

A Research Note on Household Size and Structure in Iran*

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***Prepared for presentation at the European Population Conference June 13-16, 2012,
Stockholm, Sweden**

Abstract

This paper reports on the description of household transition in Iran since 1976. In addition to significant political changes, Iran experienced a multitude of demographic and economic changes during the last four decades. A sharp fertility transition and lowering fertility to replacement level, has been accompanied with increase in age of marriage for girls and boys. The divorce rate has increased. The expansion of a strong rural public health program has improved child survival. These demographic changes are considered conduit for the transfer of social-structural changes to household size and composition. A high rate of urbanization from below 40 percent to 68 percent, and a significant shift and share in the economy from agricultural to manufacturing and service, were among the structural changes during the period. Theoretically, these structural changes are expected to stimulate change in the size and structure of households. Overall household size fell about one person in Iran but the share of extended households declined slightly. About one-third of households continue to have five and more members and 16 percent of the households are classified as extended households based on the 2006 census data. These findings are discussed in the context of the demographic and other family changes, the nature of urbanization and the economic realities of Iran.

Background

Abbasi-Shavazi and McDonald (2007) provide a comprehensive review of studies of family change in Iran. From this review, it is clear that one of the areas of family change less examined in the literature is the change in household size and composition. Specifically, it seems that while other aspects of family such as childbearing have been studied intensively, the demography of household is less studied. This situation is not unique to the study of family in Iran. In his study of household size and composition in developing countries, Bongaarts (2001) states that “demographers have neglected the quantitative dimensions of the size, composition, and change in household and their consequences”. The present study aims to add to this literature by examining data from Iranian censuses since 1976.

In the existing literature on family and family change in the Iranian society, there are some references to the topic of demography of households. For example, Azdanmaki and Bahar (2006) provide a historical and cultural context for the institution of family and family change through the Iranian history. They discuss the role of politics and religion in shaping and guiding the family as an uninterrupted and strong institution in Iran. They also refer to some of the emotional strains on households from such changes as increasing age of marriage and increase in the incidence of divorce. In discussing family type and the change in family structure, they state that the direction of changes is not from “extensive to nuclear”. However, they do not address this issue empirically.

The state of family change during demographic transition in Iran is presented in a paper by Sarai (2007) in the context of globalization and expansion of internet communication in Iran. Sarai focuses on the transition of Iranian society and economy from an agricultural system with

family as a unit of production and procreation to the contemporary society with regional variation in the economic system and hence diverse family types. He states that due to the variation in the economic organization and the diversity in the level of integration in globalization, a variety of family types can be observed in Iran. These include: extended families, semi-extended families, and nuclear families with intensive interaction with non-nuclear members. As a longstanding sociologist and observer of the Iranian society, he states that extended family is declining and a variety of nuclear families are emerging. However, he does not offer any data beyond his observation. Yet, indirect evidence about the persistence of extended family relationship is presented in two papers by Givens and Hirschman (1994) and Abbasi-Shavazi and his colleagues (2008). These researchers report steadiness in the incidence of consanguineous marriages. Historically, these marriages are based on family arrangement and extensive involvement of the members of the extended households.

Overall all the existing literature suggests that some of the characteristics of conjugal family relations are emerging in Iran. On the other hand, there are anecdotal and indirect evidence suggesting that extended household pattern and power continue. The analysis of census data from 1976 to 2006 is expected to shed some light on these ambiguities. Specifically, this analysis aims to examine the role of transformations in the Iranian economic structure and the changes in urbanization on the composition and size of the household in Iran during the last decades in the context of the relevant theories.

The theory of family change predicts the development of conjugal family type as societies modernize (Goode, 1963; Burch, 1976). Bongaarts (2001) describes this transition process in the analysis of household size and composition in the developing countries. In the largely rural traditional societies, residential families are more often extended, either horizontally or

vertically, than in modern industrialized societies where the independent nuclear family predominates. As societies develop, extended households tend to be replaced by the nuclear or conjugal households consisting of husband, wife, and children.

In demographic terms this convergence happens through changes in the proximate determinants which operate between the social and economic structure of the society and the size and structure of the household. These proximate factors include but are not limited to age of marriage, nuptiality pattern, fertility, adoption, divorce, widowhood, and voluntary or forced migration. Not all of these factors operate in all societies and many of them are regulated and maintained by what McDonald (1994) refers to as "idealized family morality" in each society. In most cases the source of this morality is religion (McDonald, 2000). The established family ethos supported by the society's institutions of mortality, particularly religion embraces certain levels in various components of family institution. Hence change in these components does not only need social-structural transformation as precursor, but the moral support and authority. The degree to which idealized family morality tolerate change in any of the components (proximate determinants) varies across time and across societies. As a result of the interaction of "idealized morality" along with social-structural and legal changes, the expectation is that change in different aspects of family, be slow, selective, and cultural-context specific in each society (McDonald, 1992; Abbasi-Shavavzi, et al, 2009; Thornton, 2005).

Social-Structural Transformation in Iran

Modernization in Iran goes back to the first quarter of the 20th century with the establishment of manufacturing sector and expansion of the transportation network of roads and railways (Banani, 1961). With the influx of oil revenue during the 1960s and 1970s, Iran afforded a huge transformation of the economy by establishing consumer goods manufacturing

units and import of consumer goods that were not assembled domestically (Abrahamian, 1982). This pattern of modernization and westernization from the above (Fathi, 1985) stimulated rural-urban migration and the need for importing food staples for a growing population. The latter perpetuated the depleting of population from rural villages by reducing the efficiency of subsistence agriculture facing the competition with the import of cheap food staples such as wheat and rice.

The shift and share among the economic sectors in Iran has intensified since 1976 and it has moved the economy away from the traditional agricultural production with a great majority of the population in subsistence household production. The Iranian economy has been fueled by revenue from high oil prices and this has unquestionably allowed the development of a large industrial sector and support of a big service sector during the last decades. According to the 2006 census, almost 50 percent of the labor force in Iran was in the service sector. The manufacturing sector had 32 percent of the labor force and the agriculture had only 23 percent of the labor force (SCI, 2007).

In Iran, urban localities are conventionally defined as places with population of 5,000 and higher according to the censuses. In some situations where a locality has been assigned a mayor for administrative-political reason, these places have been also counted as urban areas. During the first part of the 20th century the rate of urbanization in Iran was slow. According to the 1966 census, about 35 percent of the population lived in the urban areas and there was only the national capital had a population of 1,000,000 and higher. By 1986, about 54 percent of the population lived in urban areas and 28 percent lived in cities with a population of 250,000 and more. In the 20- year period between 1986 and 2006, the percentage of population living in cities of 250,000 and higher increased from 28 percent to 48 percent and by 2006, 68 percent of the

population lived in urban areas (Iran Statistical Center, 1992, 2008). The preliminary results from the 2011 census suggest that the rate of urbanization has increased to 71 percent. The essence of urban crowding comes from the increase in the medium size cities—those with one million to below 2.5 million population. About 14 percent of the urban population lived in such cities in 2006 as compared to 5.5 percent in 1986. The number of such cities has increased from 1 to 4 but the size of the population living in these cities has increased by 350 percent over the period.

Along with high rate of urbanization, the economic shift and increase in the oil revenue, the adoption of modern communication, mass media and technology, particularly computer and internet, has accelerated. Through the tremendous increase in access to satellite TV and mobile telephone, by all classes and all regions, the exposure to Western ideals have been pervasive. These exposures have been strong forces toward the strengthening of the foundations of conjugal family system—individualism and self-actualization. In addition, Westernization has become an increasingly powerful force in shaking the idealized family morality (McDonald, 2000) and freeing its grip on proximate determinants of household size and composition.

Proximate Determinants of Household Size

With regard to the changes in proximate determinants of household size and composition in Iran, the first and for most is a sharp fertility transition and lowering of fertility to replacement level. There is now a well-established literature on fertility decline during the 1990s and beyond in Iran. Abbasi-Shavazi and colleagues provide a comprehensive review of this literature. They analyzed data for the last four decades of the 20th century about fertility levels and trends in Iran (Erfani, 2008; Abbasi-Shavazi, McDonald, & Hosseini-Chavoshi, 2009). They report on total fertility rate dropping from 6.23 in 1986 to 2.51 in 1996; a decline of about 60 percent in only

one decade. By 2006, the total fertility in Iran had declined to 1.88, below the replacement level. This shift in fertility level is a major factor behind decline in household size.

Increase in age of marriage for both men and women and particularly for women should be considered influential in relation to household size. The average age of female marriage increased from around 22 in 1976 to 28 in 2006 (ISC, 2007). The percentage of never-married women age 35 and higher increased 217 percent between 1991 and 2006. There is all indication that the Iranian idealized family morality has eased its grip on young women, as young adult women continue to live in their parents' households and expand their access to higher education (Lutz, Cuaresma, & Abbasi-Shavazi, 2010). This emerging trend contributes to the pattern of larger household's size.

Traditionally family morality has had strong grip on divorce in Iran. Despite the continued strong social stigma against divorce, the family law established under the Special Civil Court system since 1979 by the Islamic State, seem to have facilitated divorce for women (Higgins, 1985). The divorce and marriage registration data show that divorce has been increasing in Iran during the last three decades. The divorce rate increased from 87.6 per 1,000 marriages in 1991, to 121 per 1,000 marriages in 2006; an increase of 37 percent (ISC, 2007). Iranian divorced women who do not get married join their parents' household. If joining the household of parent is not possible, the next option is to join the household of a brother. The increase in divorce rate is expected to affect both increase in the size of the household and the rate of household extension.

Other factors functioning as proximate determinants of household size in Iran are decline in infant mortality and the increase in widowhood. Infant mortality was very high in Iran in 1970s (Abbasi-Shavazi, McDonald, & Hosseini-Chavoshi, 2009). Local and national surveys

documented a high rate of 112 per 1000 live birth for infant mortality. Through the 1980s and more effectively during the 1990s and beyond, infant mortality and child mortality declined through policies leading to improvement of health care resources and developmental activities in small towns and rural areas. By 2006, infant mortality had declined to 26.6 per 1000 live birth resulting in higher level of child survival. The reduction in infant and child mortality means higher household size other things being equal.

From 1980 to 1988 Iran was engaged in an imposed war with Iraq, her neighbor in the west. The details of this war and its consequences are covered by several authors (Abrahamian (2008; Amirahmadi, 1990). In general, the war cost Iran heavily in human and material terms. A demographic side effect of the Imposed Iran-Iraq war was increase in the number of young widowers. As many young men married before they were deployed hurriedly to fight the Iraqi invaders, many of them were killed in the battle and left widows. These widows had to go back to their parents' household. The large number of war casualties should have translated to a large number of young widows contributing to extended and larger households, especially when considering many of these widows had children.

Materials and Data

The data presented in this reports draws on published tables from the censuses available from the Statistical Center of Iran (SCI) which has been conducting national censuses since 1966. The last census of Iran was conducted in 2006. The results from these censuses have been published and tabulations from these censuses are available for descriptive analysis. The Statistical Yearbook of Iran (Salname Amari) which is published annually by SCI provides tabulation from across the censuses and data from various government ministries. For example, vital registration data is compiled from the Civil Registration Organization. In addition to the

published data, some analysis in this paper is based on calculations from the two-percent sample of the 2006 census made available to the author. This is a large sample of 1,367,310 individuals living in 343,188 households. Some tables presented in this paper do not include comparable figures from all the four censuses due to lack of published data.

The Iranian census defines a household as a group of individuals who live in the same dwelling, share household budget and usually eat together or from the same kitchen. These households are grouped under “Settled Regular Households”. A small portion of the population is grouped under “Group Households” which includes individuals living in institutional settings. This definition is centered on residential and budget sharing. However, there are a lot of economic and social interactions which happens among members of the extended family and are not captured by this definition. For example, two adult brothers and their father who work in the same business and share all the economic resources of the family do not have residential sharing but the members of their families and all generation have significant economic and social interactions which affect the members of the households. The analysis of household composition in this paper is limited to the residential definition used in the censuses.

Iran is an ethnically diverse country. The ethnic identity draws from tribal background, language, culture and religion (Amirahmadi, 1987). A variety of family issues are affected by regional and ethnic differences (Abbasi-Shavazi and Sadeghi 2005, 2006). To measure ethnic and provincial variation in household extension, a rate of household extension was constructed. The numerator for this rate was the number of extended members in the households in the province. The denominator was the total number of households. The multiplier was 1000. Hence the rate was centered on the number of extended members, for each 1,000 households in each province.

Household Size

There was slight increase in average household size from 1976 to 1986. Yet, between 1986 and 2006, the household size decreased from 5.1 to 4.0 persons (Table 1). It is obvious that this decline in household size and the decline in fertility during the period under consideration are highly correlated. The amount of decline in household size for both rural and urban areas was the same; for urban areas from 4.9 to 3.9, about 20 percent decline; and for rural area from 5.5 to 4.4 (20 percent). It is clear that most of the decline has been during the decade of 1996-2006.

(Table 1 about here)

The net effect of decline in fertility and improvement in child survival has shifted the distribution of the households' members toward more adults than children. The lower panel of Table 1 shows the average number of children and adults per households during the period under consideration. A comparison of the average number of children, those 17 and younger, between 1976 and 2006 shows that both in rural and urban areas, this figure has declined to almost half. On the other hand the average number of adults has increased.

The decline in household size is also reflected in the distribution of households by number of members (Table 2). Overall in 1986, 56 percent of the households had five or more members. This figure declined to about 32 percent in 2006. In this regard, the difference between urban and rural areas is relatively high (28 percent versus 40 percent) suggesting persistence of large households in rural areas despite the fertility decline. The major shift in household size distribution is observed for households that have three to four members. This category of households, has gained a higher share as the share of five and more member households has declined. The overall observation is that large households with 5 and more members have

declined significantly particularly in urban areas. However, these households are still one-third of the total households in 2006.

(Table 2 about here)

The results presented in Table 1 suggest that over time there has been increase in the average number of adults per households. If we assume that two adults are on the average as parents in the households, in 2006 there were 0.7 extra adult in the average household. Furthermore as of 2006, one-third of all households have five and more members. These households are large because they have more adult members.

A very important reason for large household size and extra adults in the households in 2006 is the increase in age of marriage and hence increase in the number of young unmarried adults living with their parents. Table 3 shows the percentage of never-married men and women by age group. This figure has increased for all young adult significantly and it even has increased for those 35 years and older. Another way to look at this data is to look at the average number of never-married adult members per households. This figure was .24 in 1976 and by 2006 it has increased to .52 per household.

(Table 3 about here)

A second explanation for the extra adults and hence larger household size is that as of 2006, 16 percent of the households in Iran are extended households which include extra adults (Table 4). These adults are mainly son-in-laws and daughter-in-laws. But they also include unmarried young siblings of the head of the household as another main category. Other extended adults are widowed mothers, divorced sisters and other relatives of the head of the households and their spouses.

Household Composition

Table 4 shows the share of extended households among all households. Comparable data were not available for 1976. According to the 1986 census, the rural and urban areas did not differ in terms of the share of extended households. In all areas, about 20 percent of the households were extended households. According to the last two censuses in 1996 and 2006, the share of the extended households has declined in urban areas, from 20.8 percent of the households in 1986 to 16.2 percent in 2006. In rural areas about 19 percent of the households were extend households in 2006, showing a slight decline over the 20 years. Overall, the notable shift toward decline of extended household pattern is observed in urban areas with 15.2 percent extended households in 2006.

(Table 4 about here)

Historically, the majority of the non-nuclear members in the extended households have been the parents of the head. Other extend household members have been the spouses of married children particularly the wives of married sons. The relatives of the male head of the household and to a very limited extent, the relatives of the spouse of the head have contributed to household extension. In some cases distant relatives of the heads such as aunts and other female relatives have joined the household when they were not in a position to join with their sons' households. The latter, usually has been the outcome of events of divorce and widowhood for women who do not have any children. The non-relative members have usually been maids and helpers of the households.

The distribution of extended members of the household by their relation to the head of the household is shown in Table 5. In 2006, about 23 percent of the extended members are grandchildren. The parents of the head form another 27 percent of the extended members of the

household. The data clearly show that many of the extended households in Iran in 2006 included three or four generations living together. The share of grandchildren is correlated with the share of son-in-laws or daughter-in-laws as extended members of the household. This group is about 21 percent of the total extended members in 2006. Another major group of extended members of the household are brothers and sisters of the head. The comparable data on distribution of non-nuclear household members, from 1976 and 2006 census are very informative about the changes in the composition of the extended household members. One major observation from this table is that the share of grandchildren and the share of grandparents have both increased. The number of non-relatives and helpers has decreased to the extent that their percentage share has approached zero.

(Table 5 about here)

Table 6 shows some characteristics of the extended household members by three major age groups in 2006. The age groups are: those 17 and less, 18-34, and 35 and above. From the first panel of the table, it is clear that the majority of the members, in this age group are grandchildren. This number combined with the high percent of daughter-in-laws among age group 18-34, suggest continued persistence of co-residence of young couples and their children with husband's family. The high percentage of never-married males and females among the extended members age group 18-34, (almost 20 percent for each group) reflects the increase in age of marriage and changes in nuptiality pattern. This group is made of the siblings of the head or his spouse. Among the extended members 35 years and older, five percent are never-married women and two percent divorced women. However, the majority of the members of this group are widows who are mothers of household heads traditionally taken care of by their sons. Overall the extended households continue to take care of young couples and their children and old

parents particularly mothers. The major change is the increase in the number of young adult siblings of the head due to change in age of marriage and nuptiality.

(Table 6 about here)

Table 7 shows a simple measure of frequency of extended households for provinces. On the average, there is 160 extend members for each 1,000 households in Iran in 2006. This measure varies among the provinces. Some of these differences might be related to the ethnic diversity and cultural differences across provinces. On the other hand, the Iranian provinces have socioeconomic and geographic differences that might be important in the relationship to family organization. Overall the rates for provinces that can be identified with certain ethnicity are higher as compared to the provinces that are populated by the majority of the population who are Persians. It should be noted that the measure of ethnicity used here, is a proxy measure based on residence in province. For example, households living in Kurdistan in 2006 are considered Kurds. However, not all households living in Kurdistan in 2006 were Kurds. Since individual level measure of ethnicity is not available, any interpretation of the effect of ethnicity should be considered cautiously. Nevertheless, similar differences found in studies related to other aspects of family change in Iran, support the importance of ethnicity and region in the discussion of family type in the present study (Abbasi-Shavazi and Sadeghi, 2005, 2006; Torabi and Baschieri, 2010).

(Table 7 about here)

Discussion

The review of literature on family change in Iran suggests emerging behaviors in the domain of family that reflect the rooting of individualism and self-actualization particularly among young adult population. Such behaviors as remarkable increase in female age of marriage

are the foundation of conjugal family system and decline of the influence from extended family structure. Despite this theoretical expectation, the extended co-residential families and large households with three or more generations were prevalent in Iran in 2006. These findings are consistent with the suggestion that change in different aspects of family, is selective and depends on the social and economic realities of the society.

A major problem in a study of household change based on published census data is the difficulty of disentangling the impact of different proximate determinants of household size and structure. From the data presented in this paper it is clear that household size in Iran has decreased markedly since 1986. This decline is in concert with the documented decline in fertility. The changing economic structure and shift from labor intensive agricultural and tribal economy to a more urban based manufacturing and service- based economy, has been fostering the decline of fertility and household size with moral support based on religious authority.

The interpretation of the impact of increase in urbanization and urban population density is complex. Traditionally urbanization has had a negative effect on fertility and hence household size. Yet since urbanization in Iran has been associated with housing limitation, higher housing prices (for purchase or rent), it may have encouraged residential extension and delay in establishment of new nuclear households by young adults. Accordingly, it seems that the economic realities of urban life are also important in family change in a direction different from the conventional theoretical expectation. It is plausible to assume that, the pattern of urbanization in Iran has been an influential factor behind the relatively large number of households with five and more members despite a great decline in fertility. There are indications that delay in marriage and increase in divorce rate, contribute to the prevalence of large households and

extended families particularly in urban areas. Further understanding of these issues waits the availability of household level data for different times.

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Table 1

Average Household Size in Iran, 1976-2006

	1976	1986	1996	2006
All Members				
Total	5.0	5.1	4.8	4.0
Urban	4.9	4.9	4.6	3.9
Rural	5.2	5.5	5.2	4.4
Children				
Total	2.6	2.8	2.3	1.3
Urban	2.3	2.4	2.1	1.2
Rural	2.8	3.0	2.6	1.6
Adults				
Total	2.5	2.3	2.6	2.7
Urban	2.5	2.5	2.5	2.7
Rural	2.4	2.5	2.6	2.8

Source: Source: Statistical Center of Iran, 1992, 2000, 2008

Table 2

Percent Distribution of the Households by Size

	1976	1986	1996	2006
Total				
1-2	17.0	15.0	15.7	20.5
3-4	28.4	28.9	34.4	47.3
5+	54.6	56.1	49.9	32.2
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Urban				
1-2	16.4	15.0	15.7	20.9
3-4	32.6	32.7	38.0	50.3
5+	51.0	52.3	46.3	28.8
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Rural				
1-2	11.6	15.1	16.0	19.5
3-4	26.2	23.7	28.0	40.3
5+	62.2	61.2	56.0	40.2
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Iran Statistical Center, Source: Statistical Center of Iran, 1992, 2000, 2008

Table 3

Percent of Unmarried Population among Population 20 Years and Older

Age	1976	1996	2006
20-24	40.2	55.9	63.8
25-29	21.4	21.0	30.2
30-34	6.8	7.0	11.9
35+	1.3	1.6	2.5
Total	10.6	15.2	20.8

Source: Calculated from ISC, 1980, 1992, 2008

Table 4

Percent of Extended Households Among all Households.

	1986	1996	2006
Total	20.8	17.7	16.2
Urban	20.1	16.5	15.2
Rural	20.0	20.0	18.7

Source: Statistical Center of Iran, 1992, 2000, 2008

Table 5

Distribution of Extended Members in Relation to the Head of the Household, 2006

Relationship to the head of household	1976	2006
Grandchildren	19.1	23.3
Parents of the head	18.6	27.1
Parents of the spouse	1.9	3.1
Daughter- in-law and Son-in-law	25.2	21.4
Brothers and sisters of the head	27.4	23.3
Brothers and sisters of the spouse	1.5	1.8
Other relatives	0.6	0.0
Maids	1.8	0.0
Non-relatives	3.9	0.0
All	100.0	100.0

Note: 1976 distribution for daughter- in-laws, son-in-laws, brothers and sisters of the head and spouse are adjusted based on the 2006 distribution.

Source: Iran Statistical Center, 1990, 2007

Table 6
Characteristics of the Extended Members of the Households by Age Group, 2006

Characteristics	17 and younger	Percent*
Grandchildren		72.8
Siblings of the head		19.4
18-34 years		
Daughter-in-law		47.2
Siblings of the head		40.4
Never Married Male		20.6
Never married female		19.5
Divorced female		0.6
35 years and older		
Parents of the head		75.8
Parents of spouse of head		8.6
Sister of the head		7.1
other relatives		8.4
Female widow		62.1
Female divorce		1.9
Female never married		5.2

* As the percentage of the total in the age group. The percentages do not add up to 100.
 Source: Calculated by the author from the 2006 census, 2-percent sample file.

Table 7

Rate (per 1,000 HH) of Extended Households Among Households in Provinces in Iran, 2006

Province	Rate
Khorasan-Jonubi	58.0
Khorasan-Razavi	75.7
Yazd	91.5
Markazi	91.9
Isfahan	93.7
Kerman	94.7
Semnan	95.6
Tehran	103.4
Ghom	115.0
Korasan-Shemali	117.4
Ghazvin	131.6
Gilan	136.1
Mazandran*	157.3
Fars	164.9
Hamadan	176.7
Golestan	194.1
Hormozgan	206.9
Busher	228.5
Zangan*	170.6
Kermanshah*	177.3
Charmoha—Bakhtyari*	180.9
Lurestan	184.1
Azarbayjan-Sharghi*	193.0
Sistan-Baluchestan*	195.6
Ilam*	238.0
Kurdestan*	250.1
Ardabil*	267.0
Khuzestan*	300.4
Kokiluyeh-boir-ahmad*	314.9
Azarbayjan-Gharbi*	317.6
Iran	159.9

*Populated by a major ethnic group

Source: Calculated by the author from the 2006 census, 2-percent sample file.

Acknowledgement

We are thankful to Dr. Taha Nourolah, the head of Household and Housing Division, for releasing the two-percent sample data from the 2006 census.