

The fertility revolution in Iran

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At the turn of the 20th century, according to estimations, the population of Iran was around 10 million. In 1933, it had increased to 13 million, in 1976, to 34 million and in 1986 to 49 million. By 1996, the Iranian population had reached 60 million, a more than six-fold increase within a century. The last three decades of the country's history have been marked by major political changes, the main being the Islamic Revolution in 1979 and the war with Iraq from 1980 to 1988.

In recent years, the pace of the demographic transition which has occurred in the Islamic Republic of Iran has puzzled international observers. The total fertility rate (TFR) declined from over 6 children per woman in the mid-1980s to 2.1 in 2000. This decline has been observed in all the provinces and in both rural and urban areas of the country. How and why has fertility dropped so much in such a short time? What are the links between political and demographic trends in Iran? This article briefly reviews population policy changes over the last three decades, examines fertility trends over the same period, and offers some possible explanations behind the fertility transition in Iran.

◆ Population policy changes

The first family planning program was implemented under the Shah in 1967; nonetheless, until 1976, no significant changes were observed in the fertility level, which stagnated or declined very slightly. The 1979 Islamic Revolution put an end to this program and the new government soon adopted a pro-natalist policy, advocating early marriage and large families. The mi-

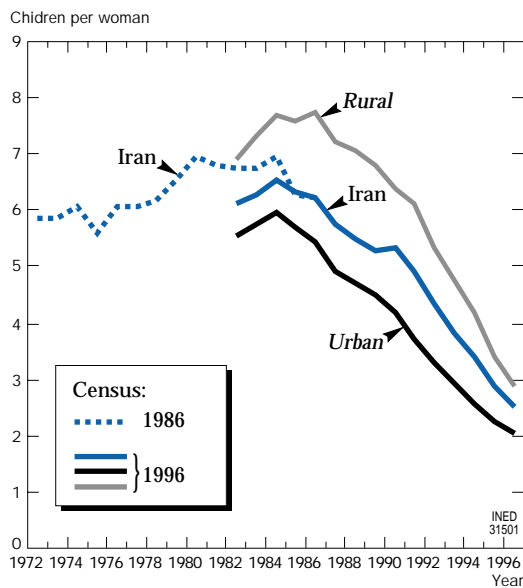
nimum legal age for marriage was reduced to 9 years for girls and 12 years for boys. The war with Iraq fuelled the pro-natalist atmosphere: families were encouraged to have more children — more soldiers for the creation of the “*Twenty Million Army*” proposed by Ayatollah Khomeini. The government and religious leaders praised women for bearing and raising many children. The pro-natalist policies were continued even after the release of the 1986 census data which, to the government's great satisfaction, indicated a very high rate of population growth in comparison with the previous census (1976). However, in December 1989, the Iranian government radically reversed its policy and launched a new family planning program. The latter, according to figures, seems to have been very successful, since the contraceptive prevalence rate (CPR) rose from 37 % in 1976 to about 75% in 2000; in rural areas, the CPR rose from 20 % in 1976 to 72 % in 2000 and in urban areas from 54 % to 82% [1].

◆ Beginning in 1984, a spectacular decline in fertility

It is difficult to accurately determine variations in fertility before the mid-1980s. Indeed, incomplete vital statistics, the poor comparability of the two studies on fertility carried out in 1977 and 1991, and the lack of precision of retrospective estimates elaborated from the 1986 and 1996 censuses make it impossible to draw firm conclusions. According to our own indirect reconstruction based on these censuses, it would seem that the total fertility rate first stagnated around 6 children per woman in the years following the implementation of the first family planning program, and rose to about 7 children per woman in the early 1980s (figure 1). The

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Figure 1 – Evolution of total fertility in Iran, 1972-1996



Source: estimated by the "own-children" method applied to the crude data from the 1986 and 1996 censuses [2].

only clear fact concerning this increase, whether real (1) or the result of poor statistics, is that it did not last very long. Fertility began to decline in the mid-80s: TFR dropped from 6.8 children per woman in 1984 to 6.3 in 1986 and 5.5 in 1988, a trend which is confirmed by the birth registration data (see box). The decrease accelerated after 1988: TFR fell to 2.8 children per woman in 1996, and down to 2.1 in 2000, just under the replacement level [1]. This sudden drop was observed in both rural and urban areas of Iran as well as in all the provinces, of which four had reached below-replacement levels by 1996.

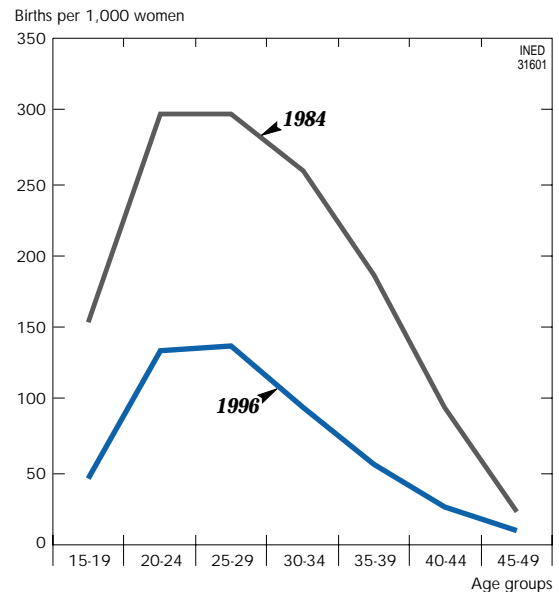
◆ Marriage postponement is a secondary factor

During the last years of the Shah's rule and the first years of the Islamic Republic, and despite the latter's encouragement of early marriage, the mean age of women at first marriage (2) actually increased slightly, from 19.5 in 1976 to 19.7 in 1986. During the following decade, the mean age rose a little faster and reached 22 in 1996. Similarly, between 1976 and 1986, the proportion of women ever married declined slightly, in all age groups, and more significantly between 1986 and 1996, except among women above 40, among whom it remained close to 100%. The declines at ages 15 to 19

(1) These results estimated by the "own-children" method have been assessed thoroughly and seem reasonable; in addition, other studies have confirmed the rise.

(2) The age at which half of the women are already married.

Figure 2 – Age-specific fertility rates (ASFRs) for Iranian women for the years 1984 and 1996



Source : [2].

(from 34% to 18%) and 20 to 24 (from 79% to 60%) were particularly striking. However, this change is limited compared to that of fertility. The increase in the age of women at first marriage accounts for only 14% of the fertility decline observed between 1986 and 1996, whereas the remaining 86% must be ascribed to changes in the behaviour of couples, in particular as concerns contraception. Indeed, fertility declined simultaneously in all age groups (see figure 2). This sharp decline of the fertility of women of all ages between 1986 and 1996 reveals several simultaneous trends: young couples wait longer before having children, married women wait longer between children, and older women have fewer children.

◆ The impact of the government policies

Can the suspension of the family planning policy and the widespread campaign in favour of early marriage and large families be considered responsible for the possible, though not proven, fertility increase between 1976 and 1986?

In any case, the social and psychological atmosphere of the time was favourable to high fertility. The rationing system implemented during the war with Iraq favoured large families, and many other government incentives encouraged couples to have more children. Nevertheless, the widespread campaign had a limited and temporary effect, as was confirmed by the fact that fertility began to decline as early as 1984, at a time when pro-natalist policies were in full swing, and five years

The debate on the fertility decline in Iran

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Until recent years, the only available information on fertility in Iran was imprecise. As a result, some were prematurely tempted to draw conclusions and assert that fertility had begun to decline in the 1970s thanks to the family planning program implemented in 1967 [3]. According to these sources, the decline stopped in the 1980s and fertility even began to increase, due to the suspension of the family planning programs, the re-introduction of Islamic rule in family law and the Islamic government's policies in favour of high fertility.

This interpretation of the evolution of fertility in Iran has raised a great deal of criticism. Indeed, there is no evidence of a causal link between the decline and increase of fertility and the implementation or suspension of the family planning program. First, it must be said that the use of contraceptives was never forbidden in Iran after the Revolution; on the contrary, the Ayatollah Khomeini approved their use in a 1980 fatwah. Moreover, the inclusion of the Shariah in the legislation and the pro-natalist measures implemented at that time most probably did not have any significant impact on fertility, since the state's financial ability to spread the word was at that time very limited due to the war with Iraq, the drop in oil revenues and the economic embargo.

Birth registration data, after adjustment, have enabled us to reconstruct the evolution of fertility [4]. This investigation reveals an entirely different picture. The total fertility rate dropped from 8 children on average per woman in 1966 to 6.8 in 1979, and remained at that level from 1979 to 1985. A spectacular decline then followed, with a drop from 6.4 children per woman in 1986 to 2.5 in 1999. The survey we carried out in Shiraz in 1996 shows the same type of evolution in this city. The fertility transition thus clearly began only after the Revolution, and not under the Shah.

One of the main reasons for the fertility decline in the second half of the 1980s is the implementation by the Islamic Republic of effective policies in favour of social and economic development in rural regions which had previously been ignored by the former regime. Living conditions generally improved, infant mortality decreased, the younger generations obtained greater access to education and communications, and this furthered the spread of modern values and standards throughout the country: these factors have contributed to a large extent to the population's adoption of modern reproductive behaviour. This also explains the success of the second family planning program implemented by the Islamic Republic in December 1989. The program did not in itself trigger the decline, as some have said, but by providing the necessary services to motivated women, the program most certainly accelerated the downward trend.

The fertility transition is part of a long process of societal change. In Iran, it took a long time for society to accept modernity. The deep transformations that are now taking shape — however contradictory this may seem from the outside — under Islamic rule are rooted in the aspiration towards change which spurred Iranian youth to bring about the Revolution of 1979 [5].

before the official inauguration of the family planning program in 1989.

The success of the program launched by the Islamic Republic was ensured by the participation of various government organizations and the mass communications network. In contrast to the situation when the pre-revolutionary family planning program was introduced, by the mid-1980s the Islamic Republic of Iran was culturally, economically and socially prepared to introduce a family planning program. In addition, the 1989 program enjoyed the support of religious leaders, and in that sense it bore a legitimacy the previous program had not. This enabled the government to promote its policy without fear of religious opposition.

The government's policies promoting public education, particularly for girls, the establishment of a health care system, the development of electricity, drinking water, transport and communication networks in remote areas of Iran contributed to the coun-

try's modernization and had an indirect effect on fertility. The *Constructive Jihad Organization* was established soon after the revolution to revive and develop the economic and social conditions of the villages and deprived regions. The activities of the organization ranged from the creation of educational and health services to the construction of roads and dams and the distribution of agricultural machinery and equipment. During the second decade following the revolution, these efforts provided a favourable background for the family planning program in Iran in general and in rural areas in particular.

The decline of infant mortality (from 114 deaths of children under the age of one per 1,000 live births in 1975 to 64 per 1,000 in 1985 and 34 per 1,000 in 1994) has had a profound impact on the country, as elsewhere in the world. Parents now have higher aspirations for their children and invest more money in their education, since the latter are less at risk of dying in infancy, and they can now choose to have fewer children.

Iranian women more and more frequently attend university (over the last three years, more girls than boys have been admitted to the government universities in Iran!), and this had had a strong impact not only on the age at first marriage and at the birth of the first child, but on the perception of fertility as a whole. With these changes, the status of women in Iran has been improving.

However, some evidence suggests that the fertility decline cannot be entirely credited to the government's modernization policies and its family planning program. Indeed, the standard of living of Iranian families dropped in the mid-1980s, a factor which most probably encouraged the fertility decline, due to the postponement of marriages and especially the increasing cost of children. It was during the ruinous ten-year war with Iraq that the oil-exporting countries, Iran included, bore the immediate consequences of the 1984 counter-shock. This crisis lasted until 1990. Since the cost of living increased dramatically during these years, young people often chose to wait until they had a salaried job before getting married, and once married, to limit the number of children in order to better invest in their education.

The decline of fertility in Iran must thus be studied in the context of fertility changes in other Islamic countries of North Africa and West Asia. In all the countries of the region, from Morocco to Iran, recent falls in fertility rates have led to a reassessment of the idea that high fertility is inherent to Islamic culture. Although the fertility decline was slow to start in this region, once under way, it proceeded rapidly, following the pace of social and economic modernization and the emergence of new expectations among the population [7]. Islamic

culture did not mark any opposition to the fertility decline. Iran is one of the countries of the world where fertility patterns have changed most rapidly. If the phenomenal fertility decline in Iran has puzzled international observers, it is because they were unaware of the extent of socio-economic and political change in post-revolutionary Iran. Thus, the "fertility revolution" in Iran should be interpreted in the light of changes that occurred *within* the Islamic Revolution.

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