

## Policy expertise and culture: the case of “civil sexuality” in Iran.

Elaheh Mohammadi and Anna Durnova

---



**Electronic version**

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/irpp/2030>  
DOI: 10.4000/irpp.2030  
ISSN: 2706-6274

**Publisher**

International Public Policy Association

**Printed version**

Date of publication: 30 December 2021  
ISSN: 2679-3873

**Electronic reference**

Elaheh Mohammadi and Anna Durnova, “Policy expertise and culture: the case of “civil sexuality” in Iran.”, *International Review of Public Policy* [Online], 3.3 | 2021, Online since 15 December 2020, connection on 08 January 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/irpp/2030> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/irpp.2030>

---

This text was automatically generated on 8 January 2022.



*International Review of Public Policy* is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International.

---

# Policy expertise and culture: the case of “civil sexuality” in Iran.

Elaheh Mohammadi and Anna Durnova

---

## Introduction

- 1 Sexuality has always been submitted to various forms of regulation. Following the tradition of understanding the regulation of sexuality through discourses and meanings transmitted through public debates (Foucault, 1976; Kulawik, 2014; Mottier, 2008), our paper looks at the recent debate on women’s sexual desire as part of the family-planning policy strategy of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The analysis shows how efforts to regulate the “sexual desire” of Iranian women have become part of the state’s natalist agenda. We propose looking at the debate through “civil sexuality”, which offers a conceptual lens to identify how social practices around sexuality are understood through their public acceptance as good or bad, and how this process happens through specific combinations of expert knowledge and cultural context. This link between sexuality and its public acceptance allows us to discuss the role of cultural context in establishing policy expertise, which has consequences for understanding how bodily and intimate practices are normalized and legitimized in modern societies that have placed expertise at the core of governing (see: Christensen, 2020; Fischer, 2009; Weible, 2008 for the overview of the role of expertise in modern policymaking).
- 2 The Islamic Republic’s public family-planning programs, intended to reduce population growth, were implemented as part of the public healthcare system in the late 1980s and early 1990s, targeting both men and women with a focus on contraception. Both men and women were required to take pre-marriage courses in which they learned about modern contraception before being granted a marriage license.<sup>1</sup> Over the past few years, however, these population policies have taken an abrupt turn as the state seeks to reverse a population decline. Now endeavoring to strengthen the family institution, the government has made sexual desire the primary concern of related policy instruments. These focus on reducing the divorce rate and on encouraging sexually and

emotionally fulfilling marriages. Pre-marital courses have begun to emphasize the notion of “sexual health” as a main component of sexual and emotional satisfaction in marriage.

- 3 In the following, we analyze the respective policy debate, consisting of the three most recent policy bills on family planning (Bills 315<sup>2</sup>, 446<sup>3</sup>, and the revised Bill 315), reports from the Iranian Parliament and related official documents, as well as strategy papers and expert debates focusing on sexual health in Iran (for details on the material, see the Annex). Our analysis highlights the ways in which the government frames women’s sexual desire as an acceptable and acknowledged part of “Iran-Islamic culture”. *Civil sexuality* helps us to ascertain that the drastic change in the Iranian regime’s discourse concerning the acknowledgement of women’s sexual desire – which presumably would cease viewing women as mere passive receivers of love and instead assign them an active role as a partner with their own sexual needs – is well aligned with the Islamic Republic’s conservative and nationalist gender ideology. Beyond the specific contexts of sexuality and Iran, the results of the analysis invite us to pay attention to culture in policy expertise (see also: Schram, 2012). Since, in modern governments, such public scrutiny also involves expertise, culture can be foregrounded as a discursive battlefield which reflects or contests a society’s behavior norms, or which might create new ones when new challenges appear and are subjected to public scrutiny (see also Alexander, 2018, p. 1050).
- 4 The article begins by presenting civil sexuality as a lens through which to analyze the Iranian case. Simultaneously, it calls for an analysis of culture through the language and meanings that policy actors use to describe the issue of public concern and to propose policy solutions; such language and meanings are articulated through the expert knowledge with which they support their claims. The theoretical argument is illustrated through analysis of the policy debate on the Iranian family-planning program, while focusing on the role of “women’s sexual desire” more specifically. The results show that the combination of expertise with cultural context, unveiled through the lens of civil sexuality, serves the purpose of normalizing women’s sexual behavior and brings it into line with the state’s gender ideology articulated in the Iranian family-planning program. The article concludes by discussing the implications of the Iranian example for the normalization of social practices through a specific combination of expert knowledge with cultural context.

## Sexuality, Gender, and Modern Population Policies in the Islamic Republic of Iran

- 5 Recent studies on gender politics and social welfare in Iran show that the expansion of public health, education and aid programs has had mixed consequences for society (Bahramitash, 2011; Harris, 2017; Sharifi, 2019). The state’s former population program, with its emphasis on population control, not only succeeded in reducing the fertility rate in Iran but also changed the reproductive culture and Iranians’ use of contraception. In 2013, a group of representatives from the 9<sup>th</sup> Islamic Consultative Assembly, which was dominated by conservatives, introduced two bills, “Comprehensive Population and Exaltation of Family” (Bill 315) and “Plan to Increase Fertility and Prevent Population Decline” (Bill 446). These bills encapsulated the Iranian government’s efforts to adopt policy measures that would increase the

population by focusing primarily on reducing the divorce rate, increasing the birth rate, and improving the overall quality of marriage. While some parts of Bill 446 were approved by the Iranian parliament in 2014, Bill 315 has repeatedly appeared on the parliamentary agenda since 2013 without action being taken. This has been mostly due to financial constraints; without funding, the program could not be implemented. A revised version of the Bill was therefore proposed in the summer of 2020, returning the issue of family-planning strategy to the parliamentary agenda. Our study covers the data up to that point.

- 6 Policy propositions on sexuality are, in general, shaped by Iran's political culture and advanced mainly through the Islamic Republic's religious-nationalist narratives. The signifiers "Iranian" and "Islamic" have become discursive tools through which the Islamic Republic of Iran argues for the necessity of its policy propositions and seeks to legitimize them to the public.<sup>4</sup> While Islamic Republic politics has adopted religiously disguised language, in practice it follows the logic that is driven by present needs rather than by timeless religious rules (Ghiabi, 2019b). In this sense, even religious tools and practices can be couched in secular policymaking (Najmabadi, 2014, Ghiabi, 2019b). For example, in a study of the history of transgender activism in Iran, Najmabadi shows the Islamic Republic's shifting perspective on non-normative gender and sexualities (2014). Her study illustrated the complex interplay between Muslim clerics, juridico-medical experts, civic authorities, and activists, tracing the path through which transsexuality moved from being a disease, to a psychological problem, and then to a disorder, with sex-reassignment surgery being perceived as a legitimate and effective treatment by the Islamic Republic (Najmabadi, 2014). Such an approach has a strong history in Iranian politics (see also: Vahdat, 2005, p. 650). Most recently, it has been extended to sexual health, as a reaction to the rising divorce rate among urban, educated Iranians, which has prompted the Iranian government to seek strategies to keep Iranians happily married.
- 7 The historical contingency of the interrelation of political Shi'a Islam, modernization, and scientific expertise are central to views on women's sexuality within Iranian politics. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Shi'a clergies in Iran adopted modern scientific views on hygiene, including those related to sexuality. In a similar spirit, in the 1970s – the heyday of the formation of opposition movement against the Pahlavi regime – the revolutionary Shi'a discourse engaged with the social sciences, humanities, philosophy, economics, and political science to gain relevance (Sadeghi, 2008a). Since then, the issue of gender – and especially the "woman question" – has been at the core of political Shi'a Islamic discourse in Iran and a range of insights from modern science has been adopted in proposed policies, making it necessary for the Iranian government to accommodate those changes within its political ideology. With the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iran experienced a paradigmatic shift from modernization as the central societal concern to the goal of society's moral purification, with women at the center of such ideology (Najmabadi, 1991). Being the "cultural signifiers of the national collectivity" (Yuval-Davis, 1993, p. 621), women then became an important symbol and embodiment of the revolution and of the changes that Iranian society underwent (Najmabadi, 1991). The position of women in society acquired a great deal of weight and prominence. Fatemeh, the daughter of the Prophet Mohammad, became a role model for Iranian women, symbolizing piety, shyness and sexual purity, yet determined

and resilient when it came to defending Islam; before all this was attributed to her, she was a maternal symbol for the nation (Sadeghi, 2008a, 2008b).

- 8 Such political discourse nevertheless produced tension between women’s domestic role and women’s position in the Islamic social order, which has since been the subject of social and political debates. As a result, political Shi’a Islam recognized women’s contribution, thereby defining their role and duties in the social structure of Islamic society. However, this contribution remained highly observant of women’s role in the family and their maternal role. Women were not reduced to the private sphere; on the contrary, with family recognized as the central unit of Islamic society, the private sphere became the domain of the political. As a result of these debates, the Islamic Republic of Iran developed policies that encouraged both women’s education and their participation in the labor force, as well as promoting and preserving women’s role in the family as wives and mothers (Vakil, 2011). Institutional changes after the Islamic Revolution – notably, the provision of free education and the Islamification of society – provided women, especially those with traditional and religious backgrounds, access to the public sphere and boosted women’s will to seek careers and political engagement. Such changes impacted on women’s priorities and had consequences for gender relations in Iran.
- 9 At the same time, such a view was defined and justified not only through reference to Islamic traditions but also by “scientific” expertise. In the 1970s, in his widely read book, *The Woman and Her Rights in Islam*, Morteza Motahari, a prominent ideologue of the Islamic Republic, employed selective adoption of psychological expertise to support his pseudoscientific (Sadeghi, 2008a) claims of the “psychological differences” between men and women, which was the primary principle underlying the Islamic Republic’s gender discourse. In the domain of sexuality, these “natural” differences between men and women were deployed to assume that women have emotional needs but remain sexually passive, in contrast to men, who have strong sexual desires. This perception was reflected in gender segregation, in the compulsory hijab, and in piety, all of which were justified as the means to protect women from the unwanted and sexualized male gaze. Since women were defined as emotional and passive, women’s will to power and sexual desire were thereby denied, while their nurturing role was highlighted.
- 10 Another change important to understanding the policy debate on sexuality came through the expansion of public health and successful population-control planning in Iran. The Islamic Republic succeeded in reducing fertility at an astounding rate (Haghighat-Sordelini, 2011) and in improving women’s overall health. Given the great political weight of the family-planning policies,<sup>5</sup> approaches to modern birth-control methods have been based on the state’s political agenda. At the end of the 1980s, when the previous population-growth policies of the Iran-Iraq War era<sup>6</sup> began to have unfavorable effects on the nation’s workforce, economy, education, and healthcare, the state reversed course, with nationalist and religious forces alike (and their corresponding discourses) mobilized to promote policies aimed at reducing the population. Harris showed that opponents of the program remained vocal when the population-control plan was first implemented (Harris, 2017, p. 138). National media and nationally distributed products joined the massive campaign with a focus on four main messages: “Better Life with Fewer Children”; “Less Population, More Opportunities, Prosperous Future”; “Fewer Children, Better Education”; and “Girl or

Boy, Two Are Enough”. Welfare incentives, such as health insurance, social security, cash allowance and maternity leave, continued only up to the third child.

- 11 These efforts were profoundly distinct from the direct restrictions and discipline seen in population programs in other countries in Asia, such as China, or in Muslim countries such as Indonesia; Iran’s population campaign instead relied more on “persuasion and welfare incentives situated within a framework of religiously sanctioned marriage legitimized by the government” (Harris, 2017, p. 135). The Ministry of Health and Medical Education, as the main institutional planner and executive governmental body, began to require both men and women to attend two-hour pre-marital courses for instruction on birth-control methods and sexual health, the importance of family size, and the religious principles underlying these issues. Harris has argued that, in modernizing sexual and reproductive norms, the Islamic Republic of Iran vigorously crafted and promulgated “religious tradition for [the] purposes of modernization” (Harris, 2017, p.135). Providing substantial support for the population-control program by distributing contraceptive devices and medication in both urban and rural areas across the country,<sup>7</sup> the Islamic Republic ran an internationally praised population program.<sup>8</sup>
- 12 To understand the policy debate on sexuality in Iran, it is also important to understand its public health context. As the Iranian public healthcare system struggles with global health problems, such as the rise of HIV infection rates and substance abuse (Ghiabi, 2019a), the necessity of effective education and a pragmatic cultural approach make sexual education and psychotherapy essential for the overall health policy. Incorporating the issue of sexual health into the “Irano-Islamic development framework”, policy efforts are focused on the important role that “resourceful”, “balanced” families and “healthy” marriages can play in preventing social problems. In the “general policies for family”<sup>10</sup>, “all the legislation, programs, executive policies, as well as all the educational, cultural, social and economic systems” in the Islamic Republic of Iran must pivot around strengthening the family which is “the fundamental and a cornerstone of the Islamic society and the core of human growth and development and the support for the health and growth for spiritual power, divine potency, and development of the country”<sup>11</sup>. Accordingly, saving the institution of family becomes the core objective of the population-plan directive; improving “the quantity and the quality of the population”, saving the institution of marriage, stabilizing families, and preventing divorce are located at the center of policy incentives. The analysis in the next section shows how these policy propositions are argued for and legitimized by the Iranian government.

## Understanding policy expertise around sexuality through “civil sexuality”

- 13 Earlier works in sociology and public policy have shown that women are repeatedly patronized in their bodily integrity (Paterson, 2010) and that related sexual practices are no exception (Jamieson, 1999; Plummer, 1996). Social and political institutions normalize such patronizations through expert knowledge because expert knowledge helps them to frame particular sexual practices as acceptable, as beneficial for health, or as beneficial for the family. In particular, debates in the context of the second-wave women’s movement in the West around the “my body, my choice” narrative (see also

Kulawik, 2014) have linked public debates on reproduction to the question of women's rights and duties (see, e.g., in: Crowhurst et al., 2016). The biological realities of reproduction have repeatedly led to women being seen as embodied, gendered, and potentially vulnerable. With this shift, sexuality, sexual health, and sexual practices can be seen as an arena in which to study the role of sociocultural patterns and political development on individual bodily behavior, such as sexual behavior (see Mottier, 2008, for the overview of the approach).

- 14 At the same time, these studies on sexuality fall into the broader trend in both sociology and public policy to study public debates on health as a prominent policy area in which expertise becomes a core tool to formulate policy steps and policy instruments to change individual practices (Gottweis, 1998; Novas & Rose, 2000). Bodily behavior becomes "an object within a medical discourse where the body is a machine to be controlled by appropriate scientific regimes" (Turner, 2008, p. 36) and these scientific regimes are represented, in most current governments, by expert knowledge (see also Jasanoff 2005). Yet which expertise will be chosen to be incorporated in a policy proposal, and how policy actors will argue for its incorporation, are embedded in the larger sociopolitical contexts of the country and of the policy sector discussed. In this regard, expertise can be conceptualized as a discursive battlefield of interactions between different stakeholders and public groups (see Fischer, 2009; Nettleton, 2000). Rather than a homogenous knowledge, expertise is a network of discourses, defined by the context of citizen, institutions, and specific technologies that are subject to public scrutiny (see also Azocar, 2020). At the same time, this view makes the case for the analysis of discourses through which expertise becomes meaningful, as well as showing for whom it is meaningful, and in what context (see e.g.: Durnová, 2019; Fischer et al, 2015; for approaches analyzing expertise through discourses). In such an analysis, we can understand policy expertise as a socially and politically embedded expert knowledge (see also Nowotny, 2003) which policy actors use in various ways to recommend certain types of behavior, or to prevent citizens from acting in certain ways.
- 15 In the feminist scholarship on expertise, Mary Hawkesworth places these sociocultural aspects under further scrutiny and speaks of legitimate forms of expertise that simultaneously reveal which forms of knowledge are generally accepted in a society and which are not (Hawkesworth, 2012). Gender becomes not only the context of a biological reality but also a cultural context that implies specific positions in the society, as well as specific types of accepted behavior. This does not necessarily mean that including gender expertise in policy will make the policy more gender-friendly (as shown, for example, by Kunz & Prügl, 2019). The analysis of expertise is focused on the question of whose views are seen as legitimate in a policy debate and what kinds of groups share these views. In the area of policies related to women, specific "gender arrangements" (Macé, 2018) can legitimize expert hierarchies. In Eric Mace's view, gender arrangements carry the importance of the cultural context, developed through historical trajectories of gender relations, and this should be integrated into the analysis of expertise. Another way to observe this process is through "gendered" frameworks of knowledge (Cavaghan, 2017) that shape what counts as expertise and for whom. In this way, the legitimacy of expertise becomes part of the political legitimacy of those who govern, thereby requiring more complex governing, which can reorganize the hierarchies between political elites and experts (Kulawik, 2020).

16 All these debates focus on culture in some way, although they do not operationalize culture in their analysis of policy expertise. While culture has become one of the central categories of modern analysis of politics (Almond & Verba, 1963; Inglehart, 1990), its role in public policy has been limited to a rather stable framework which enables us to explain political behavior with cultural variables (Ostrom & Ostrom, 2018), which predefines possibilities for states to operate transitions to democracy (Norris & Inglehart, 2019), or which explain how society assesses risks (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1983). In an effort to overcome what has been considered a rather static and a too deterministic view of culture, a notion of culture as a more autonomous and dynamic meaning-making site has been developed in cultural sociology (Alexander & Smith, 2001), seeking to explain social change on both individual and collective levels of political action (Alexander, 2018). While other approaches in social science have called for such a dynamic view of culture as well (see e.g., Shore & Wright, 1996), the interesting dimension of the cultural sociological approach is its linking of culture with discourse. In the view of such an approach, culture becomes strongly related to semantic codes that are submitted to public scrutiny:

The codes, we have argued, inform action in two ways. Firstly, they are internalized, and hence provide the foundations for a strong moral imperative. Secondly, they constitute publicly available resources against which the actions of particular individual actors are typified and held morally accountable. (Alexander & Smith, 2001, p. 191)

17 Such a conceptualization of culture offers a way to use cultural context in political analysis by identifying the various argumentative resources that policymakers use to legitimize their propositions (see also: Lejano & Leong, 2012), as much as culture can be understood as a discursive space in which to explain and design policy processes (Fischer, 2009, p. 245-270).

18 To view culture as a discursive battlefield that can be submitted to analysis is consistent with the view of expertise as a socially and politically embedded knowledge, already mentioned because both highlight the role of social relations and contexts in which policy actors deploy their efforts. In both conceptions, analysis of meanings and their interdependence is placed front and center of the political analysis which then examines different discursive formats of expertise to reflect expertise's sociopolitical and cultural interdependence. Sexuality, in our example, creates a sociopolitical context in which discourses on the body and related behavior are used, along with cultural references to women or to gender relations in general. In such an analysis of policy expertise, culture is the overarching meaning-making site in which these combinations and relations take place and make the surrounding world meaningful.

19 Emerging from this understanding of culture, *civil sexuality* is proposed as a conceptual lens through which to identify combinations and relations between expert knowledge and its cultural context. The notion of civility (Alexander, 2006) can serve here as a mediating term because it links the social embeddedness of expertise with culture. "Civil", in such an understanding, is not a pre-given category but a discursive one, which is made alongside the interaction among the public, experts and the government. By making a social practice "civil", the political elites seek to normalize it, to view it as good for people and for society's values. "Civil" recalls a discursive arena of modern public life in which citizens want to be more or less independent, want to determine their lives, and want to be able to criticize the conditions of the society they live in. However, citizens do not want to do so only with the help of laws that tell them

what to think – and which come from above or from political elites – rather, they want to forge their social practices with the help of rules that come from within society (Alexander 2006.). At the same time, the outcome of this process is situated in the continuous public scrutiny of meanings through which both civil society and political elites negotiate the world in which they live, and which they govern as much as they are governed by it (Alexander, 2006).

- 20 Tying together scholarship on culture and scholarship on the sociopolitical embeddedness of policy expertise, *civil sexuality* enables us to capture references to culture used in the debate on sexuality and to examine how these are related to each other and how they are incorporated in the policy proposition. The analysis using the lens of civil sexuality is subsequently interested in references to culture as they appear in the policy debate and it considers these references as a meaningful point of intersection between citizens – their beliefs and patterns of thinking and behavior – and the government's policies. In particular, the discursive ways in which references to culture are combined with references to expertise and to expert opinions are crucial because these particular ways allow policymakers to legitimize their policies as congruent with a country's culture.
- 21 Civil sexuality, in this perspective, allows us to see public debates as a site of meanings through which we can observe how various private matters of citizens – in this case, women's sexual desire – become a matter of public debate through particular references to cultural context (see also the process of societalization in: Alexander, 2018). The analysis through the lens of civil sexuality traces the meanings assigned to sexual health in order to reveal the specific ways in which the arguments are presented and serve to legitimize specific policy instruments as a result of that debate. The cultural context here is both the argumentation resource and the legitimacy tool. To think of the Iranian debate on sexuality as a debate aimed at creating and legitimizing a civil form of sexuality allows us to show how political elites, albeit acknowledging the need for – and the right to – sexual desire, legitimizes its forms and articulation only within the existing gender structure of Iranian family-planning law.
- 22 The approach through civil sexuality is timely for the Iranian context. First, in the field of policy design, the Islamic Republic's references to western liberal culture, as opposed to Irano-Islamic culture, have shaped many of the state's policy debates (Kian, 1998; Sadeghi, 2008a, 2008b), incorporating secular principles into how its institutions function (Bradley, 2007; Ghiabi, 2019a; Ghiabi, 2019b; Ghiabi, 2019c). The area of policy expertise around sexuality can be seen as one of the domains in which the analysis can follow specific ways of this incorporation. Second, the Islamic Republic of Iran's policy debate around family planning is important for understanding a form of governance which does not fit the category of either "conservative" or "totalitarian", but which is diametrically opposed to liberal democratic western politics.
- 23 Civil sexuality becomes articulated in the Iranian context through references to sexual desire and to sexual health, as well as through references to the importance of overall emotional well-being in marriage. All these references are, at the same time, backed by all sorts of expert opinions gathered by the government to support its view. It is crucial for the analysis that all these references are placed in the context of Irano-Islamic culture. Through the lens of civil sexuality, the analysis looks at how arguments in favor of the proposed instruments are framed through references to cultural context in the respective policy material. More specifically, policy propositions to enhance the

counseling culture around marriage and the efforts to push a consent culture in pre-marriage courses – which we elaborate on in the following analysis – are then understood as specific policy instruments that outline the relation between expertise on sexual health and the cultural context of Iranian society.

## Material and Methods:

- 24 We build our argument on the following data sets<sup>12</sup>. We analyze the policy debate through the “Comprehensive Plan for Population and Family Excellence” (Bill 315), the “Plan to Increase Fertility and Prevent Decrease in Population Growth” (Bill 446), their reports and their revised versions, as well as the official documents explaining the aims and objectives of the new Iranian family-planning program. To contextualize those bills, we used a purposeful sample of official documents, interviews, news reports and debates published on the website of the Parliament Research Center archive and the website of the Ministry of Health and Medical Education (MOHME), as well as the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei’s, official announcements, directives and speeches on his official website, and relevant General Policies of the State passed by the Expediency Discernment Council (EDC) and referred to the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei<sup>13</sup>. To identify this sample, we tracked parliamentary legislative documents that addressed the bills and MOHME reports, interviews and parliamentary debates around this legislation between 2012 and the summer of 2020. We then searched among the documented reports, legislation, interviews, and parliamentary and MOHME news reports that discussed the bills. This led us to another set of documents addressing issues such as population crisis, decreasing the incidence of divorce, strengthening the family as an institution, the Irano-Islamic model of life, the Irano-Islamic model of progress, the Irano-Islamic model of family, and the role of women in the prospective “development” and “progress” plans. We supplement these documents with details on the specific incentives proposed by the bills, most notably information about the family-planning courses – these courses are obligatory for all Iranians (being distributed through online platforms or by newsletter) – which includes details on how policy actors understand women and family and how this relates to the policy incentives for reducing the divorce rate and for sexual health. All these documents are suitable for our analysis because they connect sexuality and sexual health to the larger narrative of Iranian procreation as the main requirement for national development, with culture-making placed at the core of the family-planning policy.
- 25 We submitted the whole dataset to interpretive analysis, which is commonly used for policy documents and policy debates (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013). This analysis allows us to identify semantic categories through which “sexual desire” and women’s “sexuality” are framed as part of Iranian culture in the policy debate, and to examine how, in this process, the Iranian state managed to create that combination. “Civil sexuality” is the lens through which we identify this. At the same time, the analysis goes beyond the evaluation of the bills and does not answer the question of whether the proposed policy incentives will lead to fewer divorces and to better family-planning strategies in Iran. The analysis is interested in how the bills and the related debate argue for their objective and how they refer to culture to do so.
- 26 Following the methodological approach of interpretive analysis, all documents were first examined to identify the main topical categories. Beyond explicit references to

family planning and women, references to "sexual health", "expertise", and "culture" were identified as the main topical categories, on lexicological and syntactical levels as well as on the level of the overall coherence of the text units. Second, these three topical categories were classified according to the contexts in which they were used in all these documents, the actors who used them, and the particular stylistic means deployed. Through this procedure, we were able to identify the discourses being used to frame sexuality and, particularly, how references to Iranian culture shape these discourses. We defined "cultural" references as specific references to "Iranian", "Iranian women", "Iranian culture", and "Iranian family", as well as in relation to the religious aspect of Iranian culture articulated through "Islam", "Islamic", and "Iranian Islamic/Islamic Iranian". "Sexuality"<sup>14</sup> references consisted of "sexual desire"<sup>15</sup>, "sexual need"<sup>16</sup>, "sexual relation"<sup>17</sup>, "sexual health"<sup>18</sup>, "sexual being"<sup>19</sup>, "sexual satisfaction"<sup>20</sup>, "sexual dissatisfaction"<sup>21</sup>, and "sexual issues"<sup>22</sup>. For our purposes, "expertise" refers in the dataset to "psychotherapy", "psychology", "counseling", "social medicine", and "sexology" because these represent "expert opinions" in the policy debate. At the same time, some terms and contexts related to a debate on sexual desire are not present in the analysis because they were omitted in these documents (this includes homosexuality). The omission is at the same time meaningful as regards the incorporation of sexuality into the conservative framework of marriage.

## Analyzing the Iranian family-planning strategy through civil sexuality

- 27 In its religiously disguised discourse on the politics of "development", the Islamic Republic tends to distinguish itself from the international approach in the conception of "sustainable development". In this conception, the material, including the technical, scientific, social, political and cultural "excellence" of "Islamic society" as a whole, is defined as the means of ultimately fulfilling the divine purpose, which is the "spiritual excellence"<sup>23</sup> of "the country and the regime"<sup>24</sup>. In attaining this goal, "family," the main unit of "Islamic society", should "excel" in its role and become "resourceful" in producing and maintaining an excellent population<sup>25</sup>. Thus, the political debate on consolidating the institution of family and population increase takes on national urgency in the "Irano-Islamic" approach to "sustainable development". In adopting this framework, the political discourse around public health reflects the priority of family health over individual health; the universal slogan promoting "healthy lives"<sup>26</sup> is altered to "healthy family, sustainable development"<sup>27</sup>; and "balanced family, sustainable development"<sup>28</sup> and "sustainable lifestyle"<sup>29</sup> are adopted by officials and governmental media. Articulations such as these above define the political agenda of the state and further emphasize how sustainable development, in the perception of the Islamic Republic, is conditioned by the realization of the "Irano-Islamic family". In defining the "Irano-Islamic family", cultural codes such as "resourceful", "balanced" and "healthy" and "sustainable" are used. Thus the "Irano-Islamic family" is a family that is "resourceful", "balanced" and "healthy" through adhering to an "Irano-Islamic" "sustainable" lifestyle.
- 28 Notable in the discussion on the policy debate around family-planning strategies and subsequent developments is the change in cultural references around the source of increasing divorce rate and age of marriage. For example, years before the family

program was proposed, in 2005, “The Social Pathologies, and the Necessities for the Fourth Socioeconomic and Cultural Development Plan in the Field of Women and Family” parliamentary report stated that “cultural” change was necessary to slow the divorce rate. In that report, the impact of cultural causes prevails to the extent that the authors frame “economic problems” – such as being unable to afford to get married or to have children – as a false dilemma projected by “wrong cultural perceptions”. They also coin the term “economic culture” to refer to these “wrong” perceptions. The following argumentation in this Bill shows this very clearly: “It is crucial to underscore that the main problem with marriage is, [in essence], cultural and not economic, and that what are considered the economic problems of marriage are related to the economic culture of society rather than to the lack of economic facilities.”<sup>30</sup> These “wrong” cultural perceptions, such as “individualism” and “consumerism”, are perceived to be inevitable consequences of Iran’s industrial development, along with the importation of “western cultural values” and “adaptation” to the “western lifestyle” through western media<sup>31</sup>.

- 29 Following the framing of social problems through references to culture, so-called cultural solutions are emphasized and proposed throughout the policy debate. Consequently, in policy debates on changes in Iranian reproductive and intimate behaviors, the main approach is *farhang-sazi*<sup>32</sup> – “culture making” – which aims to change Iranians’ beliefs about marriage and childbearing<sup>33</sup>.
- 30 At the same time, this emphasis on the necessity of designing elaborate cultural plans through more strategic efforts to change the Iranian lifestyle is a response to citizens’ uncontrollable and increasing access to online global media. This situation made it necessary for the Iranian government to move beyond simple counter-propaganda slogans against “western cultural invasion” and censorship in order to counter the “wrong” cultural influences. With respect to strengthening institutions of marriage and family, the focus is consequently placed on effective cultural policies in the field of family. These effective cultural policies should do more than simply present marriage as a sacred institution in which one can find intimacy and emotional balance. The policy is focused on how to redefine marriage pragmatically as a resourceful institution that motivates people to choose it. This has been one of the main objectives of the family-planning debate in Iran and has made the sexual and mental health of the family a major component of new policies.
- 31 This new approach has drawn the state’s attention to sexual needs, among them women’s sexual desires, necessitating debate and education on the satisfaction of these needs within the framework of marriage. While the urgency of saving the institution of family has led the Islamic Republic to tap into the reality of the sexual lives and needs of the citizens<sup>34</sup>, through emphasis on citizens’ sexual needs and on the necessity of public sexual education in Iran, it is interesting to see to whom the Islamic Republic justifies this exceptional openness to sexuality and how it incorporates that openness into its cultural context, such as the Iranian gender discourse. Furthermore, this incorporation should be performed in a way that does not undermine, in the eyes of the public, the coherence of the Islamic Republic’s ideological principles.
- 32 In order to incorporate openness to sexuality in its cultural context, the Islamic Republic has conceptualized a notion of sexuality consistent with Iranian culture. Such a notion of sexuality serves the purpose of family planning and is in concert with views on sexual health that are accepted by the government and based on scientific expertise.

In order to legitimize these views, the state has invented Islamic traditions in order to incorporate its unconventional approach to sexuality into its framework. Taking expertise and cultural references together, sexuality is perceived to be a social, psychological, physical, and sexual issue. Therefore, sexual health is recognized as being necessary for physical, mental, and sexual well-being.

- 33 Observed through the lens of civil sexuality, the taboo of sexuality in Iran is then perceived to be a problem of “tradition”, rather than of the boundless relevance of “Islam”. In fact, Islam is alleged to assume sexual satisfaction as a life necessity. Although the necessity of sexual satisfaction is emphasized, it is distinguished from the “individualistic” western liberal understanding of the necessity of sexual health. The state argues that, in an Islamic society, individual well-being is for the sake of the well-being of the family, as the family is the core unit of Islamic society. As a result, citizens’ sexual satisfaction is framed as part of the larger picture of the overall well-being of Islamic society.
- 34 To forge this new conception, the Islamic Republic deployed some binary oppositions key to its earlier discourse – such as “Irano-Islamic/western”, “Irano-Islamic culture/western cultural influences”, “resourcefulness/consumerism”, and “family/individual”. It transformed these binary oppositions into cultural references such as “Irano-Islamic lifestyle/western lifestyle”, “Irano-Islamic family/western individualism”, “healthy marriage/divorce”, and “resourceful family/inoperative family”. These oppositions imply further sets of oppositions: “progress/regression”, even sometimes “progressive/traditional”, “Islamic/traditional”, “women progress/women subordination”; and also binary oppositions about sexuality, such as “marital sexual health/extra-marital sex”. All these oppositions are used in the policy documents as semantic categories to define the boundaries of this new sexuality, through which the government seeks to legitimize the policy shift of its family-planning strategy.
- 35 The process of proposing this new type of sexuality, consistent with the Iranian lifestyle, can be further illustrated through the ways in which the policy debate integrates sexual health as a component of Irano-Islamic culture. The Iranian government incorporates the World Health Organization’s (WHO)<sup>35</sup> definition of “sexual health” into its view of sexuality, but only within the boundaries of the heterosexual marriage. As a result, “sexual health” is altered to “sexual health of marriage”<sup>36</sup>. This shift then justifies the necessity of requiring sexual education as a prerequisite of marriage. Previous “pre-marital family planning” courses are renamed as “courses concurrent with marriage”. Adding the word “concurrent” emphasizes that public sexual education provided by “sexual health clinics”<sup>37</sup> are for the marrying couples and for consultation only *after* marriage, thereby clarifying the limits of sexual education and therefore also the boundaries of acceptable sexual relationships – marital.
- 36 This view of marriage is also crafted through the six-hour compulsory pre-marriage courses. For example, in the units dedicated to psychology, couples are advised to communicate their thoughts and needs to each other. Further, they should not rush to non-experts for advice but instead use psychotherapy counseling to find solutions to their personal and family problems. Accordingly, the course’s units on psychology strive to integrate sexual health as part of an understanding of marriage as psycho-physio-sexual well-being.

- 37 According to this understanding, sexual health is defined as going hand in hand with mental health and implies incentives to change women's individual behavior. In the workshop section focusing on sexual health in marriage, women are encouraged to break their wrong "traditional" habits and values of shyness, not to be ashamed of their sexual needs, not to compromise their sexual desires, and not to consent to sexual acts that they do not want to engage in. Indeed, women are encouraged to take a more active sexual role. Such unconventional openness about female sexuality is being negotiated through references to Islamic traditions. It is argued, for example, that the Islamic virtue of "haya" (shyness, modesty, decency, humility) is different from "sharm" (shame). Thus, the virtue of modesty is redefined, not disregarded, while women are entitled and encouraged to communicate effectively and claim their sexual needs within marriage. Husbands, likewise, are advised to pay attention to both the emotional and sexual needs and to the satisfaction of their wives.
- 38 Taken together, all these efforts show that the legitimization and normalization of women's sexual desire through cultural and educational incentives is an inevitable byproduct of advocating marital sexual satisfaction as a major policy component within a conservative population-growth program. While not going against women's access to higher education and careers, which have been the result of the changes in Iranian society mentioned earlier, the legitimacy of gender inequalities is maintained through a conservative family-planning policy. This is also visible in the government's policy response to the rising divorce rate, the rising ages of first marriage and first births, and the falling fertility rate. To achieve a behavior change, the Islamic Republic's policies seek to combine the cultural and religious arguments on sexuality with expert-based views.
- 39 Sharifi's study of sexual education in Iran shows that the Islamic Republic's new sex education may not have the effects that the state expected (2019). Her study shows that, while sexual education is changing the perception of sex and female sexuality among religious young participants, it has not led to the pronatal goal nor necessarily guaranteed a lower divorce rate. What it has accomplished is that young audiences of these classes now use religious justification to learn more about sex and to gain more sexual satisfaction in marriage (Sharifi, 2019).
- 40 Through this new approach to sexual health, combining expertise and culture, women's sexual desires and needs are recognized, and their active sexual role is encouraged in the framework of the family. However, this selective policy approach to the conception of sexual health by the Iranian government willfully ignores the essential need for articulation and legislation of sexual rights, even in the framework of marriage in Iran. At the same time, population-boosting policies have limited women's reproductive rights by eliminating free and state-subsidized contraception and by enforcing restrictions on legal abortion. Such a selective approach to "sexual health", rather than empowering Iranian women and improving women's sexual health, makes these policies yet another discriminatory policy that endangers women's health and, in a broader sense, the health of the Iranian population.
- 41 As a result of this approach, although social and demographic changes in Iran in the latter 20<sup>th</sup> century and now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have impacted on, and have been impacted by the status of women in Iranian society (Haghighat-Sordelini, 2011), the various policy debates have not considered the effects on women. The rising divorce rate, the rise in the age of marriage, and the decline in fertility rates are the result of

the change of women’s social status due to their increasing access to higher education and to women’s health improvement in Iran (Haghighat-Sordelini, 2011). Such changes have altered women’s perception of their roles in society, their perception of intimate and marital relationships, and their role and rights in family and society (Sharifi, 2018; Mohammadi, 2020). The Islamic Republic’s selective “sexual health” agenda reinforces the issues it claims to solve, as it deliberately ignores and refuses to engage in the legislative reform to dismantle the legitimacy of structural gender inequalities which would respond to the reality of current gender arrangements in Iran. Indeed, our analysis shows that the term “sexual health”, as used by the government, conceals the elimination of free and subsidized contraception, reduced access to legal abortion, and does not guarantee sexual rights. Being framed through the cultural context of the Irano-Islamic society, the state’s view of sexuality in fact denies any legal guarantee of sexual rights, even in the framework of marriage leaving the matter to the individual citizens’ responsibility and relationship arrangements to be resolved through psychotherapy and common-sense morality.

## Conclusion

- 42 We have analyzed the Iranian policy debate on women’s sexual desire, articulated through the Islamic Republic of Iran’s family-planning strategy. The primary aim of this strategy has been to reduce the divorce rate – and to propose a policy plan that keeps marriage functioning, and desirable, especially among educated, urban Iranians, which would further become a means of increasing the nation’s fertility rate. As a result, we see that the government is using the cultural context to integrate into this strategy concepts of “sexual health” and to modify this phrase for deployment in the Islamic Republic’s public health policy. Through these strategies, the case allows us to reveal how the policy debate is navigated to justify this unprecedented policy approach, which focuses on the sexual fulfillment of Iranian men and women within marriage. In doing so, the Islamic Republic has engaged in a reconceptualization of religious virtues and narratives, thereby reinventing some semantic codes of sexuality. This can be seen in the efforts to carefully tailor a conception of the sexual desire of women that is consistent with Irano-Islamic culture.
- 43 We have proposed understanding this process through “civil sexuality”, which allows us to reveal the state’s efforts to navigate its gender ideology and scientific expertise through the cultural context of Islam. Civil sexuality allows us to see that good sexuality, in the articulation of the Iranian government’s policies, is first and foremost heteronormative and family oriented, but above all “Irano-Islamic”. Furthermore, while sexual needs and desires are seemingly open to debate, and crucial to education and propagation, they are reduced to a means of enriching and heightening the “Irano-Islamic family”, the most essential institution in the “Islamic society”. The goal of the government’s policy strategy is to bring balance and to strengthen marriage and family for the sake of the well-being of Islamic society. Through our analysis, we have shown how this is incorporated through the use of particular semantic codes, so as to align the issue of sexuality with the Islamic Republic’s ideology, and how the process is reinforced through the means of cultural representation of both sexuality and the nation.

44 While traditional approaches to culture in public policy have marginalized its importance as a discursive battlefield, this article brings forward the understanding of culture through competing meanings to offer new insights into how better to understand culture's role in establishing policy expertise. The conceptual lens of civil sexuality stems from such an understanding of culture, thereby focusing the analysis on the government's legitimization efforts to support its policies. "Civil sexuality" has helped us to merge the scholarship on culture with the sociopolitical embeddedness of expertise in the analysis of policies. Further, it has strengthened the analytical view of references to culture as a discursive means of arguing for a policy proposition and of seeking its legitimization. We have illustrated the use of this analytical view in the analysis of the Iranian policy debate. Beyond the Iranian example, such analysis offers views on the ways through which policy propositions are made meaningful, and it can explain how changes in society are being harmonized and combined with persisting cultural values. This insight can help us to understand the role of culture in continuously changing modern societies, shaped through both a re-definition and a sustaining of a country's culture.

---

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alexander, J. (2018). The Societalization of Social Problems: Church Pedophilia, Phone Hacking, and the Financial Crisis. *American Journal of Sociology*, 83(6), 1049-1078.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122418803376>
- Alexander, J., & Smith, P. (2001). The strong program in cultural theory: elements of a structural hermeneutics. In J.H. Turner (Ed.), *Handbook of sociological theory* (pp. 135-150). Boston, MA: Springer US.
- Alexander, J. C. (2006). *The civil sphere*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Almond, G., & Verba, S. (1963). An Approach to political Culture. In Gabriel & S. Verba (Eds.), *The Civic Culture*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Azocar, M. J. (2020). Policy Debates on Pension Reform in Chile: Economists, Masculinity and the Mobilization of Strategic Ignorance. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, 27(4), 648-669.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxaa020>
- Bahramitash, R., & a. E. Hooglund, E. (2011). *Gender in Contemporary Iran: Pushing the Boundaries*. New York, NY and London: Routledge.
- Bradley, M. (2007). Political Islam, political institutions, and civil society in Iran: a literature review. *International Development Research Centre (IDRC)*. Retrieved from:  
<https://idl-bnc-idrc.dspacedirect.org/bitstream/handle/10625/48245/IDL-48245.pdf>.
- Cavaghan, R. (2017). *Making gender equality happen: Knowledge, change and resistance in EU gender mainstreaming*. New York, NY and London: Routledge.

Christensen, J. (2020). Expert knowledge and policymaking: a multi-disciplinary research agenda. *Policy & Politics*.

<https://doi.org/10.1332/030557320X15898190680037>

Comprehensive Plan for Population and Family Excellence 2013 (Bill 315) (Irn.). Retrieved from: [https://rc.majlis.ir/fa/legal\\_draft/show/845276](https://rc.majlis.ir/fa/legal_draft/show/845276)

Crowhurst, I., Roseneil, S., Santos, A. C., & Stoilova, M. (2016). *Reproducing Citizens: Family, State and Civil Society*. New York, NY and London: Routledge.

Douglas, M., & Wildavsky, A. (1983). *Risk and culture: An essay on the selection of technological and environmental dangers*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

Durnová, A. (2019). The lost battle on truth. In *Understanding Emotions in Post-Factual Politics* (pp. 22-66). Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Eshrati, F. (2019, Sep 10). A description of the general family policies announced by the Supreme Leader of the Revolution about the Balanced Family and Sustainable Development. *Basirat*. Retrieved from:

<https://basirat.ir/fa/news/295179/بایدار-توسعه-و-متعادل-خانواده>

Ghiabi, M. (2019a). *Drugs Politics: Managing Disorder in the Islamic Republic of Iran*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ghiabi, M. (2019b). The council of expediency: crisis and statecraft in Iran and beyond. *Middle Eastern Studies*, 55(5), 837-853.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2019.1585346>

Ghiabi, M. (2019c). Lessons on the Drug War from an Enemy. *Current History*, no. 118(811), 322-324. <https://doi.org/10.1525/curh.2019.118.811.322>

Fischer, F. (2009). *Democracy and expertise: Reorienting policy inquiry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Fischer, F., Torgerson, D., Durnová, A., Orsini, M. (2015). Introduction to Critical Policy Studies. In *Handbook of critical policy studies* (pp. pp. 1- 24.). Edward Elgar OnlineElgar.

<https://doi.org/10.4337/9781783472352>

Foucault, M. (1976). *Histoire de la sexualité*. Paris: Gallimard.

Gottweis, H. (1998). *Governing molecules : Tthe Ddiscursive Ppolitics of Ggenetic Eengineering in Europe and the United States*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Haghighat-Sordelini, E. (2011). Iran within a Rregional Ccontext: Ssocio-Ddemographic Ttransformation and Eeffects on Wwomen's Sstatus. In R. Bahramitash & E. Hooglund (Eds.), *Gender in contemporary Iran: Pushing the boundaries* (pp. 162-189) (Vol. 10). New York, NY and London: Taylor & Francis.

Harris, K. (2017). *A social revolution: politics and the welfare state in Iran*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

Hawkesworth, M. (2012). From Ppolicy Fframes to Ddiscursive Ppolitics: Ffeminist Aapproaches to Ddevelopment Ppolicy and Pplanning in an Era of globalization. In F. Fischer & H. Gottweis (Eds.), *The Argumentative Turn Revisited* (pp. 114-146). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Inglehart, R. (1990). *Culture shift in advanced industrial society*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Islamic Parliament Research Center of the Islamic Republic of Iran. (2005). *The Social Pathologies, and the Necessities for the Fourth Socioeconomic and Cultural Development Plan in the Field of Women and*

- Family. Tehran, Iran: The Office for Cultural Studies & Cultural Commission. Retrieved from: <https://rc.majlis.ir/fa/report/show/733103>
- Islamic Parliament Research Center of the Islamic Republic of Iran. (2014). *Divorce is the result of the localization of the European lifestyle in Iranians' life*. Tehran, Iran. Retrieved from: <https://rc.majlis.ir/fa/news/show/903415>
- Islamic Parliament Research Center of the Islamic Republic of Iran. (2013). *A 40% increase in divorce rate / Western culture influence has led to an increase in divorce*. Tehran, Iran. Retrieved from: <https://rc.majlis.ir/fa/news/show/862049>
- Islamic Parliament Research Center of the Islamic Republic of Iran. (2014). *The way to manage the population is not through force or threat*. Tehran, Iran. Retrieved from: <https://rc.majlis.ir/fa/news/show/894284>
- Islamic Parliament Research Center of the Islamic Republic of Iran. (2014). *Preventing population decline is only possible with incentive policies*. Tehran, Iran. Retrieved from: <https://rc.majlis.ir/fa/news/show/895837>
- Islamic Parliament Research Center of the Islamic Republic of Iran. (2019). *Making culture in the field of divorce and marriage*. Tehran, Iran. Retrieved from: <https://rc.majlis.ir/fa/news/show/1294914>
- Jamieson, L. (1999). Intimacy transformed? A critical look at the 'pure relationship'. *Sociology*, 33(3), 477-494.
- Jananoff, S. (2005). *Designs on Nature: Science and Democracy in Europe and in United States*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Kian, A. (1998). *Secularization of Iran, a doomed failure?: The new middle class and the making of modern Iran* (Vol. 3). Paris: Peeters. Pub & Booksellers.
- Kulawik, T. (2020). Political Epistemology in Gender Policy-Making: The German Democratization of Expertise. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, 27(4), 765-789. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxaa036>
- Kulawik, T. (2014). Bodily Citizenship in the Age of Biosciences: A Historical and Comparative Perspective. *Revue Nordique*, 28, 103-124.
- Kunz, R., & Prügl, E. (2019). Introduction: Gender experts and gender expertise. *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, 2(1), 3-21.
- Larsen, J. (2001). Iran's birth rate plummeting at record pace: success provides a model for other developing countries. . *Earth Policy Institute*, 28.
- Lejano, R.P., & Leong, C. (2012). A hermeneutic approach to explaining and understanding public controversies. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 22(4), 793-814.
- Macé, E. (2018). From Patriarchy to Composite Gender Arrangements? Theorizing the Historicity of Social Relations of Gender. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, 25(3), 317-336. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxy018>
- Moallem, M. (2018). Staging Masculinity in Iran-Iraq War Movies. In A. Magnan-Park, G. Marchetti & T. See-Kam (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Asian Cinema* (pp. 489-506). London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.
- Mottier, V. (2008). *Sexuality: A very short introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Mohammadi, E. (2020). *Global Inspirations and Plastic Modesty: The Case of Intimacy and Composite Gender Arrangements in Iran*. (Doctoral thesis) Masaryk University. Retrieved from: <https://irihs.ihs.ac.at/id/eprint/5681/>
- Najmabadi, A. (1991). *Hazards of Modernity and Morality: Women, State and Ideology in Contemporary Iran*. In D. Kandiyoti (Ed.), *Women, Islam and the State* (pp. 48-76). London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-21178-4\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-21178-4_3)
- Najmabadi, A. (2014). *Professing selves: Transsexuality and same-sex desire in contemporary Iran*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Nettleton, S. (2000). Governing the risky self. How to become healthy, wealthy and wise. In R. Bunton & A. Petersen (Eds.), *Foucault, Health and Medicine*. (pp. 207-222). New York, NY and London: Routledge.
- Norris, P., & Inglehart, R. (2019). *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nooshabadi, A. (2011, September 12). Engineering a balanced family. *Tebyan*. Retrieved from: <https://article.tebyan.net/179283/متعادل-خانواده-یک-مهندسی>
- Novas, C., & Rose, N. (2000). Genetic risk and the birth of the somatic individual. *Economy and society*, 29(4), 485-513.  
. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03085140050174750>
- Nowotny, H. (2003). Democratising expertise and socially robust knowledge. *Science and public policy*, 30(3), 151-156.  
<https://doi.org/10.3152/147154303781780461>
- Office of Women's Affairs of the Ministry of Education. (2015). *What is a balanced family?*. Tehran, Iran: Mahnaz Ahmadi. Retrieved from: <http://oerp.ir/baztab/635/چيست-متعادل-خانواده>
- Olmsted, J. C. (2011). Gender and Globalization: The Iranian Experience. In R. Bahramitash, and H. adi Salehi Esfahani (Eds.), *Veiled Employment: Islamism and the Political Economy of Women's Employment in Iran* (pp. 25-52). Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.
- Ostrom, V., & Ostrom, E. (2018). Cultures: frameworks, theories, and models. In *Culture Matters* (pp. 79-88). New York, NY and London: Routledge.
- Paterson, S. (2010). 'Resistors,' 'Helpless Victims,' and 'Willing Participants': The Construction of Women's Resistance in Canadian Anti-Violence Policy. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, 17(2), 159-184.
- Plan to Increase Fertility and Prevent Population Decline 2014 (Bill 446) (Irn.). Retrieved from: [https://rc.majlis.ir/fa/legal\\_draft/show/880288](https://rc.majlis.ir/fa/legal_draft/show/880288)
- Plan to Increase Fertility and Prevent Decrease in Population Growth 2016 (Bill 446) (Irn.). Retrieved from: [https://rc.majlis.ir/fa/legal\\_draft/show/971452](https://rc.majlis.ir/fa/legal_draft/show/971452)
- Plummer, K. (1996). Intimate Citizenship and the Culture of Sexual Story Telling. In J. Weeks & J. Holland (Eds.), *Sexual Cultures: Communities, Values and Intimacy* (pp. 34-52). London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-24518-5\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-24518-5_3)

- Sadeghi, F. (2008a). Fundamentalism, gender, and the discourses of veiling (Hijab) in contemporary Iran. In M. Sameti (Ed.), *Media, Culture and Society in Iran: Living with Globalization and the Islamic State* (pp. 207-222). New York, NY and London: Routledge.
- Sadeghi, F. (2008b). Negotiating with modernity: Young women and sexuality in Iran. *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 28(2), 250-259.
- Schram, S. F. (2012). The deep semiotic structure of deservingness: Discourse and identity in welfare policy. In F. Fischer & H. Gottweis, *The argumentative turn revisited: Public Policy as Communicative Practice* (pp. 236-269). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Schwartz-Shea, P., & Yanow, D. (2013). *Interpretive research design: Concepts and processes*. New York, NY and London: Routledge.
- Sharifi, N. (2018). *Female bodies and sexuality in Iran and the search for defiance*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sharifi, N. (2019). The religious sexual education in post-revolutionary Iran: redefining Tamkin and the control of sexuality. *Gender a výzkum*, 20(2), 68-83.
- <https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=826519>
- The Expediency Discernment Council. (2014). *The General 'Population' Policies*. Tehran, Iran: Ali Khamenei. Retrieved from: <http://www.maslahat.ir/index.jsp?siteid=3&fkeyid=&siteid=3&pageid=585>
- The Ministry of Health and Medical Education. (2019). *The Director General of Health Office of the Population, Family and School of the Ministry of Health announced: Holding training courses on marriage in Tehran*. Tehran, Iran. Retrieved from: <https://behdasht.gov.ir/بدو-آموزشی-های-E2%80%8Cدوره-برگزاری-94-داخلی-ریسپانسیو-پوسته-تهران-در-ازدواج>
- The Office for the Preservation and Publication of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's Works. (2009). *The general policies of the Fifth Development Plan*. Tehran, Iran: Ali Khamenei. Retrieved from: <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/news-content?id=5389>
- The Office for the Preservation and Publication of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's Works. (2009). *The general policies of the Fifth Development Plan*. Tehran, Iran: Ali Khamenei. Retrieved from: <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/news-content?id=5389>
- The Office for the Preservation and Publication of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's Works. (2010). *Statements at the first session of the Strategic Ideas Meeting: On the topic of the Irano-Islamic model of development*. Tehran, Iran: Ali Khamenei. Retrieved from: <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=10664>
- The Office for the Preservation and Publication of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's Works. (2016). *The General "family" Policies*. Tehran, Iran: Ali Khamenei. Retrieved from: <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/news-content?id=34254>
- The Office for the Preservation and Publication of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's Works. (2016). *Meeting of the members of the Supreme Council of the 'Center for the Irano-Islamic Development Model' with the Leadership*. Tehran, Iran: Ali Khamenei. Retrieved from: <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/news-content?id=32895>
- The Office for the Preservation and Publication of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's Works. (2017). *Statements in a meeting with university professors, university elites and researchers*. Tehran, Iran: Ali Khamenei. Retrieved from: <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=36930>

- Turner, B. (2008). *The Body and Society: Explorations in Social Theory*. London: Sage Publications.
- Vahdat, F. (2005). Religious modernity in Iran: Dilemmas of Islamic democracy in the discourse of Mohammad Khatami. *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 25(3), 650-664.
- Vakil, S. (2011). *Women and politics in the Islamic republic of Iran: Action and reaction*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Weible, C. M. (2008). Expert-based information and policy subsystems: a review and synthesis. *Policy Studies Journal*, 36(4), 615-635.
- World Health Organization. (2006). *Sexual and Reproductive Health and Research (SRH), including the Human Reproduction Programme (HRP)*. Retrieved from: <https://www.who.int/teams/sexual-and-reproductive-health-and-research/key-areas-of-work/sexual-health/defining-sexual-health>
- World Health Organization. (2015). *Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*. Retrieved from: [https://www.who.int/health-topics/sustainable-development-goals#tab=tab\\_1](https://www.who.int/health-topics/sustainable-development-goals#tab=tab_1)
- Shore, C., & Wright, S. (1996). British anthropology in policy and practice: A review of current work. *Human organization*, 55(4), 475-480.
- Yuval-Davis, N. (1993). Gender and nation. *Ethnic and racial studies*, 16(4), 621-632. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.1993.9993800>

## NOTES

1. Already, in 2002, the use of any method of contraception by married Iranian women was the highest compared with other countries in the Middle East-North Africa (MENA). In 2007 Iran began to have the lowest fertility rate among MENA countries (Haghighat-Sordellini, 2011).
2. Comprehensive Plan for Population and Family Excellence
3. Plan to Increase Fertility and Prevent Population Decline
4. For example, Ayatollah Khomeini's *fatwa* on sex-reassignment surgery and Iranian religious figures' support of modern contraception.
5. Studies on the impact of Islam on the population's reproductive behavior in the majority-Muslim countries of the MENA region conclude that it is related to government policies rather than to religious beliefs (see Harris, 2017; Larsen, 2001; Olmsted, 2011).
6. In the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution in Iran and during the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War, in line with the domestication of women's role in society, the age of first marriage was lowered, contraception was discouraged, contraceptive devices were withdrawn from clinics and pharmacies, and abortion was banned (Haghighat-Sordellini, 2011).
7. The state promoted contraceptive use among rural populations by using gender-segregation oriented policies, such as assigning female employees in the nationwide extended network of rural "health houses" (Harris, 2017).
8. One of the strengths of the family program in Iran was its involvement of men (Larsen, 2001, p. 2):  
Iran is the only country in the world that requires both men and women to take a course on modern contraception before being granted a marriage license. And it is the only country in the region with a government-sanctioned condom factory. From 2016 to 2020, some 220,000 Iranian men had vasectomies. While vasectomies still account for only three percent of contraception, compared with female sterilization at 28 percent, men nonetheless are assuming more responsibility for family planning.

9. For instance, in "The general policies of the Fifth Development Plan", which was proposed by Ayatollah Khameni in his meeting with the members of the Supreme Council of the 'Center for the Irano-Islamic Development Model' in 2009. Editor: All the references in the text to Government publications need to be listed in the reference list using this convention (APA 6<sup>th</sup> style):

Institution. (YEAR). Title. Location, Country: Author. Reference is added to the list.

10. "The General 'family' Policies" (2016).

11. Ibid.

12. The documents are listed in the Reference List.

13. The choice of data resources is related to the structure of the legislative system in Iran. While the parliament is where the Iranian legislations are debated and formulated, the Supreme Leader remains the highest authority in the Islamic Republic. The constitutional revision of 1989 transformed the Islamic Republic's political structure, including strengthening the leadership with an upgraded power of absolute guardianship of the jurist (*velayat-e motlaq-e faqih*). While the parliament legislates in the remit of the Constitution and Islamic law (as interpreted by the Guardian Council), the Supreme Leader is responsible for resolving any problems not solvable in this legislative way, in consultation with the council for the discernment of the expediency of the state or the Expediency Discernment Council (EDC). Aside from crisis policymaking, one of the major tasks of the EDC is to counsel the Supreme Leader on the General Policies of the State, or general policy directives. Worked on by various expertise committees and research institutions, the General Policies of the State passed by the EDC are announced to the legislature for further detailed policymaking. The parliament also consists of different specialized committees and the Parliament Research Center for expert study and assessment and review of the suggested policies and motions.

14. *Jensi*

15. *Tamayoli jensi*

16. *Niyazi jensi*

17. *Rabetei jensi*

18. *Salamati jensi*

19. *Hayati jensi*

20. *Rezayati jensi* (Sexual satisfaction) includes, but is not limited to, sexual climax (*oje lezate jensi*).

21. *Adami rezayati jensi*

22. *Masaali jensi*

23. Spiritual excellence in binary opposition to (merely) material excellence, the binary opposition between spiritual (Iranian)/material(Western), and unity/individuality.

24. For example, in the directives of Ayatollah Khamenei "The general policies of the Fifth Development Plan" (10.Jan.2009), and his "Statements at the first session of the Strategic Ideas Meeting: On the topic of the Irano-Islamic model of development" (1.Dec.2010), and "Statements in a meeting with university professors, university elites and researchers" (21.Jun.2017). Same remarks

25. For example, in "The general policies of the Fifth Development Plan" (10.Jan.2009), and in Ayatollah Khamenei's "Statements at the first session of the Strategic Ideas Meeting: On the topic of the Irano-Islamic model of development" (1.Dec.2010), and "The General 'Population' Policies" (20.May.2014), and "The General 'family' Policies" (3.Sep.2016), and "Meeting of the members of the Supreme Council of the 'Center for the Irano-Islamic Development Model' with the Leadership" (27.Aug.2016), and Ayatollah Khamenei's "Statements in a meeting with university professors, university elites and researchers" (21.Jun.2017).

26. Sustainable Development Goal 3 (SDG 3, or Global Goal 3), established by the United Nations in 2015: "To ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages." The UN has defined 13 targets and 28 indicators for SDG 3, including Target 3.7: Universal access to sexual and

reproductive care, family planning and education (WHO 2015), viewed on (3.Oct.2020) from <https://www.who.int/sdg/targets/en/>

27. For instance, in September 2015 the Association of Midwives, in collaboration with the Vice Presidency for Women and Family Affairs and the National Population Studies & Comprehensive Management Institute, organized the first Conference on Healthy Family, Population and Sustainable Development. The purpose of this conference was to evaluate the challenges of, and the practical solutions for, advancing population policies and improving fertility rates. The themes of the conference were listed as: Demographic, health and family policies; Marriage and family stability; Childbearing tendencies and behavior; Family health; Mother and child health; Cyberspace and healthy family; Economy and healthy family (Vice Presidency for Women and Family Affairs 2015).

28. The term is used in news and official media; for example, in the articles linked below, the "balanced family" is defined and its importance for sustainable development in the discourse of the Islamic Republic is debated: "A description of the general family policies announced by the Supreme Leader of the Revolution about the Balanced Family and Sustainable Development" from <https://basirat.ir/fa/news/295179/خانواده-متعادل-وتوسعه-وپايدار> and "Engineering a balanced family" from <https://article.tebyan.net/179283/متعادل-خانواده-يك-مهندسي> and "What is a balanced family?" by the Office of Women's Affairs of the Ministry of Education from <http://oerp.ir/baztab/635/خانواده-متعادل-چيست>?

29. The term "lifestyle" (translated as *sabke zendegi*) implies individualism. The cultural work on the Iranian-Islamic lifestyle includes not only debate on official online media but also political debates and academic initiatives. An example is the National Conference on Lifestyle and Sustainable Development, centered on two themes: The Islamic Sustainable Family Perspectives in the 2025 Iran horizon, and Strengthening the Sustainable Family.

<https://civilica.com/l/7004/>

30. The Social Pathologies, and the Necessities for the Fourth Socioeconomic and Cultural Development Plan in the Field of Women and Family (2005).

31. [ibid] and, for instance, in parliamentarians' debates "Divorce is the result of the localization of the European lifestyle in Iranians' life" (17.Sep.2014) and "A 40% increase in divorce rate / Western culture influence has led to an increase in divorce" (12.Nov.2013)

32. See Moallem (2018).

33. For example, "Making culture in the field of divorce and marriage", (1.Oct.2019), and "The way to manage the population is not through force or threat" (12.Jul.2014) and "Preventing population decline is only possible with incentive policies" (22.Jul.2014).

34. For example, Sharifi's in-depth interview study of two groups of middle-class Iranian women in Tehran illustrates the differences between two generations of Iranian women in matters of virginity, menstruation, and marriage. She emphasizes that, in studying sexuality in Iran, we should take into account the social, cultural, and familial contexts (Sharifi, 2018).

Mohammadi's ethnographic study of gender arrangement and intimacy in Iran emphasizes the importance of social class and cultural contexts. In her study, the lower-class informants are articulate and vocal about the sexual aspects of their lives. The use of terms such as "sexual desire", "sexual needs", and "orgasm" are common among them (Mohammadi, 2020).

35. According to the WHO, "sexual health" is "a state of physical, emotional, mental, and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination, and violence. For sexual health to be attained and maintained, the sexual rights of all persons must be respected, protected and fulfilled." viewed on (4.Sep.2020) from [https://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/topics/sexual\\_health/sh\\_definitions/en/](https://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/topics/sexual_health/sh_definitions/en/)

36. For instance, in “The Director General of Health Office of the Population, Family and School of the Ministry of Health announced: Holding training courses on marriage in Tehran” report, Ministry of Health and Medical Education (4.Mar.2019).

37. Consistent with the new family program, sexual health clinics were established in 2015. The clinics offer counseling to married couples in psychology, psychiatry, and medical matters, including urology, sexuality, and gynaecology.

---

## ABSTRACTS

Modern governments which have placed expertise at the core of their governing have always worked with cultural context so as to raise arguments for their policies and to legitimize them. While traditional approaches to culture in public policy have marginalized it as a discursive battlefield, this article offers new insights into the role of culture in policy expertise. In order to do so, it proposes “civil sexuality” as a conceptual lens through which to discuss how expertise makes use of culture to frame a policy and to support its legitimacy. In the analysis of the Iranian policy debate, civil sexuality serves to show how the government normalizes women’s sexual behavior as part of Islamic culture and how it integrates this into the Iranian family-planning program. The analysis shows that, despite an apparently progressive view on sexual health – demonstrated through sexual education, unprecedented acknowledgment of women’s sexual desire and encouragement of an active sexual role – in fact, the Islamic Republic is implementing an illiberal family program that serves its recent pronatalist and nationalist agenda. We draw conclusions from the results of our analysis for the way in which social practices – such as sexual practices – become normalized through a specific combination of expert knowledge and cultural context.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** culture, cultural sociology, gender, discourse, policy, expertise, Iran, interpretive, sexuality

## AUTHORS

**ELAHEH MOHAMMADI**

Institute for Advanced Studies, IHS, Austria

**ANNA DURNOVA**

Department of Sociology, University of Vienna, Austria