

# Cultural Analysis of Half-Century Demographic Swings of Iran: The Place of Popular Culture

Yaghoob Foroutan<sup>1</sup>  
University of Mazandaran, Iran

Giving specific reference to the place of culture, this paper examines the patterns and determinants associated with demographic swings from cultural perspectives. The discussion is based on the analysis of observations in a country that has experienced substantial changes in family formation resulting in one of the world's most spectacular falls in birth rate ever experienced in human history: Iran. Facing fundamental historical experiences and substantial socio-cultural changes over the past decades, the context of this study acts as a unique 'social and cultural laboratory' to survey the intergenerational comparisons. The results of this analysis show substantial intergenerational transition, which provide further evidence and fresh research findings to support the substantially important and inevitable place of cultural believes in demographic trends.

*Keywords:* culture, demographic swings, traditional believes, popular culture, Iran, intergenerational transition.

## Introduction

This paper gives specific reference to the place of culture and examines the patterns and determinants associated with demographic swings from cultural perspectives. It presents evidence to explain intergenerational transition of socio-demographic characteristics through the window of culture and religion. The paper focuses on the context of Iran that observed substantial changes in family formation resulting in one of the world's most spectacular falls in women's birth rate ever experienced in human history (Abbasi-Shavazi et al., 2009; Foroutan, 2008; McDonald, 2005; McDonald et al., 2015). Facing fundamental historical experiences and substantial socio-cultural changes over the past decades, Iran represents a unique 'social laboratory' to survey the socio-demographic consequences of traditional and modern views and values associated with women's status including their childbearing patterns. The experiences can be tracked mainly in more than half-century Pahlavi monarchy period (the Shah's regime: 1925-1979) when the government and society were predominantly influenced by the Western style, the 1979 Islamic Revolution period, the eight-year war with the neighbouring Iraq (1980-1988), the post-revolutionary modernization period commencing with the First Development Plan (1989-1993), and further developing socio-cultural changes in more recent years.

In the search of exploring the true reason of the substantial demographic transition in Iran during the past decades, social and cultural progress' has been identified as the keystone of the fertility decline in Iran (Foroutan, 2014; Foroutan, 2019; Hosseini-Chavoshi et al., 2016; Ladier-Fouladi, 1997; McDonald et al., 2015; Mirzaei, 1998; Roudi, 2017). Using a cultural approach, the present paper provides evidence to explain the substantial intergenerational transition of demographic swings over the last decades. In particular, the present paper aims to investigate the intergenerational transition through contrasting predominant cultural views and values amongst the old and new generations with regard to family formation characteristics such as marriage and fertility patterns. The paper highlights values and views associated with socio-demographic issues predominant amongst the old generation. This is explored here using the major popular beliefs, which typically reflect traditional views and values, and were predominantly and strongly believed in the past. The paper also addresses the contemporary beliefs and attitudes regarding the socio-demographic issues in more recent years, which are particularly predominant amongst the new generation.

## Research Questions

The preceding section has outlined the main research objectives of this study. More specifically, the present study deals with these key research questions: how important is the place of culture in the demographic swings of Iran during the past decades? In particular, how important is the role of traditional beliefs and popular culture in this regard? What are the main patterns and determinants associated with demographic swings from cultural perspectives? Whether and how significantly does intergenerational transition exist with respect to demographic changes from cultural perspective?

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<sup>1</sup> Correspondence: Associate Professor of Demography at the Department of Social Sciences, University of Mazandaran, Babolsar, Iran.  
E-mail: [y\\_foroutan@yahoo.com](mailto:y_foroutan@yahoo.com)

### Theoretical Approach

Generally speaking, there is no doubt that people in all human societies are under the influence of culture. However, traditional societies are more substantially affected by cultural determinants so that culture, like an octopus, encompasses nearly all dimensions of both individual and social lives in such societies. Prior studies have emphasized the importance of the cultural approach to explaining family formation characteristics such as marriage and fertility patterns of women in varying societies across the world (Abbasi-Shavazi et al., 2009; Caldwell and Caldwell, 1987; Casterline, 2017; Colleran, 2016; Fricke, 1997; Foroutan, 2000; Foroutan, 2014; Hammel, 1990; Hayes, 1994; Hirschman, 2003; Lesthaeghe, 1983; McDonald et al., 2015; Weeks, 1994).

The definition of culture is a complicated matter. Laland and Hoppitt (2003, p. 150), for instance, point to ‘the absence of a satisfactory and universally accepted definition of culture’ and claim the term, *culture*, “has become a quagmire for the social sciences”. Krober and Kluckhohn (1952) identified more than one hundred definitions for culture. In Herskovits’s (1955) view, culture is the human-made part of the environment. Based on this view, Triandis (1996) divided culture into two separate sections: objective culture consisting of tools or roads etc, and subjective culture including beliefs, attitudes, norms, values and so forth. There is a similar classification of culture in which objective and subjective parts of culture are, respectively, named as material culture such as technologies and non-material culture containing ideas, values, beliefs etc.

Culture has been defined as “a system of views, values, symbols and behaviour shared by a group of people” (Valk et al., 2004, p. 9). Based on this definition, popular beliefs or proverbs can be attached to culture through views, values, or symbols. According to Webster (1982, p. 175, 173), popular and traditional beliefs or proverbs, as a “part of cognitive system of the culture in which they occur”, are helpful because they ‘would provide valuable clues about their character and culture’. In the literature, popular and traditional beliefs have been regarded as “vehicle of expression” (Raymond 1981, p. 300), “impersonal vehicles for personal communication” (Arewa & Dundes, 1964, p. 70), and “as vehicles of conventional wisdom” (Goodwin and Wenzel 1981: 142). According to Raymond (1981, p. 300), proverbs or popular utterances are employed as one of pathways amongst scholars in social sciences and languages that “leads into a fundamental part of the language and culture of a national group”. Dundes (1981, p. 44) pointed out that “proverbs have never been adequately defined”. He, then, has identified proverbs as “traditional propositions’ which are ‘short sentences drawn from long experience” (Dundes, 1981, p. 61). Seitel (1981), Foroutan (2000), Foroutan (2014), Goodwin and Wenzel (1981) have also agreed that proverbs are short and traditional.

Using the intergenerational cultural transition approach (Andrews, 2017; Farre & Vella, 2007; Fortin, 2005), here, it is assumed that popular and traditional beliefs, like a mirror, reflect dominant beliefs, attitudes, values, expectations and aspirations of the majority of people or some groups in the society. Accordingly, they seem to be a good tool to reveal some parts of culture. People’s behaviour is, of course, considerably under the influences of such beliefs and expectations. The existence and consistence of popular culture and traditional beliefs depend totally on favourable attitudes in the society towards them. In other words, the permanence of popular culture and traditional beliefs means that they are still acceptable and powerful on people’s behaviour in the society. However, popular and traditional beliefs will gradually vanish once social beliefs and attitudes are moved towards new views and values. This cultural change also provides a good basis to study the matter of intergenerational transition, a method that has also been employed in this study.

### Research Data and Method

The research data employed in this analysis are based on three main sources. First, in order to highlight the main socio-demographic characteristics of the country over the past decades, the paper uses various secondary data of Population and Housing Censuses published by the Statistical Center of Iran over the past decades. Second, this paper also relies on the research findings of a study focusing on the status and orientation of cultural values and beliefs identified by popular culture and traditional beliefs or proverbs regarding socio-demographic issues associated with family formation and women's status (Foroutan, 2000)<sup>2</sup>. It should be clarified here that it is out of the scope of this study to examine directly whether and how strongly such cultural and traditional beliefs are predominant across the country. Rather, this study deals with this key issue indirectly in order to explore the association between these cultural and traditional beliefs and demographic swings.

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<sup>2</sup> The popular culture and traditional beliefs or proverbs highlighted in this study have been obtained from a large number of books (in Persian) dealing with the Iranian proverbs written by some of the best-known Iranian scholars such as Mehdi Sohili (1974), Ahmad Shamlo (1978), and Allame AliAkbar Dehkoda (1978, 1982) detailed in the References section.

Third, the discussion of this paper is also based on a recently conducted survey. It includes 4267 male and females aged 15 years old and over living in rural and urban areas of Ahvaz, Babolsar, Bojnourd, Esfarayen, Gonbad Kavos, Hamadan, Kamyaran, Khoramabad, Mahmoudabad, and Saghez. Table 1 presents more detailed information about the sample size by rural-urban areas of this survey. This is also a brief description on their socio-demographic characteristics: the samples included in this survey are almost equally distributed by gender (51.1 per cent males and 48.9 per cent females). On average, their median age is 31.9 years old which is just slightly higher than the whole country's median age of approximately 30.0 years old. In terms of marital status, almost two-third are married, nearly one-third are singles, and the proportions for those without partner due to divorce or death are almost negligible (1.6 per cent and 2.3 per cent, respectively). Further, 63.8 per cent of the survey's respondents live in urban areas and the remaining 36.2 per cent lives in rural areas. Finally, in terms of educational level, almost 10 per cent of them are illiterate, 20 per cent with primary and intermediate schooling, 40 per cent diploma, and about 30 per cent of them hold tertiary education. Again, Table 1 presents more detailed information about the sample size by rural-urban areas of this survey.

From a methodological perspective, it is acknowledged here that despite a relatively significant number of samples included in this survey, it is still a small proportion of the country's current total population of more than 80 million. The aspects of family formation and women's status considered in this paper include the desired age at marriage and mean age at first marriage, divorce rate, gender preference, infertility, fertility, the ideal number of children, reproductive health and family planning issues.

Table 1.

*Distribution of samples of the survey's selected rural and urban areas*

Rural – Urban areas	Male	Female	Total
Ahvaz	244	217	461
Babolsar	286	270	556
Bojnourd	235	235	470
Esfarayen	206	194	400
Gonbade-kavos	189	211	400
Hamadan	268	232	500
Kamyaran	150	150	300
Khoram-abad	240	240	480
Mahmoud-abad	202	198	400
Saghez	150	150	300
<b>Total</b>	<b>2170</b>	<b>2097</b>	<b>4267</b>

## Results of This Study

### Family Union: Marriage and Divorce

It is evident that women's birth rate is closely connected with the incidence of marriage and divorce. This association applies more significantly to societies such as Iran where, in contrast to the Western culture, birth outside the registered marriage is both legally prohibited and socio-culturally unacceptable. Countries with high level of women's fertility are usually characterized as societies with high incidence of marriage and early marriage. In addition, divorce rate in such countries is low mainly due to socio-cultural obligations and restrictions. As a result, women in such traditional settings usually stay longer in their reproductive ages and, consequently, they are potentially in the exposure of high fertility.

According to the Iranian traditional views and values predominant amongst the old generation, generally speaking, marriage is extremely important so that there is no excuse to refuse it under nearly any circumstance. Unmarried men and women are expected to marry as soon as they can: the postponement of

marriage is undesirable. For example, according to the popular and traditional culture<sup>3</sup>, it is believed that '*only God deserves to be single and unique*'. Further, in such cultural circumstances, even those people who are suffering financial hardship and cannot afford the expenditures of wedding and other costs related to marriage ceremony are expected to receive a loan enabling them to cope with the costs and to marry. Such people should not have any hesitation and concern to receive the loan because it is strongly believed that marriage is one of the best things that God likes it for His servants so He will surely help these people to cope with the difficulties. In other words, they have the best supporter, i.e. God, to repay the loan.

In contrast, the Iranian traditional beliefs reflect divorce as one of the worst possible things in the world. Couples, especially wives, have been strongly encouraged and invited to be patient and tolerant during their marital ties till death. For instance, it was traditionally believed that '*as wife comes to her husband's home upon marriage with a white dress [i.e. wedding dress], she should leave there only with a white dress<sup>4</sup> [i.e. burial garment], too*'. This suggests that she is expected to close her eyes to the possible marital arguments and household's difficulties from the beginning of marriage to the end of her life without complaining. However, patient and tolerant husbands have also been appreciated: '*a man who missed his wife due to death is better than a man who missed her because of divorce*'. It is also worthwhile mentioning that in such cultural circumstances, even the judge usually tries to postpone issuing the verdict of divorce in the hope of giving more opportunity to the couple and to their close relatives for further negotiation to keep the marital tie. This also echoes the importance of family union in this cultural setting.

According to the results of this study shown in Table 2, it is evident that marriage patterns have substantially changed over the last decades in Iran. In the past, when there were strongly positive views and values associated with marriage as highlighted above, a higher proportion of young women were married and the mean age at first marriage for women was remarkably low (around 18 years in 1956 and 1966). However, these marriage patterns no longer exist at the recent years as the traditional views and values associated with women's marriage have considerably removed from the society, particularly amongst the young generation. Accordingly, the mean age at first marriage for women increased markedly to about 24 years in 2006 and the proportion of women ever-married aged 15-19 declined significantly from about 40 per cent in 1976 to less than 20 per cent in 2006 (Computed from Censuses Data, the Statistical Center of Iran, 1956-2006).

Furthermore, according to the results of the recent survey amongst the young generation illustrated in Table 3, almost half of young people aged 15-29 years old believe that their desired age at marriage for women is, on average, between 21-24 years old, and about one-fifth of them believe that it should be between 25-27 years old (see Table 3).

Table 2.  
*Socio-demographic and reproductive health characteristics of Iran*

Year	Population (million)	Urbanization Rate %	Total Fertility Rate	Mean age at marriage (females)	Literacy Rate %	Infant Mortality Rate (2)	Contraceptive prevalence rate %
1956	19	32	7.2	18.0	15	200	na
1966	26	39	7.0	18.4	30	165	na
1976	34	47	6.3	19.7	48	112	36
1986	49	54	6.5	20.0	62	65	49
1996	60	61	2.9	22.8	85	35	72
2006	70	69	1.8	23.6	85	32	74

Source: Computed from the Statistical Center of Iran (censuses of 1956-2006); Mirzaie, 1998; Population Reference Bureau, 2005a, 2005b).

<sup>3</sup> The popular culture and traditional beliefs or proverbs in this paper appear in *Italics*.

<sup>4</sup> In this cultural context, the dead is first washed by his/her close relatives and then, he or she is covered by a white sheet prior to putting in tomb.

- (1) In some cases, particularly for contraceptive prevalence rate, the percentages refer to the closest year of the corresponding year for which data were available.
- (2) Infant mortality rate shows the proportion of infant deaths per 1000 live births.

Table 3.  
*Attitude toward desired age of marriage for women*

Age of Respondents	Desired age at marriage for women (years)						Total
	Less than 18	18-20	21-24	25-27	28-30	Above 30	
15-19	3.7	29.7	42.1	19.7	3.3	1.3	100.0
20-24	3.9	26.3	48.7	17.7	2.6	0.2	100.0
25-29	2.2	24.8	45.0	23.1	3.5	1.0	100.0
50 years and older	13.7	27.6	36.7	13.5	4.7	3.8	100.0

**Source:** The Survey in selected urban and rural areas of Iran detailed in Research Data and Method section of this paper.

Moreover, according to the results of this study illustrated in Table 4, the divorce rate has experienced roughly an increasing trend over the recent years, particularly in urban areas. This can be partly explained by the fact that the previous traditional beliefs restricting divorce which were vastly predominant amongst the old generation are gradually losing their credit in the recent years so that the new generation, for instance, do not necessarily see divorce as having a stigma as it was in the past. That, as mentioned above, the increasing trend of divorce rate particularly applies to urban areas can be mainly related to the fact that value change tends to occur more in urban areas more evidently than in rural areas, where traditional culture influencing family ties is more prevalent and long-standing. According to the United Nations' *World Marriage Data 2008*, Iran has also witnessed substantial increase in divorce incidence over the past decades so that the average annual number of divorce has been doubled during the past decades: from about 6 per 10000 total population in the year 1970 to 12 and 13 per 10000 total population in the years of 2000 and 2010, respectively. Moreover, the results of the survey detailed in the methodology section show that around one-third of young people aged 15-29 years old have a positive attitude towards divorce (Table 5). Accordingly, the marriage and divorce patterns of women highlighted above clearly echo an important intergenerational transition regarding the views and values associated with family formation predominant amongst the old and new generations over the past decades.

Table 4.  
*Divorce Rate (per 10,000 ever married) in Iran by rural and urban areas: 1976 – 2000*

Year	Urban areas	Rural areas
1976	9.7	1.9
1986	10.9	2.4
1996	9.2	2.1
2000	12.8	2.3

**Source:** Computed from Statistical Center of Iran (SCI)

NOTE: According to the United Nations' *World Marriage Data 2008*, the divorce rate per 10000 ever married in Iran in the years of 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000, and 2010 are 6, 8, 6, 12, and 13 in 2000 and 2008, respectively (United Nations' *World Marriage Data, 2008*).

Table 5.

*Positive attitude toward divorce among young generation aged 15-29 years and old generation of 50 years and older (%)*

Age of Respondents	Males	Females	Total
15-19	32.9	41.3	37.4
20-24	32.0	33.9	33.0
25-29	27.6	32.1	30.0
50 years and older	7.5	2.9	5.2

**Source:** The Survey in selected urban and rural areas of Iran detailed in Research Data and Method section of this paper.

### Generational Gap in Fertility Pattern

Women's childbearing or fertility is usually measured by Total Fertility Rate (TFR) referring to the average number of children per woman during her reproductive ages (that is, ages 15-49). During the past decades, Iran has experienced a substantial decline in TFR: from more than 7 children per woman in 1956 to about 2 children per woman in 2006. This has been identified as one of 'the most spectacular fall in birth rate ever experienced in human history' (McDonald, 2005, p. 18). Addressing to the socio-cultural views and values associated with women's childbearing predominant amongst the old and new generations, the discussion below attempts to provide evidence to explain this spectacular fall in women's birth rate over the past decades from the window of culture.

Generally speaking, a strongly traditional approach to women's childbearing warmly welcoming large family size can be evidently tracked in the cultural views and values predominant amongst the old generation in Iran. Couples have been strongly encouraged to activate their reproductive potentialities. For instance, it was traditionally believed that '*a home full of enemies is better than a home with no child*', '*wherever child is, there is no evil*', and '*sun is the essence (spirit) of sky and child, particularly son, is the essence (spirit) of home*'. Further, in this cultural setting, there has not been any concern for having more children because it is ideologically believed that the real creator of child is God, and not parents. As a result, the real creator will surely assist the parents to keep their child alive against hunger and disease as He created the child. For example, it has been culturally and religiously believed that '*someone who gave teeth, i.e. God, He would certainly provide food, too*'. This belief tends to assure the parents that the real creator, i.e. God, is totally compassionate and merciful to His servants to do not leave them alone to die due to hunger and starvation.

In contrast, infertility has not been warmly welcomed in the Iranian traditional culture. In this context, a woman who is biologically unable to give birth does not have a socially and culturally positive and acceptable status in both family and society. For instance, it has been believed that '*an infertile woman is a stranger*'. This can be also interpreted in this way that a woman would be identified as an acquaintance in family and society as long as she is able to activate the potentiality of reproduction because otherwise she would be considered as a stranger in the family and society. It is noteworthy that the infertility of a woman may give socially a right to her husband to remarry in the hope of having children in his remarriage, either by keeping or breaking the first union. However, it is also important to mention that it does not seem that such a socially acceptable right could be equally given to a woman whose husband is infertile<sup>5</sup>. This emphasizes how vitally important women's fertility has been in this cultural context.

<sup>5</sup> According to other research (Foroutan, 2002) regarding the socio-cultural changes of ageing in Iran during the last decades, the proportion of divorced female elders substantially exceeds that of their male counterparts. This pattern has been mainly explained by gender differences in this cultural context in which (even amongst elderly) divorced males are more than divorced females socio-culturally allowed to remarry, whereas divorced women are much more likely to stay unmarried for the rest of their life.

Accordingly, in such a cultural environment, couples have been socially and culturally encouraged to activate their reproductive potentialities as much as they could. This leads to women’s fertility in Iran reaching a substantially high rate in the past. TFR was about 7 children per woman in 1956 and 1966 when such traditional views and values associated with women’s childbearing were predominant amongst the old generation. Other factors such as the high rates of illiteracy, child mortality, and low rate of urbanization have also facilitated such a demographic outcome (see Table 2).

However, the pattern highlighted above is no longer the case in the recent years as the new generation tends to hold their views and values associated with women’s childbearing, which are significantly different with those of the old generation highlighted above. In contrast to the high value associated with women’s fertility in the past, people in recent years have given high value to the small family size so that TFR declined markedly to about 2 children per woman in 2006 (see Table 2). This tends to be a more evident observation amongst young generation in more recent years. For instance, the results of the survey detailed in the methodology section indicate that not only do a vast majority of young people aged 15-29 years old prefer to have two children in their marital life but also a considerable proportion of the people aged 15-19 years old have shown that ‘only one child’ is their ideal number of family size. Almost the same patterns have been observed in other studies (Abbasi-Shavazi et al., 2009; Foroutan, 2008; Foroutan, 2014; McDonald et al., 2015; Mirzaie, 1998). It is also important to state that such an intergenerational transition of values associated with family formation and women’s fertility behaviour has been accompanied by substantial progress in modernization characterized by the rising rates of education, urbanization, health services, and contraceptives use (see Table 2). Therefore, it is acknowledged that a wide range of factors contributed to the women’s birth fall in Iran during the recent years<sup>6</sup>. However, the results of this study, in accordance with prior studies (Abbasi-Shavazi, 2009; Foroutan, 2012, Foroutan, 2014; Hosseini-Chavoshi et al., 2016; Ladier-Fouladi, 1997; McDonald et al., 2015), emphasize that the spectacular fertility transition in Iran mainly lies in different socio-cultural views and values contributed by the old and new generations.

Table 6.  
*Attitude toward ideal number of children among young generation aged 15-29 years and old generation of 50 years and older (%)*

Age of Respondents	One child	Two children	Three children	4 children and more
15-19	21.3	52.9	15.7	8.4
20-24	14.3	48.9	21.3	14.0
25-29	13.4	54.5	20.2	11.1
50 years and older	4.3	35.7	28.1	27.8

**Source:** The Survey in selected urban and rural areas of Iran detailed in Research Data and Method section of this paper.

### **Generational Change in Gender (Sex) Preference**

Gender preference plays a significant role in family formation and women’s status, including fertility behavior and reproductive health. Indeed, countries facing high fertility and low reproductive health for women are often characterized by the fact that couples tend to give preference to a certain sex of births, particularly male births. In such circumstances, it is more likely that couples will tend to discontinue childbearing only once they became sure that they have at least one child of the desired gender among their

<sup>6</sup> For instance, this refers to a list of factors consisting of governmental family planning programs, the increasing first age at marriage, economic hardship, the increasing cost of living, the increasing cost of childbearing especially education, job-finding difficulties as well as increasing accessibility to electricity, TV, radio, and piped water in rural area (Ladier-Fouladi, 1997; Mirzaie, 1998; Abbasi-Shavazi et al., 2009).

ever-born children. The discussion below provides evidence as to whether such a preference has been prevalent in Iran and how significantly the country's demographic figures over the past decades could be affected by such a gender preference amongst the old and new generations.

Generally speaking, the traditional beliefs predominant amongst the old generation in Iran could be identified by a wide range of gender preference at which male gender is often prioritized to female gender (Foroutan, 2012; Foroutan, 2019). Such cultural beliefs have been demonstrated in different ways, which are classified in three main groups in this study. Firstly, some of these traditional beliefs have been displayed explicitly and directly. For instance, it has been believed that *'it would be better if the newly-born baby was not a girl, otherwise she is preferred to be sent out to husband's home [i.e. getting married shortly] or to cemetery [that is, getting died]'*. This suggests that the life of females is closely related to marriage which enables them to emerge their capability only beside husband. This was also clearly demonstrated in the traditional belief that *'girls are not eligible to express their ideas until getting married'*. Newly-married couples were much more likely to be told by their families, relatives, neighbours, and friends that *'hope God gives you a son'* rather than a girl or even a child without identifying the gender of child.

Secondly, the traditional beliefs associated with gender preference have also been displayed indirectly and implicitly. This is mainly identified through attributing the typical negative characteristics to female gender, whereas the positive ones were usually monopolized for male gender. For instance, females have been often identified by characteristics such as disloyalty, ineligible for consultancy, unable to keep secrets, often complaining and nagging, and insufficiently-wise. It was also believed that women's dreams are not true and have inverse interpretation and application in the real life. On the other hand, positive characteristics were mostly attributed to males: they were described as loyal, honest, confident and reliable in keeping secrets. In a more comprehensive perception, *'being man'* provides a wide variety of advantages ranging from a physical viewpoint (that is, bravery) to a psychological one in which males are regarded to be so loyal and reliable that under no circumstances they breach what they promise. In sum, males in this context were held in such strong and positive regard that it was traditionally believed that a *'man is a little God at home'*.

Thirdly, once females appear as wives and particularly as mothers, not only does gender preference against them tends to be markedly moderated but also they are more likely to be considered positively in the traditional beliefs. For example, it has been traditionally believed that *'although wife is the source of inconvenience, it is hoped that there is not any home without this source'*, *'the key of man's wisdom is in the hand of his wife'*, *'a man who does not have wife, he does not have a source of tranquility, either'*, and *'man is the brain of home and wife is its heart'*. It is, however, important to state that even such positive descriptions about females are not as strong as those for males mentioned before. Moreover, such positive descriptions mainly apply to married women, which suggests the fact that the traditional beliefs identify women positively only when they are beside a husband.

Here, it is argued that such male-dominated traditional beliefs predominant amongst the older generation have played a substantial role in the demographic figures of Iran over the past decades. Such traditional beliefs can also affect women's reproductive health. This lies in the fact that due to religious and socio-cultural considerations, abortion is basically illegal in the country. It is allowed only due to medical reasons, i.e. the life and health of mother, prescribed by authorities. More importantly, the high levels of women's fertility in the past (see Table 2) are significantly associated with the predominant traditional culture which has been partly highlighted in the above male-dominated traditional beliefs. However, such traditional views and values are no longer the dominant pattern in the recent years, particularly amongst the new generation. Accordingly, the substantial fall in women's birth rate needs to be in part contributed to such a generational transition identified by the different types of predominant views and values associated with gender preference over the past decades. For instance, the results of the recent survey shown in Table 7, suggest that despite the strong male-dominated traditional beliefs of the past, gender preference is no longer as predominant. According to the results of the survey detailed in the methodology section, the majority of the young people aged 15-29 years old (more than two-third of them) either do not have any gender preference (whether son or girl) or prefer to have an equal number of female and male children in their marital life.



Table 7.  
*Attitude toward gender preference by age of respondents*

Age of Respondents	Equal number of boy and girl	No gender preference	Daughter preference	Son preference	Total
15-19	40.8	27.8	9.9	20.8	100.0
20-24	49.7	22.2	14.4	13.1	100.0
25-29	43.3	30.3	11.4	14.5	100.0
50 years and older	22.4	38.6	14.7	24.3	100.0

**Source:** The Survey in selected urban and rural areas of Iran detailed in Research Data and Method section of this paper.

### **Family Planning Programs: Cultural (in)Compatibility**

The issue of intergenerational cultural transition can also be tracked in the family planning program of Iran over the past decades. The following discussion addresses whether the success of family planning program or its failure in various stages has been closely associated with its (in)compatibility with the cultural beliefs which have been partly highlighted above. This has been particularly the case in the past when traditional views and values associated with women's childbearing-related issues were predominant. The experience of substantial swings regarding childbearing policies is also in part the consequence of different types of governments which came to power in the country over the past decade.

Pre 1967, although there was no systematic population policy, the government had a pro-natalist approach supporting larger family size. The Shah's Western style regime implemented the first phase of family planning program in 1967, which mainly aimed to decrease the birth rate. The program continued until 1979 when the regime was brought down by the Islamic Revolution. As shown in Table 2, total fertility rate decreased between 1966 and 1976, which is partly a consequence of the first phase of family planning program. However, this birth fall is insignificant (from about 7 children per woman in 1966 to 6.3 children per woman in 1976). Accordingly, the question is why the first phase of the family planning program did not result in a significant birth fall? The answer mainly lies in the predominant traditional culture of childbearing which has been highlighted above. This means that the country was also strongly dominated by traditional views and values supporting high incidence of marriage, early marriage, divorce as a stigma, birth as a matter for God and son preference, leading to a large family size. Such traditional beliefs were accompanied by other socio-demographic characteristics, particularly high rate of illiteracy and high proportion of people living in rural areas where such traditional beliefs are often more likely to exist (see Table 2). It is also important to mention that the society was suspicious about the Shah's birth control program. This was mainly due to people's cultural and religious concerns; they believed that birth control program was a type of intervention in the will of God. Accordingly, mainly because of such traditional beliefs, the first phase of family planning program was not warmly welcomed in the country by the nation<sup>7</sup>. This appears to be a similar experience with what was observed in India where the government's strong birth control programs in 1960s and 1970s did not lead to a significant fall in women's birth rate, mainly because the Indian traditional culture was substantially committed to large family size so that even the government's violent birth control programs could neither deliberate provisions to cope with such traditional culture (Abbasi-Shavazi et al., 2009; Casterline, 2017; Colleran, 2016; Foroutan, 2000; Foroutan, 2014; Hirschman, 2003; McDonald et al., 2015; Sauvy, 1978; Weeks, 1994).

Upon the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the new government implemented a strong pro-natalist population approach and provided a wide range of facilities in order to support the larger family size<sup>8</sup>. The commencement of the war between Iran and Iraq in September 1980 accelerated such a pro-natalist population

<sup>7</sup> Other scholars have also made nearly the same argument. For instance, Ladier-Fouladi (1997) documented three obstacles that encountered the road to Iran's family planning programs in the first phase: cultural traditions, the lack of facilities and trained personnel.

<sup>8</sup> For instance, youths were encouraged by religious leaders to marry as soon as possible and the costs associated with marriage were often simply affordable. Meanwhile, people with a greater number of children were given priority to receive governmental supports, such as housing loans and job opportunity.

policy. However, the demographic figures drawn from the 1986 population census were observed as a serious threat for the country<sup>9</sup>. Eventually, after one decade of opposition, the second phase of family planning programs was commenced in 1989 in order to facilitate the establishment of economic development programs in the post-war era of modernization. The government also employed a wide range of facilities and services, including the involvement of religious institutions throughout the country in supporting the family planning programs. Such provisions particularly targeted rural areas where often the birth rate is higher. Such provisions were rightfully seen as essential to assist rural people to resolve the challenging compatibility of traditional culture and birth control programs, because they often contribute stronger traditional views and values of large family size. Accordingly, these careful deliberations led to the second phase of family planning programs not only being warmly welcomed in the country but also playing a significant role in the country's exceptional fall in women's birth rate in the recent years. As discussed before, people, particularly the younger generation, in Iran in recent years prefer to postpone childbearing and to have a small family size. Accordingly, they mostly accept birth control programs to achieve such goals. For instance, as shown in Table 2, the contraceptive prevalence rate in Iran increased markedly from 36 per cent in 1976 to 74 per cent in 2006.

Table 8.

*Attitude toward the recent governmental pronatalism by respondents' education level (%)*

Education of respondents	Agree	Disagree
Illiterates	41/4	58/6
Primary education	40/8	59/2
Intermediate education	37/5	62/5
High school education	31/5	68/5
Diploma education	30/4	69/6
Tertiary education	22/4	77/6
Total	30.9	69.1

**Source:** The Survey in selected urban and rural areas of Iran detailed in Research Data and Method section of this paper.

### Conclusion and Discussion

This paper has provided research-based evidence to highlight the role of traditional and modern views and values shaping significantly different features of family formation and demographic swings in Iran over the past half a century. The country's different socio-demographic features are mainly characterized by substantial changes in women's marriage and fertility patterns. In particular, the country experienced a substantial fall in birth rate for women that was observed as one of the most spectacular falls in birth rate ever experienced in human history (Abbasi-Shavazi et al., 2009; Foroutan, 2008; Foroutan, 2014; Foroutan, 2019; McDonald, 2005; McDonald et al., 2015): from more than 7 children per woman in 1956 to about 2 children in 2006 and now less than 2 children per women in most recent years. The paper has mainly associated the country's high fertility in the past with the traditional culture predominant amongst the old generation. The socio-demographic consequences of this traditional culture were a high incidence of marriage, early marriage, low mean age at first marriage, stigmatized divorce, and low contraceptive use, which combined lead to a large family size. This traditional culture has been identified as the most important obstacle faced by the country's first family planning program implemented in 1968. In the interim, socio-economic characteristics

<sup>9</sup> The results of the 1986 population census have shown a surprising population of almost 50 million (relative to about 34 million the earlier census in 1976), a return to a higher fertility level and an exceptionally high rate of the annual population growth (about 4 per cent between 1976 and 1986).

particularly the low rates of literacy and urbanization have also facilitated such demographic figures in the past. This appears similar to the Indian experience in 1960s and 1970s of traditional culture causing failure of the government's birth control program (Sauvy, 1978, Weeks, 1994) and in other developing countries in Asia and Africa (Bloom et al., 2007; Casterline, 2017; Eastwood & Lipton, 2011; Ying 2006)

On the other hand, Iran has experienced substantial social progress in recent years that have shaped modern views and values, particularly amongst the younger generation. Views and values associated with family formation and gender roles have changed markedly. This has been characterized by new patterns of marriage and family size so that people, particularly women, have preferred to postpone the age of marriage and childbearing and to minimize the family size during the recent years. Accordingly, birth control programs enabling them to reach such demographic goals have also been warmly welcomed in the society. Other modernization characteristics particularly the rising rates of urbanization, health services, contraceptive use, education (especially, a tremendous increase in women's education), a substantial rise in the cost of child, and increasing access to modern communication technologies and social media, particularly among the younger generation, have also facilitated Iran's substantial fall in birth rate in the recent years. As a result, in accordance with the preceding studies addressing the substantial effect of cultural change in demographic transition in Asian countries such as Hong Kong, India, Malaysia, Singapore, and Taiwan (Sauvey 1978; Weeks 1994; Ying 2006) and in African countries (Bloom et al., 2007; Casterline 2017; Eastwood & Lipton, 2011), this study has also provided further evidence and fresh findings to emphasise that the intergenerational cultural transition has played an important role in substantial changes in the demographic swings in Iran over the past half a century.

Most recently and from policy and practice perspectives, the country has witnessed another revolutionary change in population policy so that the Islamic government has returned to its pro-natalist position as in post-revolution era in 1978. In this line, the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei in 2012 warned of the country's low fertility and asked to increase the population of the country reaching 150-200 million, that is, twice larger than its current population. However, the results of this study have clearly indicated that the government's most recent pro-natalist approach is not warmly welcomed by Iranian nationals: the majority of them disagree and only less than one-third agree with this recent pro-natalist approach. Further analysis by educational level shows that although the higher the education level, the smaller the proportion of people agreeing with this recent pro-natalist approach, the above general pattern (i.e. the lack of the nation's warm welcome) applies to all educational levels so that even less than half of illiterates accept the government's new pronatalist approach. From an intergenerational perspective, these research results have also highlighted a critically important pattern: those with tertiary education (largely, 'new generation') are half as likely as illiterates (mostly, 'old generation') to accept the government's new pronatalist approach.

Finally, in terms of research implications, this study has provided further research-based evidence to support the underlying conclusion that without sufficient attention to the role of culture and cultural contexts, we cannot provide accurate knowledge and proper explanation on demographic swings. This, however, does not discard the importance of economic factors which are becoming another critical driver of the country's demographic changes in more recent years particularly among the new generation. Moreover, the present study has provided further evidence and fresh research findings to support the demographers' argument (Casterline, 2017; Colleran, 2016; Hirschman, 2003; May, 2012; Sauvey, 1978; Weeks, 1994) that the sustainable success of any policy interventions on demographic issues and fertility patterns requires sufficient attention to cultural contexts across the world, whether developed or developing societies. This also evidently applies to Iran because based on the results of this study, the lack of warm welcome by the highly-educated 'new generation' towards the most recent pronatalist population policy officially initiated in 2012 not only echoes substantial cultural shifts across generations but also reveals that Iran will witness further demographic swings in years to come.

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