

Shadow of culture on demographic behaviour in a developing country: Facts from Iran

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1) Detailed description

Cultural explanations of population-related issues have played an increasing substantial contribution among demographers during recent years. In fact, here, it is assumed that taking into account the role of culture on a comprehensive understanding of demographic behaviour, particularly in developing and traditional societies where even the least important personal affairs are most likely influenced by cultural factors is by far inevitable.

Iran has experienced one of the most tremendous demographic changes over the last decades. The entire population increased more than three times between the first and the latest censuses times (that is, from less than 20 million in 1956 to more than 60 million in 1996). On the basis of adopting different and contradictory population policies (that is, pro-natalist and anti-natalist policies) and more importantly, due to the presence of significantly different cultural and socio-economic characteristics and circumstances, total fertility rate has experienced substantial fluctuations over these times in Iran (from more than 7 children in 1956 to around 2 children in 2000 per woman aged 15-49). A remarkable increasing trend in the proportion of population living in urban areas, significant changes in the marriage age pattern of women, and substantial achievements in literacy and education in particular among both urban and rural female populations account for as some of most important relevant factors to produce the spectacular demographic swings over last decades in the country.

2. Theoretical focus

Theoretically, here, it is believed that comprehensive understanding of demographic behaviour and changes depends substantially on a cultural approach (Hammel 1990, Weeks 1988, Hayes 1994) . Based on this approach, it is assumed that identification of relevant components of the issue under investigation in the context of society and culture is inevitable. It is rightfully claimed that changes in traditional societies usually takes place very late and slowly, although when it begins it works as an unstoppable momentum (Weeks 1988). Indeed, the point here is a key role of culture and cultural resistance of society to postpone and reduce the acceleration of changes, in particular in societies where nearly everything is considerably affected by culture. According to this approach, although the presence and accessibility of material facilities and technologies (such as contraceptives) are important, the cultural atmosphere in which these means are supposed to be used is more important so that the actual proficiency of material facilities and technologies is exclusively based on their consistency with the society's culture which like a octopus has encompassed nearly all dimensions of individual as well as social life.

3. Data and method

The data for this paper contain some selected parts of a wide rang of components. They are as following:

First, published data of the Censuses of Population and Housing by Statistical Centre of Iran (SCI) including last four decades (1956 to 1996),

Second, selected parts of a survey conducted by the author of this paper (2003) regarding the Iranian university students' knowledge and attitudes towards demographic issues,

Third, selected findings of a research done by the author of this paper (2004) about the status of population-related issues in the context of culture by referring to the best-known Iranian common statements and proverbs,

Fourth, selected parts of a research done by the author of this paper (2003) on forty years socio demographic changes of Iranian women and,

Finally, selected findings of a research conducted by the author of this paper (2002) regarding ageing of population (elderly) in Iran and its changes over last four decades.

Moreover, these issues are considered to discuss in the light of descriptive and analytical approaches based on both primary and secondary data.

4. Expected findings

This paper focuses on a great deal of demographic issues in which the influence of culture plays a key role to discuss. Firstly, the setting of culture on young generation's awareness and attitude towards such issues as ideal family size, gender preference, marital relations, reproductive health and family planning, desired age of marriage are considered. Secondly, the orientations of proverbs and commonly used statements (as a subgroup of culture's components and more prevalent among people belonging to low and middle social classes who had and still have high contribution in demographic changes of the country) regarding marriage patterns, divorce, sex (gender) preference, mortality, fertility, infertility, and ageing are discussed. Finally, some important cultural points and traces in demographic changes of women and ageing population (elderly) over the last four decades are considered.

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This paper attempts to address some influences of culture on population- related issues in Iran where one of the most tremendous demographic changes has taken place over the last decades. The paper is strongly relied on cultural approach in which it is believed that bringing into attention the issue under investigation in the context of culture is a key precondition of comprehensive understanding of the issue. Moreover, this point seems more important in developing and traditional societies where culture plays a more substantial role in both personal and social life.

The paper is based on the selected findings of several research and studies on demographic issues in Iran. Based on these studies, implications of cultural factors on a wide range of population-related issues (containing fertility, infertility, mortality, ageing, gender preference, marriage patterns, desired age of marriage, divorce, marital relations, reproductive health and family planning, and ideal family size) are discussed.