

IRAN'S DEMOGRAPHIC TRANSITION: A Model for Other Countries?

case study | population dynamics unit

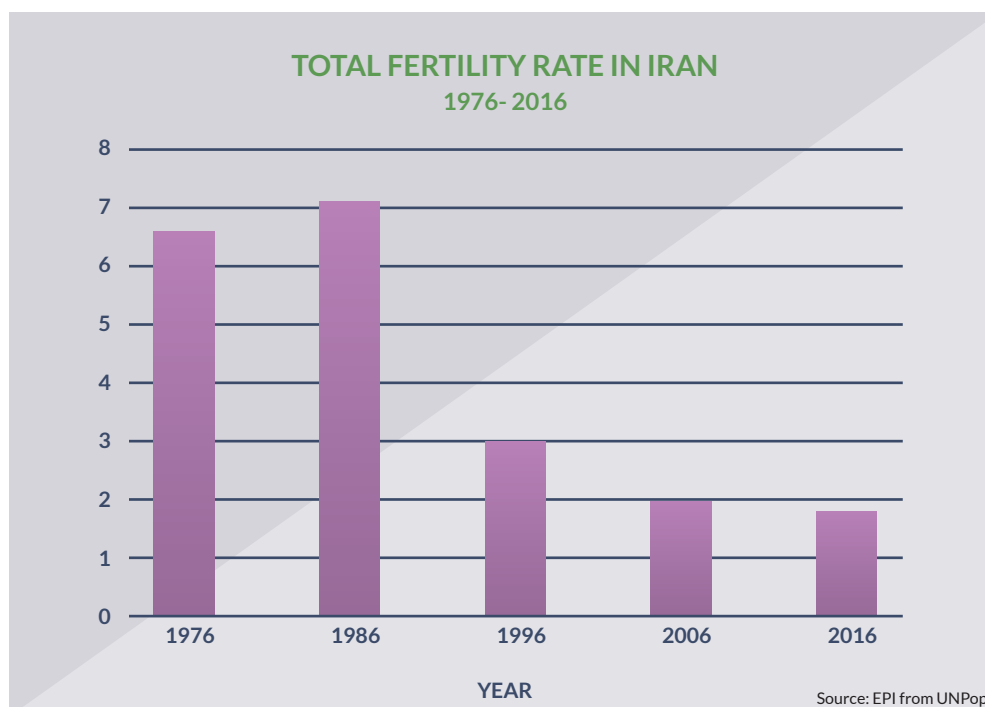
When people hear the term “population policy,” they often think of China’s strict “one-child” policy (1980-2015). But a number of countries have succeeded in reducing family size without resorting to draconian measures, but rather by providing access to education and health care. Recent Iranian history provides one model, perhaps a surprising one, for other countries that want to accelerate the shift to smaller families.

The keys behind Iran’s so-called “fertility transition” were universal access to health care, widespread **family planning** information and services, an impressive rise in female literacy and education, men’s participation in family planning programs, mandatory premarital contraceptive counseling, and strong support from religious leaders.

Between the early 1980s and the first years of the twenty-first century, the average family size in Iran fell from over six children to two.¹ In just one generation, Iran accomplished a **demographic transition** that took Western Europe centuries to achieve.

Family planning – a human right

Family planning in Iran has had its ups and downs. As early as 1967, family planning was recognized as a human right in Iran, enshrined in a national policy introduced by Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi.² The aim was to accelerate economic growth and improve the status of women, encouraging them to join the workforce. And although religious conservatives preached against the use of birth control, many women – particularly those living in cities – embraced the ability to control the number and spacing of their children with oral contraceptive pills. A 1973 law loosened restrictions on male and female sterilization. In the mid-1970s, family planning promotion hit the mass media, which spread messages of the benefits of smaller families.³



Then came the beginning of the decade-long Islamic Revolution in 1979 led by Shiite Muslim spiritual leader Ayatollah Khomeini. During this period, family planning programs were considered undue western influences and were dismantled. The government encouraged procreation, paying allowances to families for each child.⁴ Health officials were ordered not to advocate **contraception**.

“An army of 20 million”

During the 1980–88 war with Iraq, Khomeini pushed procreation to bolster the ranks of “soldiers for Islam,” aiming for “an army of 20 million.” Iran’s **population growth rate** soared to near 4 percent, according to UN statistics – one of the world’s highest.⁵ By 1986, nearly half of Iran’s population was under the age of 15.⁶

By the postwar reconstruction period in the late 1980s, Iran’s economy was faltering. Severe job shortages plagued overcrowded and polluted cities. Iran’s rapid population growth was finally seen as an obstacle to development. Receptive to solving the nation’s problems, Ayatollah Khomeini reopened dialogue on the subject of birth control. By December 1989, Iran had revived its national family planning program. Its principal goals were to encourage women to wait three to four years between pregnancies, to discourage childbearing for women younger than 18 or older than 35, and to limit family size to three children.

“Fewer children, better life”

Hefty resources were allocated to make a wide variety of modern contraceptives available free of charge to all married couples. In 1990, the High Judicial Council affirmed that vasectomies were consistent with Islamic principles, making them socially acceptable again.⁷ Farzaneh Roudi of the Population Reference Bureau (PRB) writes that a national family planning bill passed in 1993 called for an intensive population awareness campaign. Schools included courses on population, and the popular media were used to spread the message of “fewer children, better life.”⁸ All this happened when female education was fast on the rise.

Iran’s family planning campaign stretched from the cities to the countryside. Rural “health houses” integrated family planning into primary health care.

Religious leaders preached about the social benefits of having smaller families and issued fatwas – religious edicts with the strength of court orders – encouraging contraception. Engaged couples learned about contraception in a government-sponsored course they had to take to receive a marriage license.⁹ By 1994, just over half of childbearing-aged women in Iran were using modern contraception, up from 30 percent in 1989. The birth control pill was the most popular choice.¹⁰

Family planning continued to spread. As of 2020, 77 percent of all married women use some form of contraception to control their fertility, with 57 percent using modern contraceptive methods such as the pill, condoms, IUDs, and injections.¹¹ Condoms have become nearly as popular as birth control pills, an indication of Iranian men’s increasing role in limiting family size, and this was helped along by large government purchases from Iran’s condom factory, a rarity in the Middle East.¹² Though condoms are no longer subsidized by the Iranian



Woman with children preparing salad in Iran.

government, condom use remains much higher in Iran than in other Asian countries. About 10 percent of Iranian couples use male condoms for contraception, double the rate for southern Asia as a whole.¹³

The family planning pendulum swings back

Even while contraceptive use remains high, the official stance on family planning recently has swung back the other way. In 2010, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad reinstated payments to families having more children.¹⁴ By 2012 the Health Ministry’s “population control” budget was eliminated, devoted instead to growing larger families.¹⁵ Birth control is no longer subsidized, though a vibrant private industry means that it is still widely available.¹⁶ In 2014 the Iranian Parliament debated punishing people who promote contraception and voted to make it illegal to perform sterilization operations, a dramatic about-face from when the government offered free vasectomies.^{17,18}

Control over personal fertility is once again viewed by some conservatives as a dangerous western influence. The president elected in 2013, Hassan Rouhani, has not been particularly vocal on population, but in May 2014, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamanei released a 14- point plan to raise population growth rates.¹⁹ He called the 1990s’ actions that led to women controlling the size and the timing of their families, including his own role in the family planning campaign, a “mistake.”²⁰ The old television messages that urged families to stop at two children have been replaced; for instance, a state-run TV station broadcast a prominent cleric urging families to have at least five children – like the Prophet Mohammed’s family – but a dozen would be even better.²¹

Khamanei’s population policies have continued to grow more restrictive. In 2020, all state hospitals and health clinics were barred from providing contraceptives or vasectomies. In 2021, this order expanded to entirely ban any form of birth control in Iran’s tribal areas, which already suffer from high numbers of child brides and forced pregnancies.²²

Currently the highest **fertility rates** in the Middle East are in Yemen, where civil war and mass famine have destabilized many social structures, and where women have around four children on average (down from nearly seven at the end of the 1990s).²³ The United Nations estimates that less than one-third of married women in Yemen use modern contraceptives.²⁴ Sixty percent of Yemeni women know how to read, and while all the boys went to primary school in 2020, at least 13 percent of girls stayed home.²⁵ Contrast that with Iran, where schooling is largely universal and women outnumber men at the university level. Some colleges in Iran have even introduced quotas to keep the male presence from falling further than it has in recent years.²⁶

Higher education, smaller families

In country after country, when more girls are educated and stay in school longer, **birth rates** fall.²⁷ With both traditional literacy and internet use high in Iran (albeit an officially censored internet), it will be hard to turn back the clock and send young Iranians rushing to have more children.²⁸ PRB’s Roudi says that “Iran’s family planning program of the past two decades was successful because it met the needs of families. The new policy is solely top-down without considering peoples’ needs; that is why it won’t be successful.”²⁹

Country	Total Fertility Rate
Bahrain	2
Cyprus	1.5
Egypt	2.9
Iran	2
Iraq	3.6
Israel	3
Jordan	2.7
Kuwait	2.2
Lebanon	2.1
Oman	2.9
Palestinian Territory	3.5
Qatar	1.8
Saudi Arabia	2
Syria	3
Turkey	2.3
UAE	1.4
Yemen	3.7

Source: Population Reference Bureau, 2020 World Population Data Sheet

Nevertheless, anything that makes it harder to get reproductive health services and information could lead to an uptick in unplanned pregnancies and abortion. Abortion is illegal in Iran, punishable by a fine and imprisonment of up to five years, but it still happens in secretive and often unsafe conditions.³⁰ Furthermore, there is a serious risk that if condoms become more expensive or hard to find, transmission of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS, could increase.³¹

Dangers of doubling

Had Iran maintained its 1984 growth rate of 4.6 percent, the country's population would have doubled by the year 2000. Instead of the current 84 million people, Iran would have well over 100 million.

The thought of a quick doubling of population – further crowding cities, worsening traffic jams, overwhelming classrooms, and upping unemployment – once struck leaders with fear. History has shown that large numbers of young people with limited job prospects and uncertain futures can prove volatile. And further, water shortages are now considered a major security risk in Iran. Even at the current population size, lakes are shrinking and water tables are falling from excessive withdrawals.³²

Yet even while Iranian leadership is reverting to **pro-natalist** rhetoric and policies, urging women to stay home and have more babies, the highly educated and economically stretched young population are not looking to create the large families of their grandparents' time.³³

If the current trend toward smaller families holds, Iran's population will peak by mid-century at 105 million people.³⁴ The annual growth rate will drop below 0.5 percent – a rate similar to that of the several dozen countries, including Japan and many in Western Europe, that have nearly stabilized their populations. Iran is just one example of a country that has brought down fertility rates through progressive programs that advance education and opportunities for girls and women and provide easy access to modern contraception and reproductive healthcare.

Author: Janet Larsen, 2016; Updated by Abby Watkins, 2021.

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