

## Sociological Study on the Transformation of Fertility and Childbearing Concept in Iran

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### Abstract

Fertility and childbearing, in addition to the biological aspects, has always been regarded as a social phenomenon and, therefore, to understand the incident, values and beliefs, norms, and in short, the culture of any society should be scrutinized. Since the concept, condition, and value of childbearing is associated with cultural, social, political and economic dimensions, it has undergone various transformations during passage of time from past to present. The sociological approach of the current study investigated the evolution of the concept and value of fertility and childbearing in light of historical, social, cultural and economic upheavals. This study shows that the methods of rationalizing and legitimizing decisions about fertility and childbearing are defined and specified in the context of society. The rational for selecting the decisions is intermingled with social, cultural, economic, and political evolutions of the society like modernization, urbanization and the level of development in human communities. Today, fertility, childbearing and the number of children are not only connected with the interpretations of the individuals about the conditions and micro and macro subjective and objective factors surrounding them, but they are also linked with factors such as family income, the amount of time parents allocate to their children, quality of child nurturing and other family variables.

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### Introduction

Fertility is deemed as an important event for couples during connubial life. In all cultures worldwide, fertility is a necessary and desirable goal to the extent that it is conceived as the ultimate ideal in life (1). During the development and evolution of societies, various aspects of reproduction have been generated and that is why despite the expansion and development of societies, economic growth and technological advances, inability in childbearing in many places is still a justifiable reason for disruption of couples and families' relationships.

People's concept of fertility during history, as

one of the significant goals of creation, has transformed into a social expectation and is a pivotal factor in explaining and evaluating the status of individuals in the society. Through a survey on the history of civilizations and different societies, it reveals that the great portion of mythology, religion, rituals and traditions (cultural norms), literature and art which are reflexives of values and cultural norms in particular societies, is allocated to concepts and symbols of reproduction and childbearing (2). Such a huge volume and range of works and cultural beliefs about fertility in all parts of the world unfold the significance and sta-

tus of childbearing and reproduction as the permanent human desire for survival and immortality (3). For most individuals, the concept of family is formed by the birth of children.

Instinctive, emotional and social needs of individuals after marriage propel couples to have children. In human mind and instinct, the concept of evolution and immortality is intermingled with reproductive power and childbearing and thereby, the biological, psychological, and social success in life is contingent upon reproductive power of individuals and the fulfilment of societies' expectations (4).

In terms of demographics, the fertility and childbearing is also a remarkable phenomenon among the four main events of life. Childbearing, like other human phenomena, has multiple cultural, social, economic and political dimensions. Hence, in very long historical processes, its place and value has undergone several changes. In this study, an attempt was made to scrutinize the significance of fertility and childbearing in the light of social and economic developments.

**1. The concept of family, fertility and childbearing in history:** Throughout history, the family functions have been inextricably bound with the living and generally economy, the production, distribution and consumption. During hunting and fishing period, families were homogenous and extended. A lot of people (40-50) lived under the same roof and consumed collected food resources and the prey and their sex relationships were defined. In agricultural societies, economic activity leads to greater productivity and the emergence of extended families. In this period, with an increase in the number of family members, more fields are cultivated and the harvest is plentiful (5). In this course, individual families were formed and through the change in type of work, men and women took responsibilities for the economic roles. In addition, in this period, women were responsible for childbearing. However, in industrial period, the role of human beings as the main workforce in the economic turned out to be negligible and families became more limited with fewer children (6). In modern and postmodern era, part of the social promotion of the family is investing for the future generations. Higher levels of fixed income in families with two children in comparison to families with more children provide better recreation, nutrition and educational facilities, and ultimately results in better nurture of children. In fact, the transition from an agriculture-based economy to

an industry-based economy with a complex nature based on modern services and the importance of the level of expertise of human as working resources were the impetus to alter the priorities. Therefore, the significance in number of children was replaced by the quality of their nurturing and the necessary skills and information required for each individual to work efficiently in the labor market.

In a society based on agriculture, there is a relationship between the family and the organization for agricultural production. More specifically, the family as a group and the organization for agricultural production are mixed together and they construct a single coherent team. In such a community, all members of the family are involved in the production process; each member is responsible for part of the team work. In such a society, the task of financing for the life expenses based on the needs is on the shoulder of the family (7) and it seems that the main responsibility of a rural family is childbearing. Thus, having a child is deemed as a kind of social prestige for the rural family.

Urban families are the developed types of rural families. In urban lifestyle, such features like having more privacy, less neighborliness and separation of work place and living place are common. In urban lifestyle, consumption, luxury, freedom, media and virtual environment are the typical characteristics. In fact, modern families share the usual features of the modern world, namely, urbanization. It seems that lack of child and infertility is less destructive for urban families in comparison to rural ones (3).

The biological process of reproduction is influenced by complex social and environmental factors surrounded by social organizations, beliefs, norms and practices and in different cultures, it has multiple manifestations. Also, the process is embodied in politics, economics, law, religion and kinship. Today, the social value of childbearing has changed and like the old time, childbearing is not deemed as the practice for production of working power and the concept is dependent on cultural, economic and political conditions in each period (8). In a traditional society, infertile women are perceived as having incomplete sexual identity and are worthless. These women are exposed to violence, marginalization and threads of divorce or remarriage of their husbands.

In Iranian and Islamic culture, marriage is deemed as a positive value and parenthood is the ulti-

mate end for the couples in the family framework. The concept of family is vivified with the practice of childbearing. In this vein, infertile women would face many limitations, problems and psychological pressures. Women who fail to achieve motherhood are deemed as defeated females and unfeminine and therefore, they make their hard attempts to solve the problem by any means. Such enormous pressures on women can be traced in one of the important works of contemporary fiction, "a stone on a grave", and the masculinely narrated story of writer and his wife for having a child depicts such tortures (9). Of course, nowadays in many societies, the importance of childbearing as the determining factor for identifying a woman has been reduced to some extent.

**2. Theoretical approaches to the concept of childbearing:** The concept of childbearing and fertility are encircled by religious values and beliefs, norms and, in short, the culture of any society (10). In fact, it is influenced by social, cultural, and political factors in each society, so that even in times of war or peace, increase or decrease in birth rate are affected by social and political philosophy of that specific society (11). In the following part, the proposed theoretical approaches, each focusing on a determining factors involved in fertility, are scrutinized.

**2-1- Attitude and religious beliefs:** Religious orientation, for sociologists like Durkheim, is one of the main cultural factors in childbearing. But in the modern world, particularly with emphasis on personal relationships and the saliency of privacy, individualistic interpretations of religion become prominent; thus, the deep ties, faith, belief and conscience as collective features with relatively strong religious characteristics are less seen among individuals (12). In such an environment, daily life loses its spiritual sense and thereby, family like other social institutions transforms from its initial state and the previous religious beliefs and opinions would be changed (13). Weber defines religion as a belief system which constructs the essence of powers and it is an independent and affective variable which has influence on all social aspects besides individual and social life (6). According to Durkheim and Weber's theory, with the change in religious beliefs in society, fertility rate will change as a consequence. The public culture in Iranian society holds childbearing in high regard both religiously and historically. Children are considered blessing

from God and childlessness is unpleasant. In one study, the failure of government to control the population in the years 1968-1976, is attributed to the lack of approval regarding the policy by scholars and clerics and the success of the government in the policy for controlling the population in the years after 1981, is ascribed to the role of religious leaders and their support in using birth control methods (14).

**2-2- Utilitarianism and exchange theory:** Utilitarianism and exchange theory specify economic factor as affecting the tendency in childbearing and consider personal benefit as the motivation for the practice. In this theory, the social group is simply a set of individuals who make the group for their personal benefit and predicting and explaining the behavior of individuals is contingent up on their motivations which are based on their self-interest. From the perspective of the school, people are rational calculative individuals in costs and benefits. In their constant interaction with others, they keep their own interest in mind. Thus, any kind of relationship with others is deemed as an exchange. Social exchange theory shows that the interaction between two people may alter according to estimates of received rewards and the spent costs. In this perspective, the relationship between husband and wife is an exchange that starts from the beginning of life (15). Accordingly, all human relationships are based on subjective analysis of the costs and benefits and their comparisons (16). When the couples, based on calculation of profit and costs, evaluate the benefits of having children, they decide to have a child though it reduces the possibility of their social participation. In contrast, if the couples estimate the costs of having children are more than the benefits, the tendency to have the child would be reduced. In this approach, the indicators of economic satisfaction and child care costs are important in estimation and parents assess the outcome of these indicators and estimate the costs and benefits for having a rational decision about having children besides the number. In fact, in this theory, the fertility behavior is the result of rational economic decisions (17).

**2-3- Community involvement:** Community involvement is another key factor in childbearing and the scholars focused on its effect for changing the patterns of life. René König, the German sociologist, refers to reduction of family functions as a problem. In his view, through the evolution in industry, the internal structure of the family is

destroyed and its secondary functions such as financial, education and health functions, the care for the elderly and even the family's leisure have been granted to institutions and governmental, social and economic agencies (6). On the other hand, the shrinking of families and their powerlessness from economic perspective provide a barrier to protect the elderly and sick family members. In modern societies, the family members dedicate a lot of time to their leisure and thereby the members based on their talents and expertise are able to choose a separate job besides their traditional hereditary jobs. Friendly clubs and associations have reduced the function of childbearing whereby people have the convenience and comfort to actively participate in society and social events. In modern social relations, women enter the labor market and they change the family structure by their employment, so there would be a delay in their motherhood. Therefore, the participation of women in society is an important factor in the decline in childbearing (18).

**2-4- Social acceptance:** Social acceptance is another important factor in the regulation of fertility. Several theories have been proposed to explain the social acceptance. Among them, one can refer to Fazio, Fishbein, and Ajzin theory. Fazio mentions controlled and automatic cognitive processes. In his view, controlled cognitive processes reinforce the relationship between attitude and behavior. Therefore, information and experience have pivotal roles in this vein. Some part of the experience is related to attitudes of people in society about social acceptability or non-acceptability (lack of social acceptance) of a social action (such as childbearing) and the attitude in turn can inhibit the social action or increase the motivation for doing it (6). In Fishbein and Ajzin view, contrary to previous theory in which attitudes have direct influence on formation of behavior, the attitudes have indirect impact on behavior and their target is our intentions; thereby, intentions mold our behavior. In other words, according to this theory, the behavior is rooted in intentions and the intentions for the behavior are rooted in the attitudes toward the behavior (the expected benefit and benefit assessment) and that subjective norm (the expectations of important people or the expectations of others and the motivation to follow the expectations of others) (19). Based on Fazio, Fishbein and Ajzin, each individual in his decision making for any act incorporates the opinions

of friends, groups, parents and community. If the person in performing a specific action, such as childbearing, is informed about the social acceptance of her behavior, intentionally or not, she would follow the action; otherwise, she would not put the decision into practice. Based on the above-mentioned theoretical frameworks, the effective indices in childbearing will be examined in the context of social, economic, political and cultural history of societies.

**3. Effective indices in reducing the rate of child-bearing:** Until half a century ago, childbearing was a natural process in the world and each family had an average of six children (20). But during the transition to modernity and in light of the individual, cultural, social factors and even international policy, this trend has changed and was hastily reversed, so that today fertility in many countries is a social challenge for the following decades (6). The Family Protection Act of Iran (1974) also indicates the importance of fertility in Iranian society. According to Article 8 of the Act, infertility can be one of the reasons for divorce and if one of the spouses applies for divorce, it is permitted to be performed (21).

The slope of population graph in Iran, like many other countries, is downward. This reduction has many reasons. Among them, women's literacy, increasing urbanization, increased employment of women and implementation of government policies for population control are effective factors. Government efforts to control the population in the past two decades led to a cultural belief that reduction in childbearing should be an accepted model (22). In fact, this trend is in line with demands of society and the ideals of couples and it is not easy to be changed unless a more powerful and rational culture at different levels of society replaces the old one. Another contributing factor to the decline in fertility is the change in the structure of the family. Some of these include changes in individual, social and cultural levels.

**Changes in individuals:** The promotion of individualism, an increase in age of marriage, the growth in divorce rate, increased levels of education and employment of women are some individual changes (23). Among these, individualism has a key role in reduction of childbearing which will be reviewed.

**A-1- The concept of individualism:** Individualists try to promote the goals and objectives of the individual and they value independence and self-

reliance. They prioritize the interests of the individual rather than the government or social group interests, and individual is the focus of attention (24). In individualism, all the collective rules and regulations are defined in terms of individual rules (motivation, strength, faith, personal capabilities) (25) and people are considered free, empowered and responsible individuals for their actions when facing many forces and pressures (26). The development of individual values and individualism in contemporary Iranian society is a widespread event. In large cities like Tehran, the examples of the development of individualism are evident. For instance, 74% of people in Tehran believe that most individuals only think of themselves and 79% pointed that one cannot trust anybody (27). Now, Iranian families which in their traditional framework were usually collective and religion oriented have individualistic features and the evidences are clearly seen in their ceremonies and gatherings. Nowadays, individualistic gatherings like birthdays, graduation and Valentine's celebration in which the main themes are the respect for the individual replace the collective national holidays like New Year celebration and religious ceremonies (28).

**A-2- Examples of individualism:** The most crucial examples of individualism include the tendency to have fewer children and improvement of the quality of spouses' lives, regardless of the family as an institution and children.

The reduction in number of children and families is not a demographic event, but more importantly, is a fundamental upheaval in the pattern of family life. From this perspective, the small family can be described as one type of cultural pattern since this institution has many cultural implications for all aspects of family relations (28).

In a study in 2009 on the ideal number of children for citizens of Tehran, having two children by the highest frequency of 60%, and having three children by the lowest frequency of 15%, indicated the opinions of citizens in Tehran. In this study, 3% of the population preferred not to have children at all and the choice reflects the revolution of values and cultural transformation in childbearing and fertility (29).

Therefore, the tendency to have fewer children and a better life is a modern claim which attracted many fans in the past few decades in Iran. The results of the analysis suggest that the tendency of the families to have few children in the society

today is the offshoot of the change of patterns and gender clichés, especially the role of women in the family.

In the modern time, the main role of the women in the family, unlike the traditional families, is not pregnancy and raising children. Women in modern societies, as social beings, have distinct identities and are independent in urban areas. Moreover, learning knowledge and skills and employment are as important for them as creating the family.

Therefore, based on the results of the investigations, in a city like Tehran, families have tendency toward fewer children and new types of families are emerging in which there is the absence of any children. The relevant evidence is related to the statistics which show that in the year 2011, 35% of the families in Tehran were childless and 75% of them did not have any grandchildren (30). Such families did not exist in Iran in the past, but in recent years, the Iranian families are free to delay childbearing or remain childless during the rest of their life (31). Therefore, unwanted childbearing and unplanned pregnancies are obsolete practices and in turn, childbearing is now a systematic, planned and rational action in which the couples determine its suitable time and the number of children. The experience of families in Tehran reveals that such planning culminates in reduction in the number of children.

Today, women's experience and desires, interests, tastes, and their feelings are gradually developing. In the past, women did not have a high status in public arena, but the status of women within and outside the family has got a prominent place nowadays since women are now more aware of their rights and the global status of females' lives in the world. Moreover, through modernization, they have achieved more social freedom. In other words, the most important variable that determines the equal responsibilities of men and women in household chores is the awareness of women about the global conditions and globalization. This kind of awareness and knowledge is not acquired in vacuum but is the result of different factors like the use of information and communication technologies, social networks and mass media. Another outcome of globalization is the division of responsibilities in household chores, women's participation in decision-making about household affairs, women's economic participation in activities outside the home, women's political participation, changes in lifestyle and the increase in

social and cultural capital of the family which all compensate for the unpaid responsibilities of women in the house (32). All of these changes and redefinition of the role, identity and status of women in social arena can be seen as examples of the development of individualistic thinking in the society.

**B- Social changes:** Among the social changes, the transformation of families from extended type to nuclear one, the increase in the rate of urbanization in recent years and economic problems which eventually lead to unemployment and inflation are more prominent. All these factors result in reduction of childbearing rate (33). In addition, among fixed-income families, the inflation in the economy of the community has always been associated with economic insecurity. Therefore, the current condition of the urban society in Iran besides global factors makes the couples cautious in their decision for having children and leads the couples to have only a single child or remain childless.

**C- Cultural changes:** Among them, one can refer to factors like the women tendency to work and participate in society which reflect the change in women attitudes towards marriage, marital role, and motherhood. By being employed, women are not considered as the inferior sex anymore, because they can underpin their identity in the work place and their identity (34). Also, consumerism is a new trend in the modern era that has altered the lifestyle of families. With the development of consumerism, the living costs increase which culminate in a decline in childbearing.

From another perspective, some changes of today's Iranian families like having a single life, temporary marriages, initial agreements to delay having children for 5 or 10 years later, or agreement to remain childless but adopting a child are the great shifts which are required to be investigated in detail.

The issue of equality of women and men is one of the cultural revolutions. Before the modern era, females were considered the inferior sex. However, the attitude changed gradually and women believe that in both social arena and in family, they have rights similar to men. In the context of family, women are more cautious about their physical capital. The change in the physical appearance of women who experience pregnancy once and who experience pregnancy three times is apparent, causing women to be more worried than their husbands about losing their physical capital.

Thus, the importance of physical capital for a woman becomes so crucial that the agreement for having only one child in marriage becomes a significant criterion (35).

In addition, in recent years, the supports in having fewer children, as a serious dialogue regarding women's rights, are fully approved. Maintaining and strengthening the economic and social capital for women are the typical examples of equality in women's rights in society. A woman with a single child compared with a woman who has more than three children is more successful and active in her social responsibilities. According to females' opinion, large number of children leads to marginal role of women both in public and in working environment. For this reason, especially in big cities of Iran and among women, the tendency is towards having fewer children.

### Discussion

The investigations indicate that fertility and childbearing have been exposed to immense alterations from the beginning of creation. Since human beings are rational individuals, in facing the environment and the means which are at their disposal, they make decisions about the structure of their lives. These options are chosen by the individuals in terms of cultural, social, economic and political considerations of the particular society.

The methods to rationalize and legitimize decisions about fertility, childbearing and delivery do not occur in a vacuum. Selection and decision processes are somehow entangled with social, cultural, economic, and political upheavals, including modernization, urbanization and the development of human societies (36).

Childbearing is not necessarily a biomedical event and numerous studies have shown that individuals and interest groups, especially women have various beliefs, perceptions and experiences of childbearing and childbirth or childlessness, whether intentional or unintentional. The concepts and meanings related to this event favor considerable cultural or intercultural diversities in human societies and rationalization and legalization of these decisions and behaviors besides the narrative process of the issues relevant to fertility are related to economic, social and cultural context of the particular society (37).

Today, the number of children is not only connected with the interpretations of the individuals about the conditions and micro and macro subjective and objective factors surrounding them (social

construct), but it is also linked with factors such as family income, the amount of time parents allocate to their children (especially mothers), quality of child nurturing and other family variables (objective conditions of individuals). Since the traditional division of responsibilities is the common practice in the family, and women spend most of their time to raise their children, there is the chance of increasing the number of children in the family.

However, the gradual significance of human resources and the presence of women (especially married ones) in labor market and their prominent role in economics of the family in conjunction with their increased level of education, result in the collapse of the traditional division of responsibility in the family and consequently the number of children would be reduced.

In sum, it seems that population growth in case of ignoring the existing infrastructure of a country, economic growth, market potentials, the quality of education and other unenumerated factors, will be followed by negative consequences. Worthy to mention that socio-economic changes have more direct and quick effect on the attitudes and decisions of individuals who made a family or decide to create a family in comparison to the policies of the government.

With higher levels of education and the increase in living costs, the reduction trend in population growth will continue and the trend cannot be changed by centralized policy-making and planning (38). In industrialized countries, for the prevention of aging in the population and having a reasonable population size, social welfare policies are strengthened and with application of levers of economic, employment and social welfare, such as giving subsidies, giving time off to people (with maintaining job security) and social encouragement, families are motivated to have more children. For example, the Medal of Honor would be granted to a French mother who has the maximum number of children in a year. Such incentive programs have a great role in increasing the rate of childbearing in any particular community.

### Conclusion

Childbearing, or having few children, or unintentional childlessness as a social practice is under the influence of institutional resources and the structure of society (Attitude and religious beliefs and Utilitarianism and exchange theory) (39). On the other hand, the interpretations of people about

the forces and conditions in the community are determining factors in the practice. The institutional resources for defining the practice can be local or international and the resources have connections with interpretations of the people about the practices and actions. Consequently, people rely on these resources and use their creativity and recognition of the needs to make the decision about childbearing (40).

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### Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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