



A New Reading of Abortion in the Metropolis of Tehran: Based on the Lived Experiences of Women Born in the 1980s

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine abortion in the metropolis of Tehran using the grounded theory method, employing purposive and snowball sampling, and conducting semi-structured interviews with 17 women born in the 1980s who underwent at least one elective abortion in a clinic under the supervision of a specialist physician between 2021 and 2024. The data analysis, conducted using the interpretive analysis method of Strauss and Corbin, revealed two distinct pregnancy patterns among the respondents. In the first group, the causal factor was the convergence toward the discourse of definitive childlessness or low fertility. The contextual factors included the hardships of childbearing, economic difficulties, women's employment, and idealism in child-rearing. The intervening factors comprised a non-supportive environment for childbearing in society, marital life, and women's social networks. The interactions were characterized by changes in fertility behavior and a shift in women's perspective on childbearing. In the second group, the causal factor was the existence of extramarital relationships. The contextual factors included the dysfunctionality of marital life, prolonged suppression of sexual and emotional needs, husbands' extramarital affairs, and the perceived positive functions of extramarital relationships. The intervening factor was the obstacles to divorce. The interactions involved engagement with peer social networks, shifts in women's attitudinal and behavioral frameworks, and resistance to traditional and religious socialization. The core category derived from the study is "a new reading of abortion," which encompasses both the physical and non-physical consequences experienced by the actors involved.

Keywords: *Induced abortion, unintended pregnancy, definitive childlessness, extramarital relationships, family transformations*

1. Introduction

In today's world, pregnancy is largely a voluntary and elective condition in most regions, which is why induced abortion—the deliberate termination of an ongoing pregnancy through medical or surgical methods—has become one of the most contentious issues (1). It has attracted the attention of scholars and researchers from

various medical, legal, social, ethical, and religious perspectives.

The complexity of discussing and researching abortion increases when considering cultural, religious, and legal differences across societies. On one side, some individuals and social institutions advocate for the right of the fetus to live and consider abortion a violation of moral and human rights. On the other side, some support a woman's right to

choose whether or not to have a child and view legal restrictions on abortion as an infringement on women's rights. The stance of governments and policymakers on abortion is so crucial that the Republican Party candidate who won the 2024 United States presidential election included the non-prohibition of abortion as one of his seven campaign promises (1, 2).

Today, the World Health Organization (WHO) defines health as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, rather than merely the absence of disease or infirmity. Achieving health for all and advancing human rights require that everyone has access to high-quality healthcare, including comprehensive abortion care services, which encompass information, abortion management, and post-abortion care. The lack of access to safe, timely, affordable, and respectful abortion care not only jeopardizes women's and girls' physical health but also their mental and social well-being (3, 4). At present, no issue in sexual and reproductive health and rights appears more critical than abortion.

Globally, abortion is addressed with differing approaches. Some countries have legalized abortion, recognizing it as a fundamental right of women. Others, particularly more religious societies, have entirely prohibited it or imposed significant legal restrictions. The study by Ganatra et al. (2017) indicates that legal restrictions on abortion do not reduce its incidence. Their findings show that the proportion of unsafe abortions is significantly higher in countries with highly restrictive abortion laws compared to those with fewer restrictions. Unsafe abortion remains a major preventable cause of maternal mortality and morbidity (5). The study also reveals that approximately 73 million induced abortions occur worldwide annually. Six out of every ten unintended pregnancies and three out of every ten total pregnancies result in induced abortion (5).

In Islamic jurisprudence and Iran's criminal law, abortion is prohibited except under specific conditions (6). As a result, precise statistics on abortion in Iran are not available. The only official sources of abortion statistics are statements made by some officials in the media, which often contain contradictions. The *Tabnak* news website, in a report published on July 26, 2020, estimated the annual number of illegal abortions to be between 300,000 and 500,000. *Hamshahri Online*, on May 21, 2023, reported an annual

average of 350,000 to 530,000 abortions. *Farhikhtegan* newspaper, in issue 3983 on October 17, 2023, cited figures ranging from 250,000 to 650,000 annually. Additionally, *Mehr News Agency*, on January 3, 2024, reported that approximately 2,000 abortions occur daily in the country.

What is undeniable and highly significant is that, despite the prohibition of abortion in Islamic jurisprudence and Iranian law, and despite the enactment of the "Family Protection and Youthful Population" law on November 10, 2021, by the Iranian Parliament—which mandates various institutions and governmental bodies to promote marriage, childbirth, and strict measures against abortion—there has been no decline in abortion rates. Abortion is not only a crucial variable affecting total fertility rates and population growth in countries but also a critical issue in women's health and well-being. Although abortion is a global issue, in countries like Iran, where the population pyramid is shifting towards aging and birth rates are declining, its significance is even greater.

This study aims to address the following questions:

- What are the primary reasons behind the decision to have an abortion among the women studied?
- What conditions and factors have contributed to the persistence of abortion rates, despite governmental campaigns and strict policies aimed at increasing population growth and fertility?
- What measures can be effective in controlling this phenomenon?

2. Methods and Materials

This study employs the grounded theory method, which is one of the qualitative research approaches. The data collection tool used was semi-structured interviews, and data analysis was conducted based on the interpretive analysis method of Strauss and Corbin. Following this method, after each interview, the audio file was transcribed, and the transcribed text was confirmed by the interviewee. The process of open, axial, and selective coding then commenced.

In the open coding phase, the interview text was examined and segmented line by line, with each line assigned a relevant concept based on the researcher's interpretation. During axial coding, concepts that could be connected within a network were categorized into broader

concepts, forming the initial categories. In the selective coding phase, these categories were further refined into core categories or themes based on their commonalities and were linked together within the paradigmatic model around the central category.

The sampling method initially employed was purposive sampling. However, due to the limited number of eligible participants willing to be interviewed, the snowball sampling method was also utilized as the study progressed. Interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached. The study's participants consisted of 17 women born in the 1980s who had resided in Tehran for at least the past five years, were legally and religiously married at the time of the interview, and had undergone at least one elective

abortion by a specialist in obstetrics and gynecology between 2021 and 2024.

The interview location was chosen by the interviewee, and the average duration of each interview was three hours. Six participants, after reviewing the transcript of their initial interview, requested a follow-up interview. To ensure the credibility of the research findings, agreement among coders who were not members of the research team was employed.

3. Findings and Results

Table 1 presents the general characteristics of the respondents:

Table 1

General Characteristics of the Respondents

Interviewee Number	Year of Birth	Education Level	Employment Status	Number of Children
1	1984	Master's	Employed	1
2	1981	PhD	Employed	1
3	1989	Bachelor's	Employed	-
4	1985	Bachelor's	Unemployed	-
5	1989	Master's	Unemployed	1
6	1985	Bachelor's	Employed	2
7	1981	Associate Degree	Unemployed	1
8	1990	Master's	Employed	-
9	1987	Master's	Employed	-
10	1986	Bachelor's	Unemployed	-
11	1983	Bachelor's	Employed	-
12	1989	Master's	Employed	1
13	1987	Master's	Employed	1
14	1988	Bachelor's	Employed	-
15	1990	Master's	Unemployed	1
16	1988	Bachelor's	Employed	2
17	1990	Associate Degree	Employed	-

All respondents had attained higher education. Seventy percent were employed, while the remainder were homemakers. Eight participants (47%) were childless, seven (41%) had one child, and two (12%) had two children.

As previously mentioned, from the researcher's perspective, the most critical factor in examining the social phenomenon of abortion is the demographic categorization of the studied population. During the interviews, the researcher observed that even after limiting the study population based on marital status (women with legal spouses) and age (women born in the 1980s), two distinct

groups emerged. In essence, abortion among the respondents followed two different narratives or, more precisely, two distinct pregnancy patterns:

Group One: Women who experienced unintended pregnancies and did not desire to have children (9 participants).

Group Two: Women who experienced unintended pregnancies due to an extramarital relationship and were compelled to undergo abortion (8 participants).

The following tables present the subcategories derived from the 17 interviews conducted with the two

aforementioned groups. The subcategories that could be classified under broader categories were grouped into main categories, eventually forming the core category.

Group One: This group included nine respondents: five had one child, two had two children, and two were childless.

Table 2

Concepts and Categories Derived from the Nine Interviews in Group One

No.	Subcategories	Main Categories (Themes)
1	Spousal agreement on definitive childlessness – Spousal agreement on postponing childbearing – Spousal agreement on having only one or two children	Convergence in the discourse of definitive childlessness, single-child preference, or low fertility
2	Insufficient husband's income – Prioritizing women's employment and independence – Prioritizing employment over childbearing – Lack of job security – Temporary employment of mothers – Fear of job loss – Lack of real organizational support for working mothers	Women's employment
3	De-sanctification of motherhood – Focusing on self-development rather than parenting – Allocating financial resources to personal education, recreation, and advancement instead of children – Prioritizing the burdens of motherhood over its joys – The relativity of the ideal mother concept – De-sanctification of the "ideal mother" role – Separation of marriage from childbearing – The completeness of a woman without children – Decline of religious beliefs (on the importance of childbearing, on considering abortion a sin, etc.) – Diminishing parental influence in couples' lives	Changes in women's perspectives on childbearing
4	Doubts about the continuation of marital life – Major gap between ideal life and current life – Male irresponsibility – Lack of paternal involvement in child-rearing – Husbands' lack of understanding of a working mother's challenges – Negative impact of children on marital quality – Husbands' impatience – The burden of childbearing falling solely on women – Difficult past experiences with previous children	Non-supportive marital environment
5	Physical problems (maintaining body shape, health risks, pregnancy and childbirth complications, breastfeeding issues, perinatal and postpartum depression) – The overwhelming responsibilities of motherhood – Lack of personal time – Forced sacrifices of personal desires, goals, entertainment, and happiness – Direct impact of motherhood on other life roles – Child education challenges (cost-benefit mismatch in daycare, schools, universities, and educational programs) – Conflict between childbearing and couples' plans (migration, further education, work assignments for higher income, travel) – Restrictions on couples' freedom – Decreased living standards	Hardships of childbearing
6	Financial costs of child-rearing (pregnancy expenses, childbirth costs, infancy expenses, lifetime financial burden of children) – Inability to maintain expected living standards (husband's insufficient income, lack of private housing, small living space, lack of appropriate vehicle)	Economic difficulties
7	Economic instability – Healthcare issues – Environmental concerns (pollution, traffic, electricity shortages, water scarcity) – Gender inequalities (patriarchal norms, lack of security for women, unjust laws) – Lack of psychological security (disturbing news, lack of civil liberties, suppression of protests, unsafe social environment) – Fear of child's death in civil unrest – Media and social media discourse discouraging childbearing – Negative societal attitudes toward having more than one child	Non-supportive societal environment
8	Husband's unwillingness to have children – Lack of support from mothers and mothers-in-law in child-rearing (especially for second or later children) – Family acceptance and encouragement of childlessness or fewer children – Colleagues, friends, and relatives mocking families with more than one child – Resistance and jealousy from older children toward younger siblings	Non-supportive social network for women
9	Distinguishing infertility from voluntary childlessness – Acceptance of the norm of childlessness – Acceptance of the single-child norm – Moral acceptance of abortion – Lack of gender preference for children – Parental age – Satisfaction of maternal and paternal instincts through previous children	Changes in fertility behavior
10	Physical and psychological unreadiness for childbirth – Prioritization of family resources (financial and non-financial) for existing children rather than new ones – Postponing childbirth until economic stability, homeownership, job security, extensive travel, or sufficient savings – Planning childbirth after migration – Perceived personal inadequacy in parenting – Declining physical and mental capacity of parents	Idealism in childbearing
11	Physical consequences: bleeding, pain, fever and chills, headaches, abdominal pain, infections, menstrual irregularities – Psychological consequences: fear of future pregnancy, fear of infertility, reduced sexual desire, distress and regret – Emotional grief over terminating a pregnancy – Satisfaction from preventing the birth of an unwanted child – Other consequences: accepting the risk of permanent childlessness or having only one child	Consequences of abortion

1- Tendency Toward Definitive Childlessness, Single-Child Preference, or Low Fertility

The interviewees reported spending a significant amount of time deliberating between having or not having a child after discovering an unintended pregnancy. The decision to undergo an abortion was particularly difficult for women who had already experienced motherhood. Childless women expressed concerns that abortion might compromise their ability to conceive in the future. The interviews revealed a convergence in attitudes among couples in Group One toward the notion that "fewer children mean a better life."

Interviewee 8: "I really wasn't ready for motherhood... We had just bought a house and were drowning in debt... My husband was very worried about divine retribution; he kept saying that God would punish us and never grant us another child... I was also scared of the sin... but we really had no choice." (*Spousal agreement on postponing childbearing*)

Interviewee 12: "We had originally planned to have three children... But the day I found out I was pregnant, I felt like I had been bitten by a snake and was back to square one... Neither of us wanted another child anymore." (*Spousal agreement on one-child sufficiency*)

2- Women's Employment

It appears that women's employment is a significant deterrent to childbearing.

Interviewee 3: "My husband has a good income. But I refuse to be financially dependent on him. I've always worked... Earning my own income is even more important to me than having a husband." (*Prioritizing employment and women's independence*)

Interviewee 6: "I can't quit my job. My husband's income isn't enough for the life I want... Maybe if I were a housewife, I wouldn't have had an abortion... But my lifestyle is such that keeping my job is more important than keeping a child." (*Insufficient husband's income – Prioritizing employment over childbearing*)

3- Shift in Women's Perspectives on Childbearing

The interviews indicate a significant transformation in women's attitudes toward childbearing. Respondents criticized their mothers for dedicating their entire lives and well-being to their children. It seems that these women have chosen to prioritize their own happiness rather than having a

child to whom they would have to dedicate all their financial, physical, and emotional resources.

Interviewee 1: "Whenever I complain about how hard motherhood is, my mom says, 'That's why heaven lies beneath a mother's feet'... Honestly, I didn't need two heavens under my feet." (*Decline in religious beliefs – Declining role of families in couples' lives*)

Interviewee 3: "I'm not saying motherhood isn't joyful—it certainly is. But there are millions of other joys in the world. Have I experienced all of them? No. So, this is just one of those joys." (*De-sanctification of motherhood*)

Interviewee 12: "Even now, when I visit my hometown, my mother—despite having undergone heart surgery—still gives me homemade tomato paste, herbs, and pickled lemons to bring back... She thinks being an exemplary mother means doing these things... I can't be an 'ideal mother' just by handing my child jars of homemade preserves." (*Relativity of the ideal mother concept*)

4- Non-Supportive Marital Environment

The respondents believe that "a child is like an asset: the father owns it, but the mother is solely responsible for maintaining it." They either felt exhausted by this responsibility or believed that their current circumstances were not conducive to taking on such a major obligation.

Interviewee 1: "So many couples get divorced these days that sometimes I wonder if I'll be next... I think about divorce a lot, and well, one child of divorce is better than two." (*Doubts about the continuation of marital life*)

Interviewee 12: "We both work. But who has to pick up the child from daycare in the afternoon? Me. Who has to take leave when the child is sick? Me. If the daycare's roof starts leaking, who has to take the child to work with them? Me." (*Burden of childbearing on women*)

5- Hardships of Childbearing

All respondents pointed out the challenges and hardships associated with childbearing.

Interviewee 8: "If I have to go on a work assignment, who will look after the baby? When I get home at 9 or 10 PM, if I have a child, when will I get to rest? When will I get to live my life?" (*Conflict between childbearing and women's goals*)

Interviewee 12: "During pregnancy, I gained 30 kilos, and I still can't lose the weight. If I gain another 30 kilos

with a second pregnancy, I won't be able to walk—I'll have to roll around instead." (*Physical difficulties*)

6- Economic Challenges

The high cost of living, particularly the expenses associated with raising children, was a common concern among all respondents.

Interviewee 16: "All of a family's income goes toward the children. Otherwise, what expenses do a husband and wife really have? It's the child who needs food, daycare, medicine, doctors, classes, birthday parties—everything. The cost of raising a child for a year is the same as the cost of throwing a wedding." (*Financial costs of raising children*)

7- Non-Supportive Societal Environment for Childbearing

Respondents provided numerous examples illustrating how Iranian government policies, despite advocating for childbearing in rhetoric, are in practice discouraging. They pointed to movies and TV series in which no family has more than two children, with large families only appearing as elderly grandparents. Three respondents referenced the deaths of young men and women during protests such as those in 2009, 2013, and the "Women, Life, Freedom" movement, expressing their fear of losing a child in similar circumstances. They also believed that the cultural and social environment of the country reinforces the norm of having fewer children, associating it with social prestige. Two respondents with two children admitted feeling embarrassed about the idea of having a third child. Environmental issues such as pollution, traffic, and inadequate healthcare services for children were also cited as reasons for avoiding childbearing. The respondents argued that instead of solving these obstacles to childbearing, Iranian policymakers simply say: "Give birth!"

8- Non-Supportive Social Network for Women

Childless respondents stated that they were not pressured by their husbands or families to have children. The mothers and mothers-in-law of four respondents with children explicitly stated that they lacked the ability to care for additional grandchildren and that the decision to have another child was entirely up to the couple, provided they could take full responsibility for the child.

Interviewee 6: "I couldn't even bring myself to tell my colleagues that I was pregnant. Both men and women would mock me. Last year, when one of my coworkers got pregnant

with her second child, I overheard people saying we should get her a pack of 24 condoms as a baby shower gift." (*Negative societal attitudes toward having more than one child*)

9- Changes in Fertility Behavior

This category emerged from concepts that illustrate: (1) respondents underwent abortion despite believing it was a sin (two respondents believed abortion was not sinful, six believed it was, and one considered it an unforgivable sin); (2) there was no preference for the gender of the child (except in one case); and (3) respondents accepted the fertility norms they associated with themselves. Childless women accepted the risks of permanent childlessness, while others proceeded with abortion despite knowing the challenges of raising an only child.

Interviewee 6: "After thinking about it, I realized that the sin of abortion is less than the sin of having another child." (*Acceptance of abortion as a sin*)

Interviewee 8: "Maybe if I had tried to conceive and failed, I wouldn't be able to talk so easily about accepting a life without children. But when you truly don't want a child, everything changes." (*Distinguishing infertility from voluntary childlessness*)

10- Idealism in Childbearing

Another factor that made abortion easier for the respondents was their idealistic approach to parenting. They described the necessary conditions for having a child as so unattainable that they would not be able to meet them for a long time, if ever.

Interviewee 13: "Maybe if I buy a three-bedroom house and save enough money so that I don't have to worry about their future, I'll consider having a second child." (*Postponing childbearing until economic readiness*)

11- Consequences of Abortion

Four respondents deeply regretted their abortions. While few mentioned physical complications (such as fever, bleeding, and pain), almost all described emotional distress, including prolonged crying, sadness, grief, insomnia, and depression. Three reported having dreams about the child they aborted, and three felt deep sorrow whenever they saw a child the age their own would have been. When asked, "If you could go back, would you still choose abortion?" five answered "Yes," three said "I don't know," and one said "No."

Group Two: This group consisted of eight respondents whose pregnancies resulted from extramarital relationships. Two respondents had one child, while the remaining six were childless.

Table 3

Concepts and Categories Derived from the Eight Interviews in Group Two

No.	Subcategories	Main Categories (Themes)
1	A correct but exhausted marriage – A mistaken marriage – Revenge against the husband – Hatred toward the husband – Sexual and emotional novelty-seeking – The right to experience love – Inclination toward non-committal relationships – Seduction by men	Presence of an extramarital relationship
2	Dissatisfaction with marital life – Lack of excitement in the marriage – Poor quality of love – A monotonous life – Agreement on hidden divorce – Lack of communication skills with the spouse – Significant personality differences – Diverging future goals – Lack of shared objectives – Lack of shared recreation – Daily routine – Husband's lack of attractiveness – Psychological pressure – Inability to tolerate the spouse and in-laws – Exhausting married life – Fear of missing out on life opportunities – Constant arguments and disputes with the spouse – Forced endurance of the marriage – Indifference toward the spouse – Inability to resolve family conflicts – Financial exploitation of women – Financial difficulties – Lack of children – Preference for definitive childlessness	Dysfunctionality of marital life
3	Lack of sexual intimacy with the husband – Neglect of women's sexual pleasure – Traditional views on sexual relationships – Lack of sexual enjoyment with the husband – Poor-quality sexual relations – Repetitive and monotonous sexual encounters – Feelings of loneliness – Feeling ignored – Feelings of humiliation – Sense of worthlessness – Feeling unattractive – Negative self-evaluation	Suppression of sexual and emotional needs for a prolonged period
4	Infidelity of men – Dishonesty of men – Neglect by men – Absence of men – Addiction to alcohol and drugs – Distrust toward the husband	Extramarital relationships of husbands
5	Decriminalization of extramarital relationships – Decriminalization of abortion – De-sanctification of concepts (motherhood, being a good wife, love, fidelity, marital sexual exclusivity) – Declining role of families in couples' lives – Irrelevance of religious teachings in contemporary society – Religion as a restrictive barrier	Conflict with traditional and religious socialization
6	Marriage as a life sentence – Motherhood as a life sentence – Nihilism toward childbearing – Nihilism toward the role of motherhood – Prioritization of individual quality of life – Employment as empowerment	Shift in women's attitudinal and behavioral framework
7	Personal barriers (fear of initiating divorce – Concerns about the stigma of being a divorced woman) – Non-personal barriers (having children, husband's unwillingness to separate, concerns about parental reaction, legal barriers to divorce, dissatisfaction and distrust toward the country's judicial system, professional consequences of divorce, societal perception of divorced women)	Barriers to divorce
8	Feeling valued – Sense of sexual attractiveness – Indescribable sexual pleasure – Quality and frequency of foreplay – Quality and frequency of sexual intercourse – Experience of new emotions – Receiving affection – Enjoyment of seduction – Fulfilling the need for conversation with a man – Excitement of a secret relationship – Self-perception as courageous – Emotional comfort – Increased self-confidence – Feeling lively – Discovering a new self – Filling leisure time – Forgetting a mistaken marriage	Positive functions of extramarital relationships
9	Normalization of extramarital relationships in society – Normalization of abortion in society – Awareness of extramarital affairs and abortions among friends, colleagues, and relatives – Normalization of extramarital relationships in society (social media, cinema, TV series) – Avoidance of judgmental individuals – Shifting responsibility onto the husband and absolving oneself	Interaction with peer social networks
10	Physical consequences: (bleeding; fever; dizziness; nausea; pain; physical weakness; menstrual irregularities; loss of sexual desire; fear of sexual intercourse) – Psychological consequences (anxiety about the unintended pregnancy being exposed, loneliness, negative emotions, sleep disturbances) – Other consequences: Breaking the taboo of unintended pregnancy	Consequences of abortion

1- Presence of an Extramarital Relationship

A significant portion of each interview was dedicated to recounting the story of the respondents' failed marriages and the circumstances that led to their extramarital relationships.

Interviewee 2: "I got married with logic, my parents' approval, and after a lot of research. But I believe everything has an expiration date. Our marriage has expired too." (*A correct but exhausted marriage*)

Interviewee 7: "My husband has been cheating for years. He thinks only men are capable of infidelity. He basically believes women are incapable of doing anything, including cheating. Now that I'm sitting here, I think a non-committal

relationship is the best kind of relationship, and my husband was actually doing the right thing all along." (*Revenge against the husband – Inclination toward non-committal relationships*)

2- Dysfunctionality of Marital Life

All respondents believed that their marital lives had effectively ended and that there was no hope for improvement. Throughout the interviews, they repeatedly mentioned that their failed marriages imposed significant psychological distress on them and that pretending to be happy in front of society and their families made them feel even worse.

Interviewee 9: "He always says he has no money. He borrows money from me multiple times a month. He constantly screws up at work. He doesn't know how to show affection. We have a dull and useless life that looks appealing from the outside but is rotten at the core." (*Financial problems – Lack of excitement in marital life – Monotony in life*)

Interviewee 11: "We don't argue. We don't talk at all, so there's nothing to argue about. We each live our own separate lives, but we've agreed to attend family and social gatherings together." (*Lack of communication skills with the spouse – Agreement on hidden divorce*)

3- Suppression of Sexual and Emotional Needs for a Prolonged Period

All respondents stated that the absence of sexual relations or poor-quality sexual experiences with their husbands was one of the key factors leading them to seek extramarital relationships. Five respondents reported that they had not engaged in any sexual activity with their husbands for a long time (ranging from two to fifteen years) and that they slept in separate bedrooms.

Interviewee 2: "We have sex every week, but it's always the same. My husband thinks we're too old for variety. Whenever I bring up the idea of trying something new, he humiliates me and asks if I think I'm some kind of immoral woman." (*Poor-quality sexual relations – Traditional views on sex*)

Interviewee 4: "We haven't had any physical intimacy in fifteen years. We don't even kiss each other on Nowruz. It's ridiculous, but even when we watch a movie together, we make sure to sit apart." (*Lack of sexual intimacy*)

Interviewee 7: "My husband never believed in female pleasure during sex. Not now that he's wealthy—he never did, even in the beginning. The last time we had sex after a long time, I felt horrible afterward. The feeling of being used by your husband is far worse than being used by another man." (*Neglect of female sexual pleasure – Poor-quality sexual relations – Feeling ignored*)

Interviewee 14: "My husband has sexual dysfunction. He knew he had a problem, and so did his family, but they hid it from me. He refuses to get treatment. He says, 'Is life just about sex? Focus on what you have.'" (*Lack of sexual intimacy*)

Interviewee 17: "Two years ago, we went on a trip to Russia. On the first day, he just told me to meet him at a certain time on the last day to check out of the hotel. We were there for eight days. The only time we saw each other was occasionally at breakfast. It was the worst trip of my life. The loneliness was suffocating." (*Feeling worthless – Negative self-evaluation*)

4- Extramarital Relationships of Husbands

Four respondents were aware that their husbands were also engaged in extramarital relationships.

Interviewee 10: "He's promised a hundred times that it would be the last time, but I've caught him again. He drinks so much and smokes so much weed that he forgets where he was or what he told me." (*Distrust toward the husband – Addiction to alcohol and drugs*)

5- Conflict with Traditional and Religious Socialization

Respondents expressed frustration with societal and religious expectations that demand women to be flawless in their roles as daughters, mothers, and wives while ignoring their rights as individuals.

Interviewee 2: "Every time I complained about my life, my mother told me, 'That's why heaven lies beneath a mother's feet. That's why a woman's struggles in marriage are as virtuous as fighting in the path of God.' One day, I decided to return heaven to God and walked away from the battlefield back to my own small world." (*De-sanctification of the concept of the ideal mother/wife*)

Interviewee 4: "My mother suspected I was pregnant. She told me a hundred times that if a woman aborts her child, the heavens will tremble. I had an abortion, and not a single brick fell from the heavens." (*Decriminalization of abortion*)

Interviewee 7: "They drilled it into our heads that if a woman has a relationship with someone other than her husband, she will face divine punishment—she'll go bald, get leprosy, be hanged by her hair in the fires of hell, and have molten lead poured down her throat. One day, I asked myself why these punishments only apply to women. Why do unfaithful men seem to look younger every day?" (*Decriminalization of extramarital relationships*)

Interviewee 17: "My mother suspects I'm in a relationship with someone. But she never says anything. She knows that if she does, I'll leave and never look back." (*Diminishing role of families in couples' lives*)

6- Shift in Women's Attitudinal and Behavioral Framework

All respondents mentioned that they would have had an abortion even if their pregnancies had resulted from their husbands. Most believed that motherhood would deprive them of future opportunities, such as career prospects, entertainment, travel, and youthful pleasures.

Interviewee 9: "Does a person experience every pleasure life has to offer? No. So, let's assume motherhood is one of those pleasures—I just don't want to experience it." (*Nihilism toward motherhood*)

Interviewee 10: "Instead of bringing another person into this world and exhausting myself trying to make them happy, I choose to focus on my own happiness." (*Prioritization of individual quality of life*)

7- Barriers to Divorce

All respondents had contemplated divorce multiple times, planned for it, and then reconsidered. Two of them stated that they think about divorce almost daily and severely criticize themselves for lacking the courage to proceed. This category was divided into two subcategories:

- **Personal barriers to divorce**
- **Non-personal barriers to divorce**

All respondents stated that non-personal barriers were more significant, with societal and workplace pressures on divorced women being the main deterrents to separation.

Interviewee 2: "A divorced woman in our country struggles to work. She either has to fight off her male colleagues and managers like a rabid dog all day, or she has to accept everything without resistance." (*Professional consequences of divorce*)

Interviewee 4: "I'm terrified of going to court... of the judge, of the lawyers, of everything... but mostly of my mother. When my sister got divorced a few years ago, my mom didn't let her into the house for two years—even though she had a child." (*Fear of initiating divorce – Concern over parental reaction*)

Interviewee 11: "My niece got divorced a few years ago. It took her three years just to get it officially recorded in her

documents." (*Dissatisfaction with the country's judicial system*)

8- Positive Functions of Extramarital Relationships

Respondents described their marriages as lacking fulfillment, and their extramarital relationships compensated for these deficiencies, providing numerous benefits. However, they identified two negative aspects: (1) fear of exposure to their children, spouses, families, and workplaces; and (2) negative self-evaluation. Half of the respondents admitted to sometimes hating themselves for lacking the courage to leave their marriages, while the other half claimed to have overcome this self-reproach.

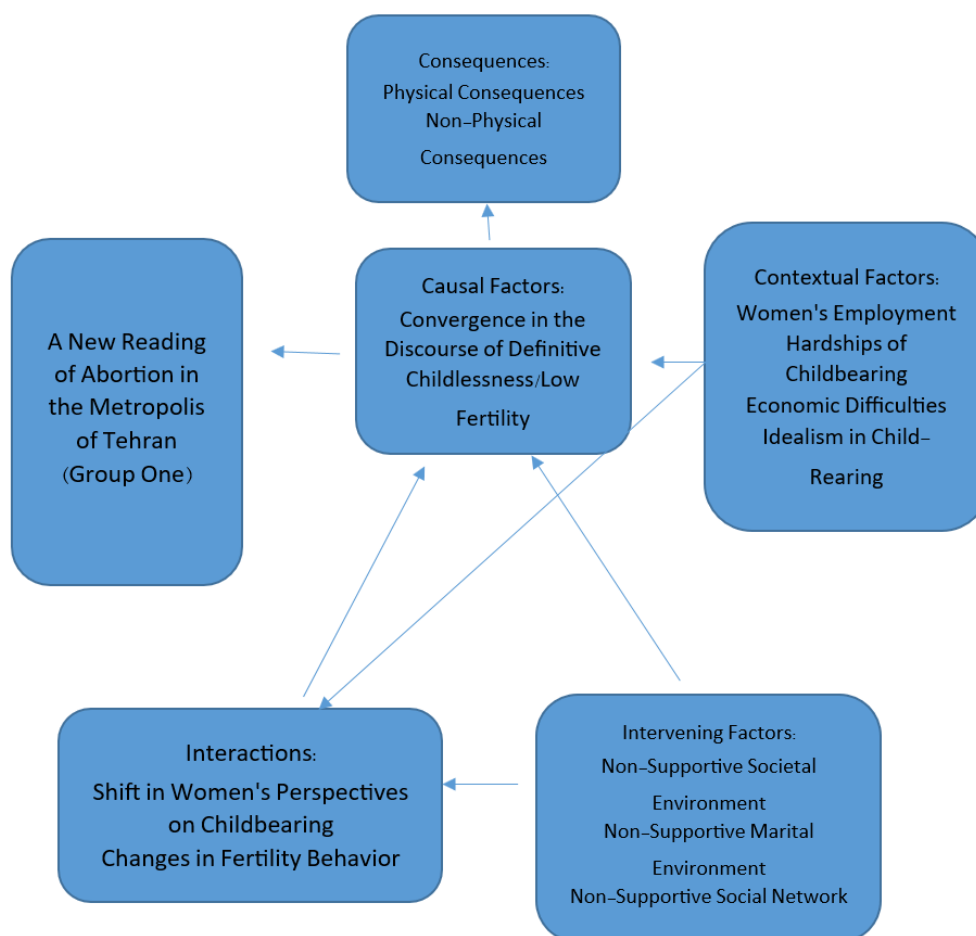
Interviewee 7: "For me, the thrill of secrecy is even greater than the pleasure of sex. The feeling of outsmarting a man who thinks he's invincible gives me power." (*Excitement of a secret relationship – Self-perception as courageous*)

Interviewee 9: "Before this relationship, I had completely lost my self-confidence. I started believing I wasn't sexually attractive and that my husband was justified in not desiring me. This relationship made me a new person." (*Increased self-confidence – Discovering a new self*)

Paradigmatic Model of Group One: The primary reason for the respondents' decision to undergo abortion in Group One was their convergence in the discourse of definitive childlessness or low fertility (*causal factor*). The hardships of childbearing, economic difficulties, women's employment, and their idealistic approach to child-rearing (*contextual factors*), alongside the non-supportive environment of society, marital life, and women's social networks (*intervening factors*), contributed to shaping the discourse of definitive childlessness or low fertility. The central category derived from this study is "A New Reading of Abortion," which is characterized by interactions and actions such as changes in fertility behavior and shifts in women's perspectives on childbearing, leading to both physical and psychological consequences for the actors involved.

Figure 1

Paradigmatic Model of Group One

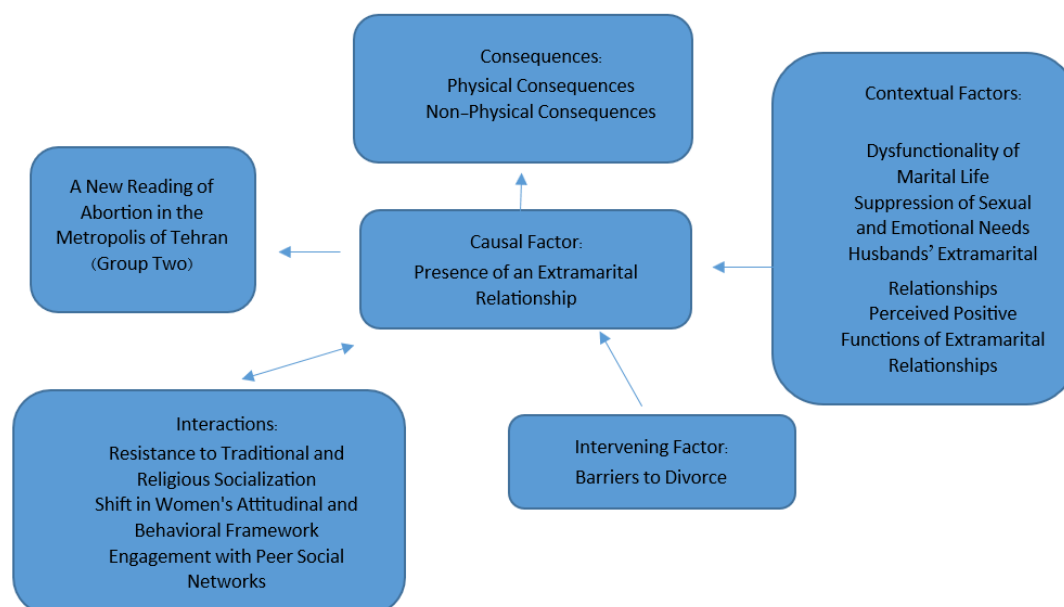


Paradigmatic Model of Group Two: The presence of an extramarital relationship (causal factor) was the primary reason for unintended pregnancy and the main factor behind the decision of Group Two respondents to undergo abortion. The dysfunctionality of marital life, prolonged suppression of sexual and emotional needs, husbands' extramarital affairs, and the perceived positive functions of extramarital relationships (contextual factors), combined with barriers to divorce (intervening factor), facilitated and reinforced the

formation of extramarital relationships among the respondents. The core category derived from this study is "A New Reading of Abortion," which is characterized by interactions and actions such as engagement with peer social networks, shifts in women's attitudinal and behavioral frameworks, and resistance to traditional and religious socialization, leading to both physical and non-physical consequences for the actors involved.

Figure 2

Paradigmatic Model of Group Two



4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that abortion in the metropolis of Tehran is shaped by two distinct narratives: (1) abortion as a choice within the discourse of definitive childlessness or low fertility and (2) abortion as a necessity resulting from extramarital pregnancies. These two categories emerge from broader transformations in family structures, marital relationships, and women's reproductive attitudes, reflecting Tehran's entry into the second demographic transition, as indicated by previous studies (7). The results highlight a convergence with Van de Kaa's theory of the second demographic transition, emphasizing changes in family dynamics, fertility control, and childbearing patterns in modern societies (8).

A central finding of this study is the decline of traditional family functions among participants, particularly in relation to sexual, emotional, economic, and reproductive roles. In theory, marriage is expected to fulfill multiple needs, including sexual fulfillment, emotional security, social legitimacy, financial stability, spiritual growth, and reproduction. However, interviews indicate that, apart from its social function (providing marital status and social respectability), the institution of marriage has lost most of its other functions for the respondents.

Sexual dissatisfaction was widely reported, with many respondents stating that they had either ceased all sexual relations with their spouses or found their marital sex life to be unfulfilling. Those engaged in extramarital affairs reported significantly higher levels of sexual satisfaction.

Emotionally, respondents frequently described feelings of loneliness, a lack of inner peace, unhappiness, and diminished self-confidence. Women in the first group, despite having more structured marriages, did not express deep marital satisfaction or a sense of romantic fulfillment. Those in the second group, whose marriages were dysfunctional, openly articulated their psychological distress, reinforcing prior findings that many Iranian women in strained marriages experience emotional isolation, leading to depressive symptoms and extramarital relationships (6, 9).

The financial function of marriage also appears to be weakening. Interviews revealed that some working women earn more than their husbands and, while they contribute to household expenses, they perceive financial responsibility as a male duty. This has led to accusations of male irresponsibility and dissatisfaction with marital financial dynamics. Other respondents stated that they bear the full financial burden of their lives and even share travel expenses with their spouses.

Religious functions of marriage also appeared largely irrelevant to respondents. Apart from one interviewee, none

considered marriage to enhance their moral or religious standing. Many respondents explicitly rejected the idea that marriage fosters chastity, arguing that marriage often provides a pretext for unethical behavior. This aligns with prior research which found that younger generations of Iranian women increasingly perceive marriage as a pragmatic rather than sacred institution (4, 7, 10, 11).

Finally, reproductive functions of marriage have significantly declined among respondents, as evidenced by widespread convergence in the discourse of definitive childlessness, single-child preference, or low fertility. The declining emphasis on childbearing reflects broader demographic shifts in Iran, as noted in Abbasi-Shavazi and Mandaqari's (2009) study on declining fertility rates and shifting reproductive norms.

The qualitative interviews illustrate that Tehran's women born in the 1980s (1360s in the Persian calendar) have developed unique lifestyles and perspectives compared to previous generations. Seven major themes emerged in their discourse:

1. **Diminished Family Influence:** Respondents attributed many of their disappointments to their families and relatives. Although they acknowledged that their families still exert some influence over them, they believed this influence had significantly weakened over time.
2. **Religious Ambivalence:** Respondents exhibited clear uncertainty about religious beliefs. They had neither completely abandoned their faith nor followed religious doctrines unquestioningly, unlike their parents' generation.
3. **Changing Attitudes Toward Sexuality:** Many respondents criticized their lack of sexual education, stating that discussions about sex were taboo in their families. They reported entering marriage with minimal sexual knowledge, leading to long-term sexual dissatisfaction. This supports Khosravi's (2015) study, which found that poor sexual education in Iranian families contributes to marital dissatisfaction.
4. **De-Sanctification of Marriage:** Most respondents viewed marriage as a societal competition in their youth—who could marry first? They felt pressured by their families to marry quickly after school or university. Although they remained married, they increasingly viewed marriage as a flawed institution that had wasted their youth. This supports prior findings that younger Iranian women perceive marriage as a social obligation rather than a personal choice (12, 13).
5. **Rejection of the "Ideal Mother" and "Ideal Wife" Roles:** Respondents rejected the cultural expectation that women should sacrifice themselves for their husbands and children. They no longer aspired to be "ideal mothers" or "ideal wives" but instead sought a balanced and independent identity. This aligns with prior research on shifting gender roles among Iranian women (12, 14).
6. **Life as a Competitive Marathon:** Many respondents felt trapped in a societal "life marathon," where they were expected to complete various milestones—education, marriage, career, homeownership, and motherhood—without ever pausing to reflect on their true desires. This constant pressure contributed to their reluctance to have children, as they saw childbearing as yet another compulsory milestone rather than a personal choice.
7. **Moral Flexibility Regarding Sin:** Respondents generally considered abortion and extramarital affairs to be immoral but did not express regret for their actions. They acknowledged their actions as sins but also forgave themselves, indicating a shift toward personal moral autonomy rather than strict religious adherence.

The study also highlights critical transformations in attitudes toward fertility. Two key findings emerged: (1) the decision to undergo abortion was more difficult for mothers than for childless women, and (2) regret over abortion was more pronounced among women in more stable marriages.

Childless respondents fell into two categories: those with relatively stable marriages, who were unsure about future childbearing but did not rule it out, and those in unhappy marriages, who were content with remaining childless. Among those with children, all preferred fewer but better-supported children, prioritizing quality over quantity in their reproductive choices.

This study confirms Saifoory et al.'s (2019) findings that Iranian women increasingly view childbearing as an elective decision rather than a societal or religious obligation (9). It also aligns with Kaboudi et al.'s (2013) study, which found that economic improvements alone do not increase fertility rates, as women's childbearing choices are influenced by broader lifestyle considerations (15).

This study is limited by its sample size and focus on Tehran. The 17 respondents cannot fully represent all married women of the 1980s generation in Tehran, let alone Iran as a whole. Additionally, the qualitative nature of this study limits its generalizability, though it provides in-depth insights into the lived experiences of participants.

Future studies should compare fertility attitudes across different generations and geographic locations to explore whether similar trends exist outside Tehran. Longitudinal studies could also examine how women's attitudes toward abortion evolve over time. Additionally, future research should further investigate the role of extramarital relationships in shaping reproductive decisions.

Policymakers should acknowledge that Tehran has entered the second demographic transition, making voluntary childbearing a defining feature of modern Iranian family planning. Instead of criminalizing abortion, authorities should treat it as a social phenomenon and focus on preventing unintended pregnancies. Greater access to sexual education and contraception would be more effective in reducing abortion rates than restrictive laws. Additionally, medical authorities should prioritize safe abortion access to minimize physical and psychological harm to women. Addressing economic, emotional, and sexual dissatisfaction in marriages could also reduce abortion rates by improving family stability and childbearing desirability.

Authors' Contributions

Not applicable.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethics Considerations

The study placed a high emphasis on ethical considerations. Informed consent obtained from all participants, ensuring they are fully aware of the nature of the study and their role in it. Confidentiality strictly maintained, with data anonymized to protect individual privacy. The study adhered to the ethical guidelines for research with human subjects as outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. Ethical considerations included obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity, and avoiding any harm to participants.

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