increase in the dissolution of first marital unions through divorce and separation, a pattern persisting for nearly four decades (Ojeda de la Peña, 1986). Regarding the impact of specific individual and sociocultural factors, research indicates that certain characteristics of women correlate with elevated probabilities of dissolution. These factors include marrying at a young age, residing or being raised in urban areas, possessing lower levels of education (Ojeda de la Peña, 1986; Ojeda & González Fagoaga, 2008), having a history of premarital fertility (Ojeda de la Peña, 1986), and having work experience (Ojeda de la Peña, 1986; Rojas López, 2021). Similarly, varying types of marital unions exhibit differing risks of dissolution, generally reflecting higher risk levels with less institutionalized unions, whether legitimized by civil and/or religious authorities (Ojeda de la Peña, 1986; Ojeda & González Fagoaga, 2008).

Among the various predictive factors influencing the risk of marital dissolution, the age of a woman at her first union and the type of union established stand out for their significance. However, recent research suggests intriguing modifications in the behavior of these variables, driven by changes in their sociocultural composition and meanings. This evolution is directly and/or indirectly linked to the increased social participation of Mexican women and the empowerment of gender among newer generations. Concerning the first variable, Pérez and Ojeda (2016) note interesting shifts in the differential impact of age at first union on marital dissolution among more recent cohorts forming unions. They find that the highest levels of dissolution risk occur in extreme age groups. Specifically, when a woman enters her first union at a very young or late age within the Mexican marital context, it appears to entail higher dissolution risks compared to unions formed at intermediate ages. Thus, it seems a transition may be underway from a traditional model, characterized by a clear unidirectional inverse relationship between age at first

union and dissolution risk, towards a potentially more modern model where an emerging bidirectional or curvilinear relationship between the variables is observed.

Conversely, the type of the initial union has emerged as profoundly influential in voluntary marital dissolution within Mexico. This sociocultural variable carries significant legal, practical, symbolic, and even psychosocial implications for couples, their children, and conjugal family stability. Historically, this variable has consistently and unilaterally affected the risk of union dissolution based on the degree and type of institutionalization. Traditionally, civil and religious marriages have exhibited the lowest dissolution risk, followed by religious-only unions and then civil-only marriages, with consensual unions presenting the highest risk (Ojeda de la Peña, 1986; Ojeda & González Fagoaga, 2008). However, macro-social, cultural, and gender shifts in the country have precipitated significant changes in Mexican marital norms. Scholars such as Solís (2004) and Quilodrán (2000) have highlighted the deinstitutionalization of marital frameworks in Mexico, resulting in a notable decrease in formal marriages and a concurrent rise in consensual unions, a trend confirmed by Pérez and Esteves (2012) and later described as explosive growth.

As previously noted, it is imperative to consider not only the rise in consensual unions in Mexico but also the qualitative transformations this marital form is undergoing, both in its demographic composition and its sociocultural significance within the contemporary Mexican marriage landscape. The category of “consensual union” no longer solely encompasses traditional arrangements aligned with the sociocultural norms of traditional Mexican marriage. It now encompasses a broader spectrum, including more modern forms such as cohabitation, which bear similarities to European cohabitation practices (Quilodrán, 2000). The term “consensual union” now encompasses diverse sociocultural references beyond simply living together without marriage; it also includes egalitarian couples who opt for this arrangement due to the lack of access to civil or religious marriage. Additionally, it embraces individuals with varied demographic and social characteristics—an aspect crucial for understanding contemporary Mexican marriage dynamics, including the voluntary dissolution of marital unions, the focal point of this study.

METHODOLOGY AND INFORMATION SOURCES

The analysis of the described phenomenon primarily relied on data from the women’s section of the 2018 ENADID. This survey offers national, state-level, and rural-urban statistical coverage and representativeness, drawing from a sample of 108,439 women aged 15 to 49 years. This ample sample size facilitated detailed analyses at both the individual state level and the regional level, focusing on the northern region of the country. This northern region encompasses the states bordering the United States: Baja California, Sonora, Chihuahua, Nuevo León, Coahuila, and Tamaulipas. Consequently, the study included a sample of 14,057 women who were ever married and residing in the region at the time of the survey.

Using data from the 2018 ENADID, it is calculated the probabilities of dissolution—both through divorce and separation—of women’s first marital unions included in the survey. To

achieve this, we applied the life table technique to the survey data.³ Additionally, it is consulted secondary information provided by INEGI and published by CONAPO (2022) on the topic. Furthermore, based on data from the 2018 ENADID, it is conducted four logistic regression models to separately estimate the odds ratios for the probabilities of separation and divorce. These models were based on specific social and demographic characteristics of women from the northern region who participated in the survey.

Variations in the Behavior of Dissolutions due to Divorce and Separation in Northern Mexico

There is a scarcity of studies examining the patterns of voluntary marital dissolutions across various regions of Mexico. This scarcity is primarily attributed to limitations stemming from available data sources, as vital statistics typically only document divorces and not de facto separations. Moreover, not all demographic surveys provide statistical representation at the state and/or regional level. The dearth of information regarding de facto separations poses a significant challenge in comprehensively understanding this phenomenon, given that it has historically been and remains the preferred method of voluntary marital dissolution in the country. According to data from the Encuesta Nacional Demográfica (END) (National Demographic Survey) of 1982, 83% of dissolutions nationwide were de facto separations, while divorces accounted for only 17% (Ojeda, 1991). Twenty years later, the proportion of separations at the national level remained virtually unchanged at “83.5%,” as reported in the Encuesta de Salud Reproductiva (Reproductive Health Survey of 2003 (Ojeda & González Fagoaga, 2008, p. 120). This figure has even risen, with de facto separations comprising 87.9% of total voluntary dissolutions among women’s first unions participating in the 2018 ENADID, according to our own calculations using this dataset.

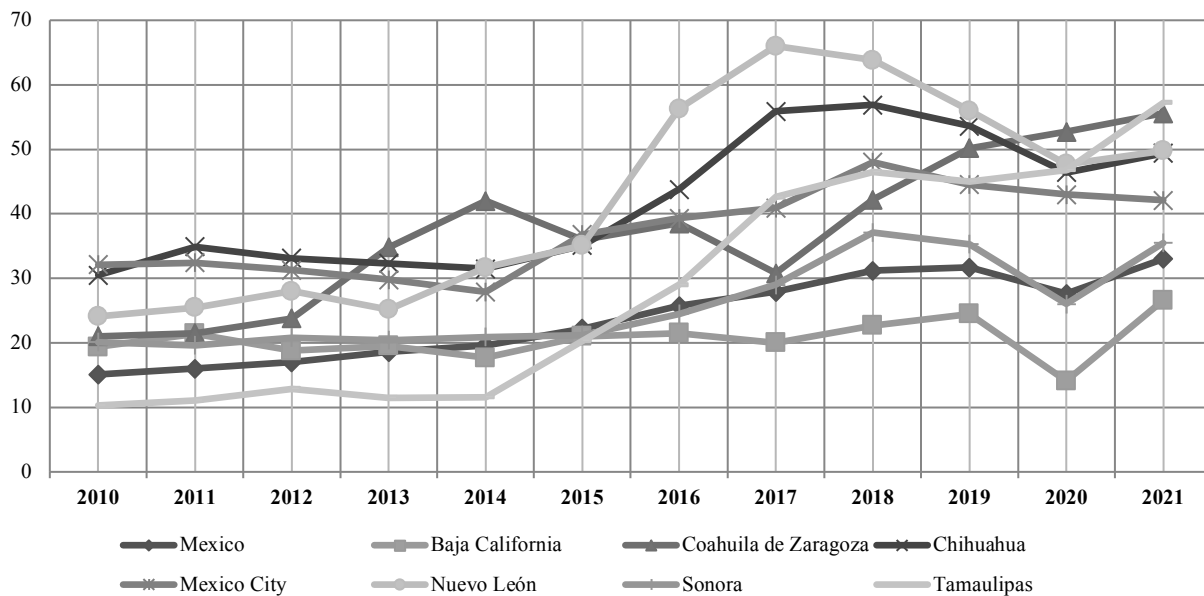
Concerning the frequency of divorces and de facto separations in northern Mexico, Ojeda de la Peña and González (1992) highlight, based on data from the 1982 END, that this phenomenon was more prevalent in the region compared to the national average at that time. This discrepancy was attributed to the relatively higher levels of development in the northern region of the country. This finding warrants further investigation to ascertain whether it remains valid after almost four decades, as will be explored later in this study.

Despite the limitations posed by vital statistics in capturing de facto separations, the significance of the data they provide on divorces remains indisputable. In this context, the divorce-marriage ratio figures for the years 2010 and 2021, as provided by CONAPO (2022), offer valuable insights. These figures are depicted in Graph 1, illustrating an upward trend in registered divorces over the past decade, with the exception of the year 2020, coinciding with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. This trend appears to have resumed in 2021. The rise in divorces is evident both nationally and in smaller geographic units like Mexico City and the six northern border states. However, it is important to acknowledge that the divorce-marriage ratio has inherent limitations in gauging divorce levels, as it may inflate them due to a concurrent decrease in registered marriages during the same period (as

³ The technical details of this demographic method can be consulted in Ojeda de la Peña (1986).

will be discussed later). Nonetheless, this indicator facilitates comparisons of dissolution rates across the geographic units under consideration. This is particularly noteworthy for Tamaulipas, Coahuila, and Nuevo León, which, while exhibiting low or moderate levels in 2010, saw significant increases almost a decade later in 2019. Lastly, it is pertinent to clarify that the inclusion of national data and Mexico City in this study serves solely for comparative and reference purposes concerning the northern region, the primary focus of our analysis.

Graph 1. Divorce-Marriage Ratio at the National Level, Mexico City (CDMX), and Northern Border States (2010-2021)



Source: Own elaboration based on data from CONAPO (2022).

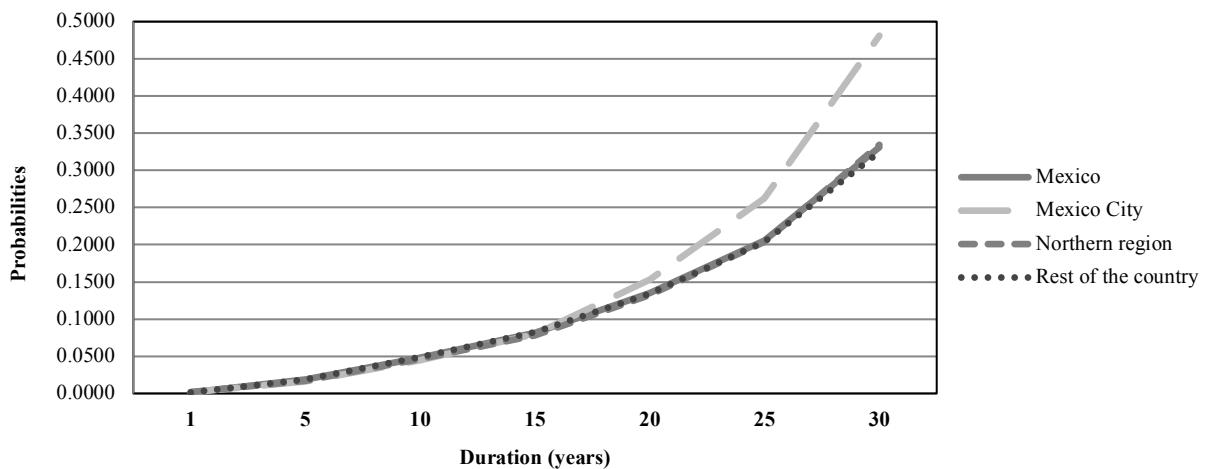
Table 1 aims to elucidate the dynamics of first marital union dissolutions within families in the northern region by comparing divorces and separations across different regions of the country. The table presents cumulative probabilities of dissolution derived from life table techniques, utilizing marital life history data from the 2018 ENADID. A comparison of the estimated figures reveals a significantly higher prevalence of the phenomenon in Mexico City compared to the national total and the other two regions considered, particularly at the 30-year union duration. For instance, nearly half (48%) of all first marriages and consensual unions culminate in divorce or separation within 30 years of formation, based on the experiences of the cohort of first unions defined by the marital history of interviewed women ever married in Mexico City. In contrast, the intensity of marital dissolution in corresponding cohorts in other geographic units is one-third. Specifically, dissolution rates at the national level and in the northern region stand at 33% at the 30-year mark, while in the rest of the country region, it is 32%. Interestingly, as depicted in Graph 2, the prominence of Mexico City in this phenomenon primarily stems from the behavior of cohorts beyond the 20-year mark, indicating a notably higher probability of dissolution through divorce or separation in more mature unions in this region compared to others and the national total.

Table 1. Cumulative Probabilities of Divorce and Separation of the First Marital Union in Different Parts of Mexico

Duration (years)	Mexico	Mexico City	Northern Region	Rest of the country
1	0.00140	0.00163	0.00187	0.00129
5	0.01865	0.01622	0.01731	0.01902
10	0.04849	0.04422	0.04657	0.04906
15	0.08138	0.07951	0.07842	0.08208
20	0.13459	0.15300	0.13278	0.13426
25	0.20593	0.26278	0.20362	0.20425
30	0.33107	0.48102	0.33431	0.32469

Source: Own calculations of the life table of voluntary marital dissolutions based on the ENADID (Inegi, 2018).

Graph 2. Cumulative Probabilities of Divorce and Separation of the First Marital Union in Different Parts of Mexico



Source: Own elaboration based on calculations made in Table 1.

Focusing on the dynamics within the northern region, Table 2 reveals notable disparities in the cumulative probabilities of dissolution among the six northern states. Sonora emerges with the highest dissolution rates across all union durations over the 30-year observation period, with dissolutions reaching 44% of the initial total of the hypothetical cohort of first unions in this state. In second place, Nuevo León and Chihuahua trail significantly, each with 32% of their respective cohorts of first unions dissolved at the 30-year mark. Close behind is Baja California, with 31% of dissolutions at the same duration. Conversely, Tamaulipas and Coahuila exhibit the lowest cumulative probabilities of marital dissolution, with 29% and 30%, respectively, of first unions dissolved 30 years after formation. It is worth noting the case of Nuevo León, which, like Sonora and Chihuahua, demonstrates high probabilities of dissolution during the initial union durations

but experiences a decline in strength from the 10-year mark onwards, aligning more closely with the patterns observed in the other two northeastern states of the country.

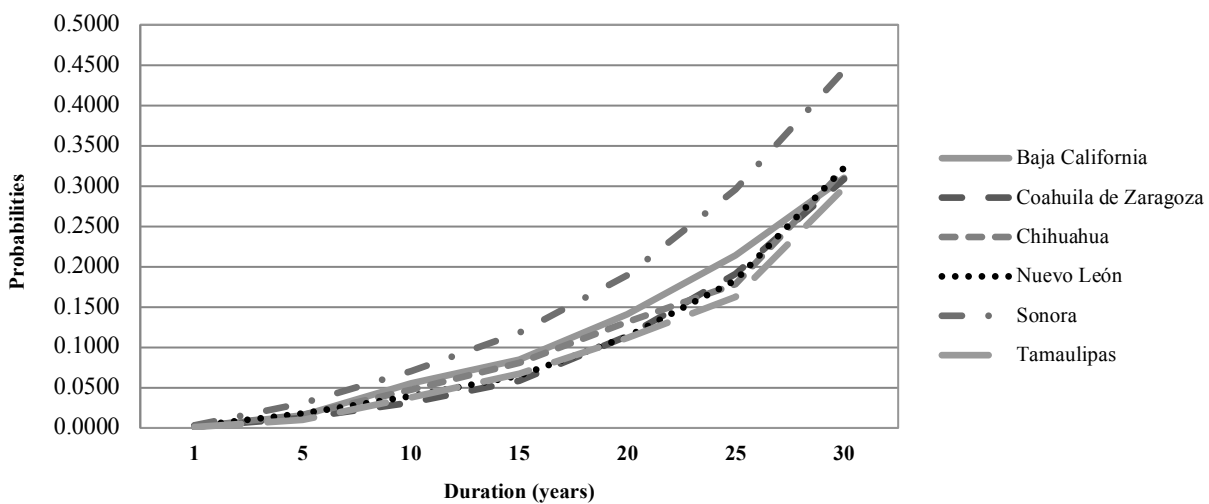
Table 2. Cumulative Probabilities of Dissolution by Divorce and Separation of the First Union in the Northern States of Mexico

Duration (years)	Total North	Baja California	Coahuila de Zaragoza	Chihuahua	Nuevo León	Sonora	Tamaulipas
1	0.00187	0.00117	0.00168	0.00129	0.00252	0.00325	0.00110
5	0.01731	0.01560	0.01224	0.01668	0.01807	0.03058	0.01024
10	0.04657	0.05527	0.03149	0.04756	0.03920	0.07012	0.03793
15	0.07842	0.08439	0.05850	0.08096	0.06462	0.11827	0.06730
20	0.13278	0.14098	0.11399	0.13123	0.11326	0.18967	0.11169
25	0.20362	0.21408	0.19137	0.17809	0.18275	0.29567	0.16214
30	0.33431	0.31025	0.30867	0.32040	0.32258	0.44335	0.29804

Source: Own calculations from the life table of voluntary marital dissolutions, based on the ENADID (Inegi, 2018).

As depicted more distinctly in Graph 3, the data reveal a nuanced geographical pattern distinguishing between states in the northwest and those in the northeast, particularly in terms of cumulative probabilities of dissolution at union durations exceeding 15 years. Notably, states in the northwest such as Sonora, Chihuahua, and nearby Baja California exhibit higher probabilities, while those in the northeast, namely Tamaulipas and Coahuila, along with the somewhat distant Nuevo León, demonstrate lower probabilities of marital dissolution at more advanced or mature union durations.

Graph 3. Cumulative Probabilities of Dissolution by Divorce and Separation of the First Marital Union in the Northern States of Mexico



Source: Own elaboration based on calculations made in Table 2.

TWO MACROSOCIAL FACTORS RELATED TO DIVORCE AND SEPARATION

The Rise in Consensual Unions

As mentioned earlier, among the factors influencing the risk of voluntary dissolution of first marital unions in Mexico, the age of the woman at her first union and the type of union adopted are particularly significant. Regarding the latter, several studies underscore its consistent influence over time and its unidirectional effect on the risk of dissolution of first unions, specifically concerning the differential risk traditionally observed between marriages and consensual unions in determining levels of marital dissolution. On one hand, consensual or consensual unions typically carry a higher risk of dissolution than marriages (Ojeda de la Peña, 1986). On the other hand, the risk of dissolution of consensual unions tends to be higher than that of marriages at younger union durations (Ojeda & González Fagoaga, 2008; Quilodrán, 2000), as well as the association observed between consensual unions and younger ages at first union (Quilodrán, 2000; Pérez Amador, 2022).

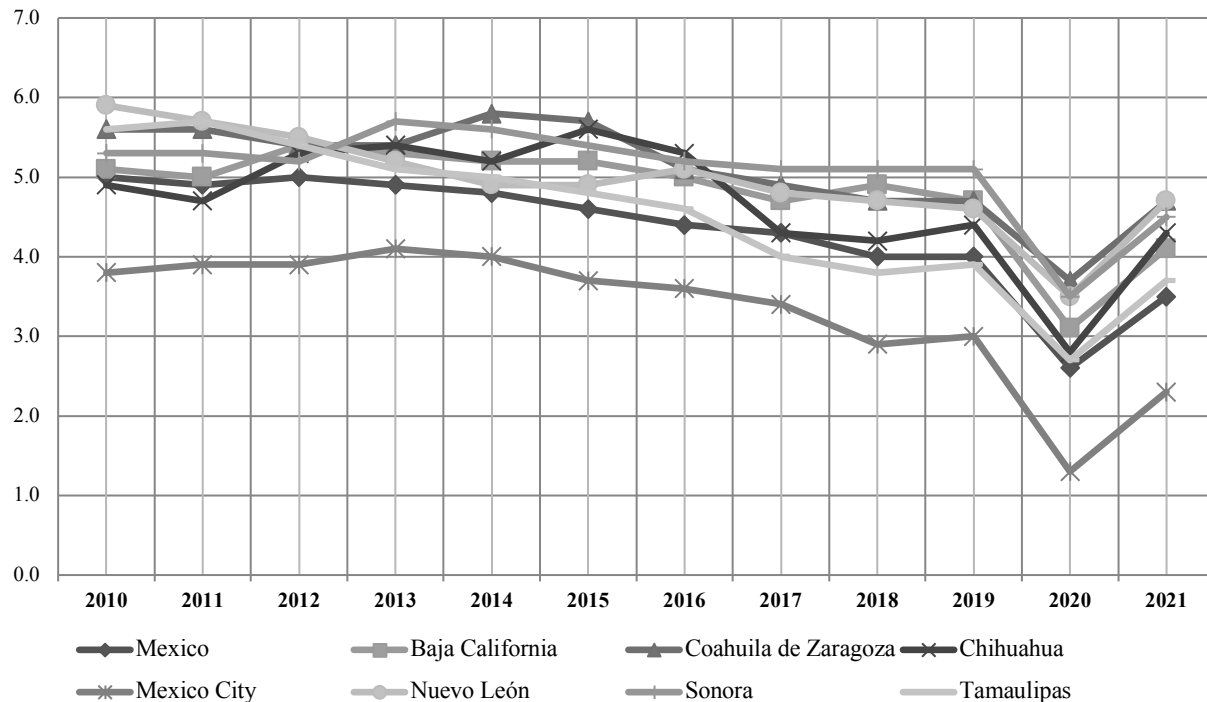
However, the demographic dynamics of these two variables, and likely their impact on the risk of dissolution among younger generations, are being altered, partly associated with the macro-social and cultural shifts observed in the country, especially over recent decades. This qualitative change is somewhat reflected in the perceptions held by some young individuals regarding the comparative advantages and disadvantages between marriage and consensual unions. Clear preferences are emerging for the latter, citing reasons such as “ease of formation and absence of paperwork,” as well as the perception of it “being easier to dissolve if necessary.” These insights stem from a study conducted among high school students in Tijuana, Baja California (Ojeda, 2009, p. 55). At a quantitative level, another manifestation of this shift is the dramatic transformation occurring in the marital landscape of young adults in regions with high economic dynamism, such as the state of Baja California, where consensual unions have dominated as the primary form of marital union for several years now (Ojeda, 2014).

In this same sense, it would be expected that the rise in consensual unions and the qualitative evolution of their socio-cultural significance are also altering their influence on the risk of marital dissolution through divorce and separation. Consequently, it is imperative to consider the transformations that may be underway in marital structures, particularly within consensual unions, when analyzing the phenomenon of marital dissolution. Overall, it is reasonable to assume that a substantial portion of the changes observed in the occurrence of marital dissolution could be directly and/or indirectly linked to shifts in the marital composition of populations.

With the objective of indirectly investigating this aspect, the following data from CONAPO (2022) regarding the observed changes in crude marriage rates in the total national, in Mexico City, and in the six northern border states between 2010 and 2021 are provided. Graph 4 illustrates a consistent decline in marriages across the various geographical units considered over the period, interrupted only by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to a temporary collapse of

rates in 2020, followed by a subsequent rebound in 2021. Once again, Mexico City stands out with the lowest rates, while notable variations are observed among the northern states. Among the latter, it is notable how the decline in rates has been less pronounced in Sonora and Chihuahua compared to Tamaulipas, where the decline has been particularly noticeable, with the rate dropping from 5.6 marriages per thousand inhabitants in 2010 to only 3.9 marriages per thousand inhabitants in 2019.

Graph 4. Crude Marriage Rates at the National Level, Mexico City, and the Northern States of Mexico (2010-2021)



Source: Own elaboration based on data from CONAPO (2022).

Census data provides insights into the comparative significance of consensual unions within the country's marital landscape and their recent evolution. Table 3 illustrates the percentage distribution of women either married or in consensual unions for two census years, 2010 and 2020. A notable observation is the evident rise in the relative prevalence of consensual unions during this census period, both nationally and across each of the northern states. In 2010, women in consensual unions comprised a quarter of the total population nationally, whereas by 2020, they represented just over a third. Similarly, the northern region witnessed an uptick in the proportion of women in consensual unions, ranging from 26.5% in Nuevo León to 41.4% in Baja California for the year 2020.

Table 3. Percentage Distribution of Women Aged 12 and Over in Marital Unions, Either Marriage or Consensual Union (2010 and 2020)

Entity	Census year	Unions	Marriage	Consensual union
Total Mexico	2010	24 168 772	17 983 462	6 185 310
		100%	74.4%	25.6%
	2020	27 129 449	17 834 607	9 294 842
		100%	65.7%	34.3%
Baja California	2010	643 892	415 725	228 167
		100%	64.6%	35.4%
	2020	794 691	465 803	328 888
		100%	58.6%	41.4%
Coahuila de Zaragoza	2010	596 783	487 322	109 461
		100%	81.7%	18.3%
	2020	692 152	500 368	191 784
		100%	72.3%	27.7%
Chihuahua	2010	703 602	486 553	217 049
		100%	69.2%	30.8%
	2020	797 470	503 132	294 338
		100%	63.1%	36.9%
Nuevo León	2010	1 019 494	859 762	159 732
		100%	84.3%	15.7%
	2020	1 293 987	950 529	343 458
		100%	73.5%	26.5%
Sonora	2010	550 946	385 930	165 016
		100%	70.0%	30.0%
	2020	616 135	398 096	218 039
		100%	64.6%	35.4%
Tamaulipas	2010	687 230	502 139	185 091
		100%	73.1%	26.9%
	2020	776 725	506 329	270 396
		100%	65.2%	34.8%

Source: Own elaboration based on the Population and Housing Census (INEGI, 2010) and the Population and Housing Census (INEGI, 2020).

The surge in consensual unions in the northern region, however, has manifested with intriguing disparities among the various states, indicating once again a distinct geographical pattern within two northern subregions. As evident from Table 3, in 2010, women in consensual unions constituted between 30 and 35% in Chihuahua, Sonora, and Baja California (the latter exhibiting the highest percentage). Meanwhile, women in similar unions ranged between 15.7 and 26.9% in Nuevo León, Coahuila, and Tamaulipas, with the latter boasting the highest proportion.

Between 2010 and 2020, the proportions of consensual unions increased in all states, albeit with intriguing variations in the percentages. In essence, the states in the northwest subregion recorded more modest increases compared to those in the northeast. Specifically, in the northwest entities, the proportions of women in consensual union rose by between 5.4 and 6.1 percentage points, whereas among those in the northeast, the increase ranged from 7.8 to 9.4 percentage points. Therefore, the change observed between 2010 and 2020 was more pronounced among the northern states that historically exhibited lower levels of deinstitutionalization in their marital arrangements. Remarkably, these latter states nearly reached the high percentages of women living in consensual union that the northwest northern states had a decade earlier, by the 2020 census year. Consequently, it is reasonable to anticipate that this significant increase in consensual unions within the marital structures of various northern states, coupled with their comparatively higher risk of dissolution, would also lead to a rise in the proportional weight of de facto separations among overall marital dissolutions in the northern states.

The Legislative Frameworks Concerning Divorce, Marriage, and Cohabitation in the Northern Region

The surge in marital dissolutions and consensual unions in Mexico, akin to other societies, is emblematic of broader societal shifts in the nation's social and economic fabric. These transformations have facilitated greater social and economic empowerment among women in newer generations, affording them increased agency in decisions pertaining to the formation and dissolution of their marital bonds. Concurrently, these changes have precipitated shifts in cultural norms and gender dynamics, reshaping the social and economic perceptions surrounding marriage and divorce, as well as their symbolic and institutional significance within family dynamics. Within this evolving landscape, the role of the State assumes significance, delineating and enforcing the framework that legitimizes and regulates the conditions under which citizens can establish and dissolve marital unions to uphold the institution of the family. A brief review of pertinent legal aspects concerning divorce, marriage, and cohabitation within the civil codes of the six northern states under consideration sheds light on both the potential challenges encountered by couples, particularly women, in seeking divorce or opting for de facto separation as an alternative. Additionally, it illuminates certain adaptations within the legal framework aimed at accommodating unconventional social behaviors in the formation of marital unions divergent from traditional norms (e.g., monogamous and heterosexual marriage). This prompts reflection on the direct and/or indirect impact of such legal dynamics on the prevalence of marital dissolutions through divorce or separation in the northern region of the country.

In the realm of divorce, Table 4 delineates that within the civil codes of the northern states—operative between 2018 and 2022—a prerequisite was established mandating a one-year duration of marriage before couples could seek divorce by mutual consent. This option was contingent upon two conditions: firstly, the absence of minor children within the union, and secondly, the implementation of a separation of property agreement. In instances where these conditions were not met, couples were compelled to pursue contested divorce, necessitating negotiation between parties to resolve matters pertaining to legal, physical, and economic custody of minor children, as well as asset distribution acquired during the marriage. Addressing such circumstances necessitates the engagement of legal professionals and adequate financial resources to defray associated expenses. Moreover, the emotional toll of this process, particularly for the party initiating the divorce, as well as for other family members, notably minor children, cannot be overstated.

Similarly, it is noteworthy in Table 4 that only two of the six states (Baja California and Chihuahua) do not recognize incompatibility of characters as grounds for divorce, or do not mandate a specific cause to initiate the process. This scenario, as one might surmise, renders both the possibility of seeking divorce and the procedural aspects there of more arduous, as it necessitates substantiating that the opposing party has committed a fault or transgression warranting divorce. Such circumstances compel legal recourse and entail heightened financial and emotional tolls, potentially prolonging the duration to secure a favorable divorce decree. Confronted with the practical, financial, and emotional challenges associated with obtaining divorce under these latter conditions, it is conceivable that opting for de facto separation becomes highly appealing, and perhaps the sole viable recourse in certain instances.

Table 4. Legal Provisions Concerning Divorce, Marriage, and Cohabitation in the Civil Codes of Northern Mexican States (2018-2022)

	Baja California	Sonora	Chihuahua	Coahuila de Zaragoza	Nuevo León	Tamaulipas
DIVORCE						
It can be requested by mutual consent after one year of marriage, provided there are no minor children and property separation has been established	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
It includes incompatibility of characters as a cause; or does not mandate the necessity of specifying a cause to request divorce	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
MARRIAGE*						
Minimum age required for marriage	18 (both)	16 him, 14 her	18 (both)	18 (both)	18 (both)	18 (both)
Same-sex marriage recognized	Yes	No	No	Yes*	No	No

(continues)

(continuation)

COHABITATION (free union)

It is legally recognized between a man and a woman after two years of duration; or from the birth of common children	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
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* A Civil Solidarity Pact Agreement is extended to the couple, and upon dissolution of the union, a Termination of Civil Solidarity Pact Agreement is issued.

Source: Own elaboration based on the Código Civil para el Estado de Baja California (Decree 253 of 2021); Ley para la familia de Coahuila de Zaragoza (Decree 784 of 2020); Código Civil del Estado de Chihuahua (Decree 402/73 of 1974); Código Civil para el Estado de Nuevo León (Decree 112 of 1935); Código Civil para el Estado de Tamaulipas (Decree LII/441 of 1987) y Código Civil para el Estado de Sonora (Law 132 of 1949).

In Table 4, concerning marriage, it is evident that the minimum age requirement for civil marriage was 18 years for both sexes in all northern states, except Sonora, between the years 2018 and 2022. Thus, legal adulthood was a prerequisite for both spouses. This requirement was recently instituted in the legislation of most northern states following the amendment of the Federal Penal Code in 2019, which prohibited marriage before the age of 18 and forced cohabitation. Sonora has also amended its legislation in alignment with this federal reform. However, it is notable that until very recently, several of these same states allowed marriage with a minimum age of 16 for males and 14 for females. For instance, in Sonora, these were the minimum ages permitted prior to the 2019 reform for legal marriage; albeit, consent from those exercising parental authority or guardianship over the minors was required, as per article 242 of the Civil Code for the State of Sonora (2022). Additionally, in Sonora, a waiver of these age requirements could be granted

by the judge of first instance, if any, or in the absence thereof, the local judge, or in the absence of the latter, the minor judge, of the place of residence of the interested minors, for serious and justified reasons (pp. 26-27).

This partly elucidates why marriage statistics in Mexico still indicate instances of marriages involving individuals under 18 years of age in northern states.

Changes in the social behavior of the Mexican population in recent years, coupled with organized social activism, have spurred significant modifications in the legal frameworks of certain states, aiming to expand the institutional regulation of marital arrangements within their jurisdictions. Two notable amendments pertain to same-sex marriage and cohabitation, the latter being a legal term denoting common-law unions in civil codes. Regarding the former, as depicted in Table 4, only two of the six northern states recognize same-sex marriage in their legislation, affording such unions legitimacy and equating their rights and obligations with those of heterosexual marriages. Consequently, in most parts of the northern region, same-sex couples remain highly vulnerable, compelled to live discreetly and lacking legal protection. Their status is even more precarious than that of consensual unions between heterosexual couples, particularly concerning dissolution through de facto separation, as it often represents their sole recourse.

Regarding consensual unions, Table 4 reveals that all northern states recognize the legal entitlement of partners, particularly women, to receive financial support after two years of union formation, or earlier if children are born from the union. This, coupled with the previously attained acknowledgment of rights granted by law to children born from a consensual union before paternal recognition, potentially ameliorates the legal circumstances of women/mothers in such unions, along with their children. These rights can be particularly crucial in cases of economic exploitation within the relationship or when seeking to dissolve it through de facto separation. Despite these significant legal strides, in some instances, seeking the assistance of a legal professional may still be necessary to enforce such rights.

From another standpoint, these legal advancements render consensual union a more appealing choice than formal marriage for numerous couples, irrespective of gender. This might be applicable to couples aiming for enhanced legal adaptability in their marital unions and to very young couples who perceive consensual union as a pathway to adulthood. It enables them to explore their sexuality with a level of emotional stability and without being encumbered by *excessive legal obligations* in the event they opt for dissolution through separation.

Hence, it is highly probable that the legal aspects of divorce, marriage, and consensual union are playing a role, both directly and indirectly, in the rise of marital dissolutions through separation in the northern states of the country.

PREDICTIVE FACTORS OF MARITAL DISSOLUTION AMONG WOMEN IN THE NORTH

Sociodemographic research extensively explores the significance of individual predictive factors in understanding the phenomenon of voluntary marital dissolution across various countries, including Mexico. In the Mexican context, this aspect has been extensively studied, primarily focusing on analyzing the influence of women's characteristics on the phenomenon. This focus is largely attributed to the limitations of available information in demographic surveys, which have served as the primary data source. Drawing from the wealth of accumulated knowledge in this area, it was deemed appropriate to conduct a statistical analysis examining the relationship between variables related to the social and demographic characteristics of women and the incidence of divorce and separation, treating these two events separately.

Concerning the Sociodemographic Profile of Women Ever in Union

At the top of Table 5, the marital status declared by women ever in union is presented, categorized by the northern federative entity where they were interviewed. As expected, the percentage of separated women is notably higher than that of divorced women, constituting 21.7% and 13.2% of the total regional, respectively. However, it is interesting to note that the numerical predominance of separated women over divorced women is observed in the three states of the northwest subregion,

but only in one of the northeast subregion—Tamaulipas—while in Coahuila and Nuevo León, the proportions of divorced and separated women are practically equal.

Table 5. Northern Mexico: Percentage Distribution of Women Ever in Union, According to Some Characteristics

	Baja California	Coahuila de Zaragoza	Chihuahua	Nuevo León	Sonora	Tamaulipas	Northern border total
Marital status at the time of the survey							
Married or living with partner in a consensual union	62.3	47.1	58.5	58.1	68.6	71.8	61.5
Separated	23.5	25.1	26.8	18.8	17.4	18.4	21.7
Divorced	9.8	25.4	10.8	19.1	10.1	7.5	13.2
Widowed	4.4	2.3	3.8	4.1	3.9	2.4	3.6
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Premarital cohabitation							
Yes	14.5	12	17.8	12.3	16.7	8.9	14.7
Type of first union							
Consensual union	61.6	44.6	66.7	46.3	64.9	57.7	57.7
Marriage	38.4	55.4	33.3	53.7	35.1	42.3	42.3
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Own calculations based on the ENADID (INEGI, 2018).

In Table 5, the prevalence of consensual union in the marital history of a substantial percentage of women is evident, either as the type chosen for their initial marital union or because they lived in a consensual union with the same partner they eventually married. Regarding the former scenario, it is noteworthy that the proportion of women with a consensual union as their first union is notably high in the overall regional context, constituting 58% of cases. Furthermore, when comparing across states, it is observed that the percentages of women with a consensual union as their first union surprisingly exceed 60% in the northwestern states, with Chihuahua leading at almost 67%. Although this type of union is comparatively less prevalent among women in the northeastern region, its occurrence is still significant: 44.6%, 46.3%, and 57.7% in Coahuila, Nuevo León, and Tamaulipas, respectively. These figures indicate a departure from more traditional marital practices, particularly in the northwestern states, where consensual unions are more prevalent compared to the northeastern states, which have historically exhibited more conservative marital behaviors with a higher proportion of formal marriages.

Regarding premarital cohabitation, Table 5 reveals that a significant percentage of women's first marriages are initiated through consensual unions. Specifically, 14.7% of married women in the northern region lived with the same person they later married. This marital experience is more prevalent among women in the northwest subregion compared to those in the northeast subregion.

The percentages range from 14.7% in Baja California to 18% in Chihuahua in the northwest, while in the northeast, the percentages are 8.9% in Tamaulipas, 12% in Coahuila, and 12.3% in Nuevo León.

Another significant characteristic to consider for this study is the age of women at their first union, categorized by the type of union chosen. Table 6 provides insight into this aspect, revealing a notable contrast between the age at the first consensual union and the age at the first marriage. As anticipated, there is a considerable difference in the average ages, with the average age at the first consensual union being 18.3 years and the average age at the first marriage being 21.1 years, resulting in a regional gap of 2.8 years. Across states, the difference in age between these two types of unions is generally less than three years, except for Sonora, where the gap is nearly four years. Among these states, Coahuila exhibits the smallest gap at 2.1 years, while Baja California shows the largest difference at 2.9 years between those opting for their first union through free arrangements and those choosing marriage.

Table 6. Northern Mexico: Characteristics of Women Ever Partnered

Entity	Age at time of survey		Age at first union		Age at first marriage		Years of schooling	
	Average	SD	Average	SD	Average	SD	Average	SD
Baja California	38.8	9.2	18.5	4.4	21.4	6.4	9.4	3.6
Coahuila de Zaragoza	37.7	9.3	17.9	3.6	20.0	5.9	9.2	3.2
Chihuahua	37.9	8.8	18.3	4.4	20.6	5.8	9.2	3.4
Nuevo León	38.1	8.8	18.7	4.7	21.1	6.4	9.7	3.3
Sonora	38.4	9.2	17.9	3.3	21.7	6.8	9.6	3.5
Tamaulipas	39.1	9.3	18.6	4.1	21.3	6.5	9.7	3.5
Total	38.4	9.1	18.3	4.2	21.1	6.3	9.5	3.4

Source: Own elaboration based on the ENADID (INEGI, 2018).

Table 7. Northern Mexico: Percentage Distribution of Women Ever Partnered, According to Their Age at First Union

	Baja California	Coahuila de Zaragoza	Chihuahua	Nuevo León	Sonora	Tamaulipas	Northern border total
14 or less	10.9	15.8	14	11.7	13.3	10.9	12.6
15-19	60.3	57	57.7	58	60.3	54.6	58.1
20-24	20.3	22.2	20.3	20.4	21.6	26.2	21.7
25-29	5.5	4.6	5.9	6.6	4.3	7.3	5.7
30-34	2.4	0.3	1.1	1.8	0.5	0.2	1.1
35-39	0.5	0	0.5	1.2	0	0.5	0.5
40-44	0.3	0	0.5	0.3	0	0.3	0.2
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Own elaboration based on the ENADID (INEGI, 2018).

The data in Table 7 provide valuable insights into the age at first union. For women who reported premarital cohabitation with the same partner, whether through marriages or consensual unions, the time spent in a consensual union before marriage is taken into account. The analysis reveals a remarkably young age structure at first union, with nearly 71% of surveyed women in northern Mexico entering into union during their teenage years, and almost 13% doing so before reaching the age of 15. This youthful age structure at first union is consistent across all northern states, with Sonora and Coahuila having the highest percentages of women entering union before the age of 20, approximately 73%, and Nuevo León and Tamaulipas having slightly lower percentages, just under 70%.

While it is tempting to dismiss these differences as insignificant given the high percentages involved, one could argue that they are socially alarming in today's context, as they involve marital arrangements where women are teenagers or even children. It is worth considering that this situation occurs in states where women's educational attainment has slightly exceeded secondary school level, averaging 9.5 years of schooling (see Table 6). One factor that could be influencing these very young age structures at first union is migration, as this region attracts a significant number of migrants from all parts of the country, including regions where early marriage has been more common historically.

DIVORCE, SEPARATION AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF WOMEN

The data presented above highlight notable variances between married women and those in consensual unions, particularly concerning their age at first union. Additionally, it is crucial to acknowledge that divorced and separated women represent diverse populations with distinct individual characteristics and behaviors concerning marital dissolution. Hence, it was deemed essential to explore the statistical relationship between various social characteristics of women and the likelihood of divorce, as well as the probability of separation. To achieve this, four distinct logistic regression models were computed: two for each northern subregion, and two for each type of dissolution of the initial marital union—divorce and separation. The ensuing results are detailed in Tables 8 and 9.

Table 8 depicts the models related to separation. Notably, education emerges as a significant variable in this form of marital dissolution across both northern subregions. Specifically, within the northeastern subregion, women with educational attainment beyond middle school witness a 57% decrease in the likelihood of separation. Similarly, in the northwestern subregion, this probability diminishes by over half (52%) for women with similar educational levels. Conversely, interpreting these findings from another angle reveals that women with only a middle school education or less exhibit more than double the probability of separation in both northern subregions of Mexico.

Table 8. Odds Ratios (OR) for the Probability of Marital Separation in Women from Two Subregions of Northern Mexico

Eastern region		OR
	Beyond middle school**	0.43
	Migrant to the region	1.13
	Union before 18 years old	1.27
	Constant**	2.365
Western region		OR
	Beyond middle school**	0.48
	Migrant to the region	1.12
	Union before 18 years old*	1.33
	Constant**	2.997

*p<0.05; **p<0.005

Source: Own calculations based on the ENADID (INEGI, 2018).

In Table 8, the significance of a woman's age at first union in relation to the probability of separation is evident, though it is significant only in one of the two subregions. Specifically, women from the northwest subregion exhibit a one-third higher probability of separation if they entered into union before reaching the legal age of 18. However, this pattern intriguingly does not manifest among women in the northeast subregion.

In the same Table 8, it is observed that being a migrant to the region among women does not appear to significantly influence the probability of separation in either of the two subregions.

In Table 9, the results from the logistic regression models for divorce are presented. It is notable that education emerges as a highly significant variable, albeit in the opposite direction to what was observed for separation. Intriguingly, in both northern subregions, having a level of education beyond middle school poses a risk factor, increasing the probability of divorce by up to three times or more compared to women whose highest educational attainment is middle school.

Table 9. Odds Ratio (OR) for the Probability of Divorce in Women from Two Northern Regions of Mexico

Eastern region		OR
	Beyond middle school**	2.942
	Migrant to the region	0.905
	Union before 18 years old	0.877
	Premarital cohabitation**	0.084
	Constant*	0.702

(continues)

(continuation)

Western region	OR
Beyond middle school**	3.456
Migrant to the region	1.226
Union before 18 years old	0.892
Premarital cohabitation**	0.049
Constant**	0.599

*p<0.05; **p<0.005

Source: Own calculations based on the ENADID (INEGI, 2018).

In Table 9, an intriguing finding emerges regarding the effect of premarital cohabitation on the probability of divorce. Contrary to expectations, this variable influences the dissolution of the first marital union by divorce, but its effect is protective. Surprisingly, the probability of divorce decreases by up to 95% among women in the northwest subregion and by 91.6% among women in the northeast subregion. Additionally, the age at first union before 18 years does not significantly affect the probability of divorce in either of the two northern subregions, unlike its impact on separation, which is noteworthy.

Finally, once again, the migratory status of women does not appear to significantly influence the likelihood of divorce. This finding suggests that a woman's migratory status in northern Mexico does not seem to impact the probabilities of marital dissolution, whether through divorce or separation.

CONCLUSION

The findings reveal that, overall, marital stability within the northern border region of Mexico may not be particularly favorable. Marital dissolution of first unions through divorce and separation in the region ranks among the highest in the country, albeit with notable variations among the constituent states. Broadly speaking, the data suggest a distinct dichotomy between states situated in the western and eastern parts of the region. States in the northwest subregion exhibit comparatively higher probabilities of marital dissolution than those in the northeast subregion.

Equally noteworthy is the prevalence of free or consensual unions among women who have experienced relationships in northern Mexico. While the percentages of such unions are higher in the northwest states compared to those in the northeast, the latter have seen a more significant increase in this type of union from 2010 to 2020. Concurrently, there has been a notable decline in marriages across all northern states, particularly in the northwest. This trend creates conditions that may foster family instability, given the higher probabilities of dissolution associated with consensual unions.

The significance of consensual unions in the north is also evident in the significant percentages of women who have a history of premarital cohabitation, especially in the northwestern region.

However, it is worth noting that, contrary to expectations, premarital cohabitation proved to be a protective factor against divorce in both subregions of northern Mexico.

The predictive factors for divorce and separation do not exhibit uniform behavior in northern Mexico, as evidenced by the statistical analysis of the association between individual variables and the probabilities of divorce and separation when considering these events separately. Education and age at first union emerge as particularly significant. Education is found to be highly significant in both types of marital dissolution, but with contrasting effects. Having more than a middle school education reduces the probability of separation but increases the probability of divorce.

Similarly, age at first union exhibits a notable impact. The youthful age structure of first unions in the northern states undermines marital stability in the region, particularly in the northwest. The statistical significance of age at first union among women is evident in separation cases, wherein joining before the age of 18 increases the probability of dissolution, albeit not in the case of divorce.

These findings underscore the importance of conducting further in-depth statistical analyses on the predictive factors of voluntary marital dissolution, specifically divorce and separation, across different regions of the country. It is crucial to treat these two events separately and to gather more comprehensive data on each type of marital dissolution through surveys. Moving forward with the socio-demographic examination of family stability and instability, especially among younger generations and recent union cohorts, requires a nuanced understanding of divorce and separation dynamics at both regional and state levels. Given the increasing diversity of Mexican families, a more comparative and regional approach to studying their socio-demographic dynamics is imperative.

Translation: Erika Morales.

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