

How to cite this article:
Bozari, S., Salimi Ghaleh-ei, E., Chalani, A., Bakhshi, Z., & Fattahi, F. M. (2027). Social Feedback on Marriage Incentive Policies (With a Focus on the 2021 Law on Population Youth and Family Support). *Journal of Historical Research, Law and Policy, 5*(6), 1-18. https://doi.org/10.61838/jhrlp.468

Article history:
Original Research

Dates:
Submission Date: 07 July 2026
Revision Date: 03 October 2026
Acceptance Date: 10 October 2026
First Pubication Date: 10 November 2026
Final Publication Date: 01 June 2027

Social Feedback on Marriage Incentive Policies (With a Focus on the 2021 Law on Population Youth and Family Support)

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the marriage rate in Iran has declined substantially. In its most recent legislative effort to increase the population and mitigate certain social problems, the Iranian legislature has adopted a range of policies aimed at incentivizing marriage. Using a survey research design and drawing on both library-based studies and data obtained through a questionnaire, the present study seeks to assess public feedback regarding the effectiveness of approved programs and policies intended to reduce the age at marriage. The findings indicate that Iranian society regards both the educational system's approach to teaching skills required for married life and the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting's approach to promoting marriage as effective and is generally supportive of their outcomes and consequences. Nevertheless, Iranian society is largely opposed to marriage at an early age or child marriage. Accordingly, the prevailing social expectation is that policies designed to reduce the age at marriage should be implemented in a manner that does not lead to child marriage. The principal conclusion and proposition of this article is that such policies should be continued while establishing a minimum legal age for marriage and simultaneously pursuing cultural development and public awareness-raising regarding the adverse consequences of marriage at an early age.

Keywords: *Child Marriage, Law on Population Youth and Family Support, Marriage, Childbearing, Vehicle Allocation Scheme*

Introduction

The declining marriage rate is becoming a national problem. According to statistics from the Civil Registration Organization, the number of registered marriages has followed a downward trend in recent years. This situation is influenced by two issues: first, the complete withdrawal of some young people from marriage, and second, the postponement of marriage. Both issues are rooted in economic and cultural factors. Some young people who are willing to marry lack favorable economic conditions for doing so, while another group, influenced by Western culture, has adopted new lifestyles and abandoned marriage in its conventional sense. In this regard, the 2021 Law on Family Support and Population Youth has introduced a range of cultural, educational, and economic measures.

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Drawing on library-based studies and data extracted from a questionnaire, the present study seeks to assess societal feedback regarding the effectiveness of approved programs and policies aimed at reducing the age at marriage. The study first identifies the policies stipulated in the 2021 Law on Population Youth for reducing the age at marriage and subsequently evaluates societal perceptions of the effectiveness of these programs and policies. Using a survey method and examining data obtained from 103 questionnaires comprising nine questions distributed among members of the general public, the study specifically addresses the following questions: To what extent are government policies aimed at reducing the age at marriage effective? What are the principal social concerns and demands regarding these policies? The study subsequently discusses the arguments advanced by proponents and opponents of early marriage, provides a typology of measures designed to reduce the age at marriage and encourage childbearing, and finally analyzes the findings obtained from the questionnaire.

Research Background

No study has specifically examined marriage incentive policies in Iran; however, previous research has addressed the phenomenon of delayed marriage. Among these studies is the book *Sociology of the Family (With an Emphasis on Delayed Marriage in Iran)*, authored by Ghasem Oveisi Fardoui in 2016. In 2007, Abbas Rajabi, in the article “Age at Marriage: Factors Contributing to Its Increase and Strategies for Its Reduction,” addressed the increasing age at marriage and its adverse consequences as one of the major social problems and ultimately proposed strategies for reducing the age at marriage. In the 2011 article “Causes of the Increasing Age at Marriage Among Girls,” Karam Habibpour Gatabi and Gholamreza Ghaffari examined indicators associated with the rising age at marriage. Likewise, in the 2019 article “The Meaning Construction of Delayed Marriage Based on Grounded Theory,” Shahla Bagheri and colleagues identified the causes of increased age at marriage and delayed marriage among girls. In the 2021 article “Challenges in Implementing Pro-Natalist Incentive Policies: A Qualitative Study in Isfahan,” Farideh Shams Ghahfarokhi and colleagues examined citizens’ evaluations of policies intended to increase childbearing. Furthermore, in 2018, Maliheh Doustmohammadi and Mojtaba Ghaffari examined the jurisprudential and legal dimensions of the age at marriage, marriage of minors, and its related rulings. In the 2023 article “Causes and Factors Contributing to the Increasing Age at Marriage and Declining Marriage in Iran,” Abolghasem Shamsabadi identified the relevant factors and strategies for reducing the age at marriage. Regarding the 2021 Law on Population Youth, Soheila Haji Norouz and Abdolhamid Sadegh Joula, in 2024, studied and analyzed the law and the challenges associated with its implementation. Several studies have also adopted an economic approach to examining the effects of economic factors on marriage, including the 2016 article “An Examination of Economic and Cultural Factors Affecting the Age at Marriage in Iran,” by Ebrahim Altejaei and Mina Azizizadeh, and the 2011 article “An Examination of Factors Affecting Women’s Age at Marriage in Iran: An Economic Approach,” authored by Vahid Zarrabi and Seyed Farrokh Mostafavi.

The innovative aspect of the present study is that, whereas most previous studies have examined the effects of different factors on the age at marriage, the present research is distinguished by first identifying marriage incentive policies, with a particular focus on the 2021 Law on Population Youth, and subsequently examining societal feedback regarding these policies.

1. Marriage in Statistical Perspective

An examination of the age pattern of married individuals by sex across censuses demonstrates differences between men and women. For example, the proportion of married women under the age of 30 has been higher than that of men in the same age group, indicating that women generally marry earlier. Conversely, during middle age, approximately from 45 or 50 years onward, the proportion of married men gradually becomes higher than that of married women. A sociological explanation for this phenomenon lies in the different post-separation behaviors of men and women following divorce or the death of a spouse. A greater proportion of men who become unmarried due to death or divorce remarry, whereas women in middle and later adulthood tend to display a lower inclination toward remarriage following divorce or widowhood. A comparison of the mean age at marriage between urban and rural areas shows that, throughout the period under examination, the gender difference in age at first marriage was generally greater in urban than in rural areas. In 2006, the difference in mean age at first marriage between men and women in urban areas was 1.1 years greater than that in rural areas. In 2016, however, the gender difference in the age at marriage in rural areas was 0.1 years greater than in urban areas. Overall, recent years have witnessed a convergence in the age pattern of marriage between urban and rural areas; nevertheless, a significant difference between men and women remains. Examination of the ages of husbands and wives at three time points—2006, 2011, and 2016—shows that in both 2006 and 2011, the highest frequency of marriage among both women and men occurred in the 20–24 age group. In 2016, the highest frequency among women remained in the 20–24 age group, whereas among men it shifted to the 25–29 age group, a pattern consistent with census-based estimates of the mean age at first marriage. The proportion of marriages involving persons younger than 15 years in 2006, 2011, and 2016 was 4.4%, 4.6%, and 5.6%, respectively. At all three time points, more than 95% of these marriages involved girls. (1)

2. Economic Policies Encouraging Childbearing in Other Countries

Since the 1960s, Western industrialized societies have experienced substantial changes in family formation, marriage, and fertility, such that low fertility has now become a structural concern in most European countries. (2) Changes in the family and gender roles observed in 1988, 1994, and 2002 provided a unique opportunity to analyze changing attitudes toward marriage and children in six countries: Austria, West Germany, the United Kingdom, Ireland, the Netherlands, and the United States. Despite relatively similar sociopolitical systems and comparable levels of economic development, these countries exhibit considerable demographic differences. The United States and Ireland have had the highest fertility rates among Western industrialized countries, whereas Germany and Austria have had some of the lowest fertility rates in Europe. Germany has also displayed one of the highest proportions of nonmarital childbearing in Europe, while a relatively high mean age at first marriage and first pregnancy has been characteristic of the Netherlands. (2)

Today, many countries adopt family policies that positively encourage marriage and population growth and have increasingly oriented their policymaking toward marriage incentives and higher birth rates. The following section examines selected measures and incentives adopted by several countries in response to population decline.

Germany: Germany's fertility rate has followed a downward trajectory over recent decades. Data from the German Federal Statistical Office indicate that approximately 654,300 births were registered in 2025, representing a 3.4% decline from the preceding year and the lowest number recorded since 1946. (2) The total fertility rate in

2025 was 1.46 children per woman, remaining substantially below the replacement level of 2.1. (2) At the same time, the number of deaths was approximately 1.01 million, resulting in a natural birth deficit of approximately 352,000. (2) Although Germany has experienced positive population growth in recent years through measures such as immigration, many experts maintain that, excluding migrants, the country continues to face population decline and that immigration is the principal driver of population growth. In Germany, the welfare policy supporting families is characterized as “family-friendly” and encompasses numerous statutory benefits, including parental leave, maternity leave for pregnant women, childcare, family planning, pregnancy counseling, parental allowances, support for employed mothers, and financial support for children, young people, and older adults. Pregnant women cannot work during the final six weeks of pregnancy unless they expressly indicate that they wish to do so, and mothers are prohibited from employment for eight weeks following childbirth. In cases of premature delivery or multiple births, this period is extended to 12 weeks. The maternity protection period before and after childbirth is at least 14 weeks. Maternity protection legislation applies to all employed women, and maternity leave is calculated from six weeks before childbirth or from the date of birth, with the entire period being paid. Pregnant employees are prohibited from working more than 8.5 hours per day, performing overtime work, working night shifts, or working on Sundays; medical examinations conducted during working hours are counted as working time. Furthermore, when total income exceeds the maximum statutory maternity benefit, employers are required to pay the difference as a supplementary allowance, while the federal government provides maternity benefits equivalent to sickness benefits for women who are not members of an insurance fund. Between 2009 and 2014, the Federal Ministry of Finance and the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs developed major family- and marriage-oriented benefits. Nevertheless, the German Family Association has characterized recent demographic statistics as an “alarming wake-up call,” attributing them to decades of structural discrimination against families and deficiencies in the social security system. (2)

United Kingdom: Fertility in the United Kingdom has also followed a downward trend. According to the Office for National Statistics, the total fertility rate in England and Wales declined to 1.39 children per woman in 2025, down from 1.41 in 2024 and representing the lowest level since 1977. (2) Approximately 585,396 live births were recorded in 2025, representing a 1.6% decline compared with the previous year. (2) The mean age of first-time mothers also increased to 31.1 years, reflecting an ongoing trend toward delayed childbearing. (2) Under these conditions, all women are entitled to 52 weeks of maternity leave following childbirth, 39 weeks of which are paid. During the first six weeks, 90% of full salary is paid, while the remainder of the paid leave period is compensated at a statutory minimum rate. The British government also provides weekly child-related payments to parents. Nevertheless, experts have warned that declining fertility, combined with increasing life expectancy, will exert growing pressure on the labor force, public services, and pension system. (2)

France: France, which until recently constituted an exception in Europe because its fertility rate remained relatively close to replacement level, is now experiencing a substantial decline in births. According to the French national statistical institute, approximately 644,000 babies were born in 2025, 2.3% fewer than in 2024 and 24% fewer than in 2010, representing the lowest number of births since the end of World War II. (2) The total fertility rate also declined from 1.61 in 2024 to 1.56 in 2025, its lowest level since the end of World War I. (2) In France, women are entitled to 16 weeks of maternity leave beginning six weeks before childbirth. Following this period, parents are entitled to three years of unpaid parental leave. The French system encourages larger families by increasing benefits according to the number of children, with additional benefits provided for a third child. The government

provides newly delivered mothers with services such as free medical consultations and home nursing care. Families with a third child receive an annual financial allowance of €1,000. Under newer regulations, French families may remain with their children for up to three years while retaining a guarantee of returning to their employment. The government annually provides financial allowances for children from the age of three through designated stages of preschool, school, and university education. In-kind support, tax reductions, and access to public facilities are also provided, and the government partially subsidizes the cost of domestic help for families with children. More recently, President Emmanuel Macron has called for “demographic rearmament” through reforms intended to facilitate childbearing, and the government has considered increasing financial support for up to six months following childbirth. (3) A parliamentary report in France has also proposed creating a “single family payment” of €250 per child per month and a unified 12-month paid parental leave scheme. (2)

Japan: Japan has one of the lowest birth rates in the world. Data from Japan’s Ministry of Health indicate that the total fertility rate declined to 1.14 children per woman in 2025, marking the tenth consecutive year of decline and the lowest level since records began in 1947. (2) The number of births in 2025 was approximately 671,000, a decline of 2.2% from the previous year, while approximately 1.59 million deaths occurred, producing a natural population decrease of approximately 918,000. (2) Under Japan’s 2010 child allowance legislation, families with children up to 15 years of age receive monthly financial support of up to 13,000 yen. The government also provides a childbirth allowance of 500,000 yen for each birth and pays a monthly child allowance ranging from 10,000 to 15,000 yen depending on the child’s age. Despite these measures, fertility continues to decline, and population experts emphasize that structural factors such as employment insecurity, stagnant incomes, and difficulties in balancing work and family responsibilities remain major barriers to increasing fertility. (2)

Sweden: Sweden has long been recognized for its generous parental leave policies. Parents receive 480 days of paid parental leave for each child, of which 390 days are compensated at approximately 80% of earnings and the remaining 90 days at a fixed rate. (3) Parents may transfer up to 90 days of their leave entitlement to other persons, such as relatives, and may use 60 days simultaneously, allowing both parents to take leave at the same time. (3) One of Sweden’s major social benefits is the child allowance, a fixed, non-repayable payment made by the government to parents for every child until the age of 16. The amount is unrelated to parental income, and the total allowance increases with the number of children in the family. Nevertheless, Sweden’s fertility rate has also declined over the past decade, falling from 1.98 children per woman in 2010 to 1.43 in 2024. (2) This decline has occurred despite generous parental leave policies, and some analysts argue that parental leave alone cannot provide sufficient motivation for childbearing because broader economic and social factors also play an important role. (2)

South Korea: South Korea has for years recorded the lowest fertility rate in the world. In 2024, the country experienced its first increase in fertility after nine years: the total fertility rate rose from 0.72 in 2023 to 0.75 in 2024 and then to 0.80 in 2025. (2) The number of births increased by 6.8% in 2025 to approximately 254,500. (2) In 2025, the South Korean government allocated approximately 28.6 trillion won to direct programs addressing low fertility, representing a 13% increase over the previous year. Measures including expanded cash allowances, childcare services, housing support, and preferential loans for families with infants have formed part of these interventions. (3) Private companies have also participated in these programs, offering cash bonuses of up to 100 million won to employees who have children. (3)

Alongside national policies and interventions, expansion of the educational system, improved birth control, and increased female labor-force participation have also facilitated changes in family-related behaviors and attitudes.

The more individuals pursue education and employment, the more likely marriage and childbearing are to be postponed, thereby contributing to the gradual erosion or diminished salience of traditional family values. (4) Makiko, examining the relationship between women's economic resources—including full-time employment, education, and income—and their attitudes toward marriage in 31 countries, demonstrated that women's economic independence does not in itself reduce the attractiveness of marriage; rather, incompatibility between employment and family life diminishes women's aspirations for marriage. (4) These factors, together with other economic, cultural, and social determinants, contribute to delays in marriage and childbearing and indicate that pronatalist incentive policies, although necessary, are not in themselves sufficient to reverse demographic trends.

3. Typology of Marriage Incentive Measures in the Law on Population Youth

Cultural Measures

Because society is composed of smaller family units, society itself constitutes the most appropriate context for facilitating family formation and enabling young people to marry. Accordingly, resolving the difficulties surrounding youth marriage and preventing further increases in the age at marriage require the cooperation and collective participation of all members of society. (3) Therefore, the cultural measures stipulated in the 2021 Law on Population Youth are addressed first. Pursuant to Article 28 of the Law on Family Support and Population Youth, all institutions specified in Article 29 of the Sixth Five-Year Economic, Social, and Cultural Development Plan of the Islamic Republic of Iran, particularly the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting Organization, the Islamic Development Organization, public nongovernmental institutions and organizations, municipalities, and village administrations, are required to undertake appropriate measures aimed at raising awareness and providing education regarding the positive and valuable dimensions of timely and facilitated marriage, larger family size, strengthening and supporting maternal and spousal roles, safeguarding family stability, countering content inconsistent with the General Population Policies, informing the public about the side effects of different contraceptive methods, and increasing awareness of the serious medical, psychological, cultural, and social consequences of abortion. Such measures include the production and broadcasting of films and television series, commercial advertising, and the organization of festivals and exhibitions.

A. In implementation of this law, the production, broadcasting, distribution, dissemination, promotion, publication, or representation of any educational, research, cultural, or entertainment program or content, in any form whatsoever—including films, television series, and animation—that is inconsistent with the General Population Policies is prohibited.

B. The promotion of families with two or fewer children and of single living in commercial advertisements by the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting Organization, as well as in commercial and outdoor advertising in cyberspace, online media, home-video networks, and public spaces, is prohibited. To encourage advertisers who depict families with three or more children while complying with regulations governing advertisements involving children, additional broadcasting time shall be granted.

C. The Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting Organization is required, in cooperation with the Islamic Development Organization and other relevant cultural institutions, to allocate part of its productions to various formats, including films, television series, documentaries, animation, talk shows, hybrid programs, and

competitions, whose principal content emphasizes the value, promotion, and encouragement of childbearing, condemns single living and low fertility, and denounces and prohibits abortion.

D. The Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting Organization is required to develop and implement weekly and monthly programs aimed at monitoring and demanding implementation of this law for the purpose of increasing the population growth rate.

E. The Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting Organization, through the Audio-Visual Media Regulatory Organization, together with the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, is required, as appropriate and in accordance with statutory duties, to cooperate with the National Cyberspace Center in supervising content related to the General Population Policies in cyberspace and in media and artistic productions, particularly cinema, theater, home-video network products, and published works. In cases of violation, the relevant matter must be pursued through the legally competent authorities.

F. The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, in cooperation with the Ministry of Health and Medical Education, is required to develop phrases, symbols, images, or other content supporting the family, Iranian mothers, and the value of having multiple children, and to supervise the appropriate inclusion of such content on the packaging of goods and products produced by manufacturing, distribution, and service units, as well as in books, cultural products, and the press.

The Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting Organization is required to allocate at least 10% of the budget designated for production programs, animation, documentaries, films, and television series to programs focusing on population growth and population youthfulness (Article 29).

The Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting Organization has consistently undertaken various measures in support of policies aimed at reducing the age at marriage, including cultural interventions and the production of films and television series containing related themes.

Some researchers maintain that television series and films featuring adolescents in leading roles generally attract large adolescent audiences and that the narrative content of such productions should therefore differ from programs primarily directed at adults. Because adolescents are highly impressionable and may consequently develop an increased interest in the opposite sex, it is argued that, rather than prematurely introducing the idea of marriage, appropriately designed content should be used to guide adolescents toward personal development and improved life circumstances.

In addition to the institutions identified in Article 28 of the Law on Population Youth, Article 31 of the Law on Family Support and Population Youth provides that the Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Sports and Youth, Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, Islamic Development Organization, Headquarters for Enjoining Good and Forbidding Wrong, and other relevant institutions are required to allocate at least 30% of their financial support for nongovernmental organizations and cultural associations to entities such as cultural and volunteer groups, mosque cultural centers, and nongovernmental organizations established with a religious orientation to reduce the age at marriage, facilitate youth marriage, encourage childbearing, and strengthen the family. An annual report on performance, evaluation of activities conducted, and support provided under this Article must be submitted to the National Population Headquarters and also made publicly available.

Furthermore, pursuant to Article 32 of the law, the Ministry of Roads and Urban Development and all municipalities and village administrations are required to allocate at least one-third of the annual nominal capacity

of outdoor advertising designated for cultural purposes in cities, villages, transportation routes, and other public spaces to the subjects of marriage, childbearing, population growth, and strengthening the family institution.

Educational Measures

Pursuant to Article 33 of the 2021 Law on Family Support and Population Youth, the Ministry of Education is required, in cooperation with the Center for the Management of Islamic Seminaries and the Islamic Development Organization and within the framework of resolutions adopted by the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, including the Fundamental Transformation Document of Education, to undertake the following measures:

A. Teaching and developing skills relating to the Iranian-Islamic lifestyle, individual and social personality development, personal competencies, promotion of the value of marriage, family and childbearing, and responsibility for family formation and development, while observing learning principles based on implementation of the Fundamental Transformation Document of Education. Such content must be incorporated into educational, research, and developmental programs through all learning packages, particularly textbooks, productions and events, festivals, educational and cultural camps, and interactive and online multimedia content making use of technological ecosystems in cyberspace across all educational levels.

B. Incorporating educational and developmental content consistent with the General Population Policies and General Family Policies into textbooks within two years after the law enters into force.

C. Providing training on developmental skills associated with puberty and marriage through continuous in-person education for parents and educational personnel, adapted to students' ages and based on the Iranian-Islamic lifestyle.

D. Training competent, committed, and married personnel to teach the course "Family Management and Lifestyle."

The Ministry of Education has also adopted policies aimed at supporting marriages involving persons under the age of 18. These measures include removing barriers preventing married students from continuing their education in regular daytime schools and promoting the cultural value of marriage, family, and childbearing in schools following adoption of the Law on Family Support and Population Growth. Under the new regulations, no school may prevent a student from continuing his or her education in a daytime school solely because the student is married. (3) Opponents of child marriage argue that these measures adopted by the Ministry of Education demonstrate institutional support for, and encouragement of, child marriage. They further contend that Article 33 of the law, which consists of four clauses and obliges the Ministry of Education to promote the value of marriage, family, childbearing, and responsibility for family formation and development through learning packages, textbooks, and other educational materials at all educational levels, effectively supports marriages involving persons younger than 18.

It should nevertheless be noted that the third clause of this Article makes education regarding puberty and marriage contingent upon its appropriateness to students' ages. Accordingly, unlike the preceding clause, its implementation does not necessarily encompass all educational levels. Nevertheless, because a student under the age of 18 is considered a child, opponents of child marriage maintain that Article 33 in effect obliges the Ministry of Education to promote marriage at younger ages.

Despite the arguments advanced by opponents of child marriage, it may be stated that following adoption of the Law on Family Support and Population Youth in 2021, various ministries and organizations, including the Ministry of Education, were required to support population-increasing programs. Thus, the Ministry is required to promote

the value of marriage, family, and childbearing. However, such approaches within the educational system and certain other organizations may reinforce concerns that the new legislation, rather than encouraging mature adults to marry and have children, could contribute to child marriage, unsuccessful marriages, the birth of unhealthy infants as a consequence of reduced prenatal screening, and other adverse outcomes. (3)

Shahla Kazemipour, a sociologist, maintains that “teaching marital skills to students who have reached an acceptable age can be beneficial, and establishing an educational framework for teaching marital skills within the school system is appropriate, provided that such education is delivered properly and, more importantly, only to students who have reached an acceptable age.” (4)

Economic Measures

Another factor affecting implementation of family policy in Iran is the volatile economic situation, including inflation, economic recession, and related conditions, whose most pronounced consequences are manifested in household livelihoods and institutions associated with the family. Accordingly, improving the economic circumstances of families, on the one hand, and establishing favorable conditions for policy implementation, on the other, are necessary. (2)

Economic Policies Encouraging Childbearing in Iran

Demographic analyses indicate that, following a period of fertility decline, Iran has entered a new stage of demographic transition. The principal feature of this new phase is not population growth but rather a persistent and continuing decline in fertility below replacement level, followed by a pronounced reduction in annual population growth, both of which are likely to become major demographic challenges. If low fertility persists over time, it may generate significant challenges for the country. During the past decade, various policies have been adopted in Iran; nevertheless, they have not played a substantial role in increasing fertility or preventing the decline in population growth.

In 2021, however, the Law on Population Youth, which was adopted to encourage individuals to marry and have children, introduced various forms of support for families with children, which are examined in detail below.

Today, a young population constitutes an important opportunity for every country, and governments employ various incentive policies to increase population growth. This section first describes the incentive policies adopted by the Islamic Republic of Iran and then considers measures implemented in other countries.

Pursuant to Article 2 of the Law on Population Youth, the Ministry of Roads and Urban Development is required to provide families with a third or subsequent child with a second opportunity to benefit from government housing support. Such families may therefore use all relevant governmental housing facilities for a second time.

Under Article 4, the government is required, after the birth of a third or subsequent child, to allocate a plot of land or residential unit of up to 200 square meters to families residing in villages or cities with populations below 500,000. Ownership is granted jointly and equally to the father and mother at the cost of land preparation and only once, through installment payments with a two-year grace period and an eight-year repayment schedule. The title deed must be delivered to the owners no later than one month after payment of the final installment. For residents of cities with populations exceeding 500,000, depending on government declarations regarding available land or housing, the property may be allocated in surrounding settlements, new towns, neighboring cities, or the birthplace of either parent, provided that the population of the selected location does not exceed 500,000. The location is

selected by the father or, if the father is deceased, by the mother. In the event of the death of either parent, ownership of the land or residential unit passes to the deceased person's heirs in accordance with the applicable inheritance laws.

Pursuant to Article 5 of the Law on Population Youth, in order to improve access to and the quality of housing, completion certificates, construction levies, costs associated with network allocation and utility connections, and engineering-system service fees are subject to a 50% discount for families with three children younger than 20 years and a 70% discount for families with at least four children younger than 20 years, on a one-time basis. Building permit fees and construction levies are also subject to a 10% discount for families with at least three children younger than 20 years.

Under Article 9 of the law, the Central Bank of the Islamic Republic of Iran is required, through operating banks and credit institutions, to provide different forms of housing finance intended to encourage childbearing as follows.

A. A 25% increase in the ceiling of loans for purchasing, constructing, or repairing housing for each child younger than 20 years, up to a maximum of twice the approved ceiling, financed through an increase in bank deposits and in accordance with resolutions of the Money and Credit Council.

B. An extension of the repayment period by two years for each child younger than 20 years, up to a maximum extension of ten years.

Article 68 provides that, in order to support youth marriage, the Central Bank of the Islamic Republic of Iran is required to use the banking system's interest-free savings and current-account resources to provide interest-free marriage loans, as a first priority, to all couples whose marriage contract was concluded no more than four years earlier and who have not previously received a marriage loan. In 2021, the interest-free marriage loan amounted to 700 million rials for each spouse, with a ten-year repayment period. To reduce the age at marriage, the Central Bank is also required to increase the interest-free marriage loan to a maximum of 1 billion rials for eligible husbands younger than 25 years and wives younger than 23 years. Nevertheless, granting marriage loans to very young girls without establishing a minimum age, despite the fact that they may not even be legally capable of independently opening a bank account, remains open to debate. Individuals should marry at an age at which they have attained appropriate physical, psychological, and social maturity, and the objective of a marriage loan should precisely be to enable individuals to marry at an appropriate age. Indeed, early marriage may require greater cultural than economic analysis. Accordingly, marriage loans cannot necessarily be regarded, in isolation, as a determinant of increased marriage at young ages.

Another economic measure contained in the law is Article 69, which requires the Central Bank of the Islamic Republic of Iran, in implementation of Paragraph (Ch) of Article 102 of the Sixth Five-Year Economic, Social, and Cultural Development Plan, to allocate, through operating banks, 9 trillion rials from interest-free savings and current-account deposits within the banking system to interest-free housing deposit, purchase, or construction loans, depending on the household's request. Such loans, with repayment periods not exceeding 20 years, are intended for families without housing who have had or will have a third or subsequent child from 2020 onward, with a loan amount of 1.5 billion rials.

Under Article 10 of the law, the Central Bank of the Islamic Republic of Iran is required, for children born in 2021 and thereafter, to provide "interest-free childbirth loans" through all banks and credit institutions using interest-free savings and current-account resources within the banking system and by eliminating marriage loans for applicants older than 50 years.

With respect to the capital market, Article 11 provides that for each child born from the beginning of 2021 onward, the government is required to allocate 10 million rials, subject to an annual ceiling of 10 trillion rials, exclusively for the purchase, in the child's name, of units in exchange-traded investment funds.

Pursuant to Article 12, domestic automobile manufacturers are required, from the date on which the law is communicated, to provide one domestically manufactured automobile at the factory price, selected by and registered in the mother's name, following the birth of a second or subsequent child, on a one-time basis during each registration period. In each registration period, 50% of available vehicles must be allocated to this scheme. Where the number of eligible applicants exceeds 50% of the vehicles offered, priority is granted to mothers who have not received a vehicle during the preceding two years. In any event, if the number of applicants either within or outside the priority group exceeds 50% of available vehicles, allocation is determined by lottery, and unsuccessful applicants may participate in subsequent registration periods. This program has been subject to criticism with respect to the possibility of vehicle registration for mothers younger than 18 years, including concerns regarding the absence of a statutory minimum age and the inability of such mothers to hold a driving license.

Under Article 13 of the law, the Targeted Subsidies Organization is required to use the revenues generated by eliminating subsidies for the three highest-income deciles to increase child-related subsidies for households in the first through fourth income deciles that have at least three dependent children and in which neither parent is employed by one of the bodies identified in Article 29 of the Sixth Five-Year Economic, Social, and Cultural Development Plan. The subsidy for these households is to be paid at three times the level approved for other beneficiaries.

Another provision addressing the economic dimension is Article 21, under which the government is required to provide insurance coverage for homemaker mothers with three or more children. For unemployed mothers with three or more children residing in rural and nomadic areas, the government must pay 100% of insurance premiums. With the birth of a fourth and fifth child, two years of insurance contribution history are added for each child.

Findings

In this section, findings derived from the questionnaire were analyzed across eight components: "social attitudes toward marriage incentive policies," "social attitudes toward the Ministry of Education's activities concerning instruction in married-life skills," "social attitudes toward the activities of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting Organization," "social acceptance of reducing the age at marriage," "the causal relationship between policies aimed at reducing the age at marriage and child marriage," "the effect of family economic conditions on early marriage," "agreement with the vehicle allocation scheme for mothers younger than 18 years," and "the necessity of establishing a minimum age for eligibility for marriage-support measures." These components are discussed below under three principal themes.

Social Attitudes Toward Marriage Incentive Policies

The findings of the present survey demonstrate that 50% of respondents evaluated policies aimed at reducing the age at marriage as generally "effective," 37% considered them "effective provided that a minimum age is established," and only 12% regarded these policies as fundamentally "ineffective." In other words, a total of 87% of the sample acknowledged, in one form or another, the potential effectiveness of these policies in encouraging or

facilitating marriage. At first glance, this level of relative support indicates that the 2021 Law on Population Youth has not been entirely rejected by public opinion; rather, it enjoys conditional acceptance.

An important point, however, is the emergence of a structural ambivalence among this supportive group. A considerable number of respondents—as will be discussed more precisely in subsequent sections—explicitly or implicitly expressed concern that implementation of these policies could result in an unintended consequence, namely child marriage. In other words, among the 87% who regarded the policies as effective, two groups can be distinguished: those who focus primarily on the policies' capacity to increase the marriage rate, and those who regard such effectiveness as conditional upon the implementation of protective mechanisms. This duality may be analyzed through the theoretical framework of "competing values in family policy." On the one hand is the collective value of "population growth and facilitation of marriage," rooted in national and demographic-security concerns; on the other is the universal value of "protecting children's rights and postponing marriage until intellectual and physical maturity," which is also consistent with the modern discourse of children's rights and international legal instruments. The simultaneous presence of these two values in the minds of social actors creates a condition of "normative conflict," which is manifested attitudinally as "support for the policy in general, accompanied by concern about its potentially deviant consequences."

From the perspective of cognitive sociology, respondents appear to have employed a form of conditional reasoning: "The policy is effective, provided that it does not deviate from its proper course." This conditionality, clearly reflected in the 37% who regarded the policies as effective "if a minimum age is established," demonstrates that public opinion is neither categorically opposed to reducing the age at marriage nor willing to accept such a policy unconditionally. Rather, respondents call for an institutional design that incorporates "age thresholds" as safeguards. This finding is consistent with the theory of "reflexive policymaking" in the sociology of public policy: citizens in contemporary societies are no longer passive recipients of policy; instead, they actively anticipate potential outcomes, unintended consequences, and the need for compensatory mechanisms.

In the same vein, evaluations of the Ministry of Education's activities clearly reproduce this ambivalence.

Approximately 60% of respondents considered the teaching of married-life skills in schools to be "useful and awareness-enhancing," whereas 40% regarded such activities as ineffective or even inconsistent with students' rights.

What initially appears to be a bipolar division, when examined alongside the respondents' explanatory answers and previous questions, seems to be rooted in concerns that such education may create a foundation for early marriage. In other words, the 40% minority is not necessarily opposed to life-skills education itself, including effective communication, conflict resolution, or financial management; rather, they object to the "implementation context" of such education at younger school ages. From the perspective of "educational labeling theory," incorporating marital-life topics into lower-secondary or even upper-primary textbooks may inadvertently convey to students the message that "society expects them to marry soon." This may be particularly consequential for girls in disadvantaged areas, where it could increase the likelihood of early school dropout. Conversely, supporters of this type of education, representing approximately 60% of respondents, rely on an "empowerment through knowledge" perspective and argue that greater awareness of marital responsibilities and interpersonal skills may reduce the likelihood of unstable and unsuccessful marriages. Both perspectives possess an empirical rationale; however, the findings of the present study indicate that fear of child marriage is sufficiently strong within Iranian public opinion to

offset a substantial proportion of the potential benefits of school-based education unless such education is explicitly accompanied by warnings regarding the harms associated with early marriage.

Regarding the activities of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting Organization, the data similarly indicate that 62% of respondents evaluated its programs concerning married-life skills as “highly influential,” whereas 37% considered them ineffective.

At first glance, this appears to be a favorable ratio and suggests that national broadcasting has achieved relative success in promoting a discourse centered on marriage and family. However, from the perspective of the theory of the “acceptance–effect gap,” perceived influence does not necessarily imply acceptance of the content of the messages. In other words, individuals may acknowledge that such programs “influence others” without regarding themselves as direct recipients of that influence. Furthermore, in view of findings presented in the subsequent section showing that more than 88% of respondents strongly oppose child marriage, it may be argued that a proportion of the 37% who regard broadcasting programs as ineffective are in fact criticizing their content. From their perspective, rather than emphasizing “informed and timely marriage,” national broadcasting may at times implicitly normalize or even idealize marriage at very young ages. This criticism is compatible with “media framing theory” in mass communication: when a media organization repeatedly portrays the successes of a 16- or 17-year-old married couple while giving insufficient attention to their economic, educational, and psychological challenges, it may gradually lower the perceived “acceptable age at marriage” among audiences. Accordingly, although 62% of respondents described these programs as influential, such influence may not always operate in the direction intended by policymakers; rather, it may sometimes mean the “normalization of a lower age at marriage,” thereby reinforcing concerns regarding child marriage. Consequently, these findings emphasize the need to redesign media messages so that encouragement of marriage is balanced with clear warnings regarding early marriage—an issue frequently neglected in the design of cultural policies.

Social Acceptance of Child Marriage and Its Perceived Causal Relationship With Marriage Incentive Policies

The survey findings demonstrate that 52% of respondents were “opposed” to reducing the age at marriage, 35% were “strongly opposed,” while only 10% agreed and 2% strongly agreed. In total, more than 88% of the sample expressed a negative or strongly negative attitude toward child marriage.

Such a high degree of negative consensus regarding a particular social issue is relatively uncommon in Iranian survey research and may be interpreted as evidence of the formation of a strong social norm opposing marriage before physical maturity or during early adolescence. From the perspective of the theory of “modernization and changing family values,” as societies move toward industrialization, urbanization, expansion of education, and broader access to information, the ideal age at marriage tends to increase, while child marriage is transformed from a “tolerable traditional practice” into “a norm-violating behavior inconsistent with children’s rights.” Within this framework, the 88% opposition rate may be interpreted not merely as a simple opinion but as the result of the internalization of the global discourse on children’s rights, together with lived experience of the adverse consequences of early marriage within families and social environments. This finding is also consistent with the theory of “age-based role expectations” in developmental psychology: contemporary societies increasingly conceptualize “adolescence” as a distinct life stage characterized by responsibilities such as education, skill development, and identity formation, and therefore postpone marriage until late adolescence or the third decade of

life. Any policy seeking to move these age boundaries downward is likely to encounter extensive normative resistance.

More important than opposition to child marriage itself is respondents' perception of causality: approximately 70% of participants believed that a causal relationship exists between marriage incentive policies and child marriage, meaning that implementation of these policies—particularly economic and cultural incentives lacking clear age thresholds—would directly contribute to an increase in marriage at younger ages. Only 30% rejected such a relationship.

From the perspective of the theory of "causal attribution in policymaking," this finding is highly significant because members of the public do not ordinarily draw a precise distinction between "correlation" and "causation." Nevertheless, a clear mental causal model appears to have emerged among the majority of respondents, according to which government incentives such as marriage loans, vehicle allocation, and housing assistance operate as the "independent variable," while increased child marriage functions as the "dependent variable." This perception is consistent with the theory of "policy feedback" in political science: policies not only alter behavior but also shape public perceptions of governmental responsibility for unintended consequences. When a law explicitly or implicitly provides particular benefits to very young mothers, for example those younger than 18 years, public opinion may rapidly conclude that "the government favors marriage at young ages," even when the formally declared objective of the law is merely to "support the family." Accordingly, the 70% who perceived a causal relationship were not necessarily making a scientific or statistical inference; rather, they were expressing a moral and normative inference: "If substantial rewards, such as vehicles, land, and loans, are provided in exchange for marriage or childbearing, economically disadvantaged families may arrange the marriage of adolescent daughters earlier in order to benefit from such incentives." This inference is broadly consistent with analyses of child marriage within contexts of socioeconomic deprivation. (4) In Iranian society, the vehicle allocation scheme for mothers younger than 18 years lies at the center of this perceived causal relationship.

A case-specific examination of this scheme clearly demonstrates the intensity of such concerns: 42% of respondents opposed the allocation of vehicles to mothers younger than 18 years, 45% were strongly opposed, and a total of 87% expressed a negative attitude. Only 8% agreed and 4% strongly agreed. This represented the highest level of opposition among all questionnaire items.

From the perspective of the theory of "policy–cultural context congruence," this widespread opposition suggests that people regard the scheme not merely as ineffective but also as "unjust" and "dangerous." Several reasons may account for this opposition. First, there is a legal and practical incongruity in allocating a vehicle to an individual who may be unable to obtain a driving license or independently assume relevant civil responsibilities, including insurance and traffic-related obligations. In practice, although the vehicle may be registered in the mother's name, it may actually be used by the father or other relatives, potentially creating family disputes and perceptions of unfairness among children. Second, there is the commodification of childbearing. The scheme may implicitly communicate to very young mothers that "the value of the vehicle outweighs concerns regarding the health and future of the child," inadvertently creating an incentive for closely spaced pregnancies at younger ages. Third, it may directly reinforce child marriage. For many respondents, offering a substantial financial incentive to a mother younger than 18 years is tantamount to "inviting families" to arrange early marriages for their daughters, particularly in regions where traditional norms favoring early marriage remain influential. Within this framework, the vehicle scheme has become a "symbol" embodying broader public concerns regarding the Law on Population Youth.

From the perspective of Robert Merton's theory of the "unintended consequences of social action," marriage incentive policies in Iran may generate "deviant consequences": rather than primarily encouraging mature young adults who are prepared for marriage, they may shift the effective target population toward adolescent girls whose families place pressure on them in order to obtain available incentives. In social-policy literature, this phenomenon may be characterized as a "target displacement effect": a policy designed to encourage a desirable behavior—marriage at a socially appropriate age—may in practice encourage a more vulnerable group to undertake the same behavior prematurely. The findings of this study suggest that Iranian public opinion is highly aware of this mechanism and therefore perceives a causal relationship between such policies and child marriage. This collective awareness may be attributed to two factors. First is historical experience in recent decades, during which some economic incentives, including government assistance to larger families in disadvantaged regions, have at times been perceived as coinciding with marriages below the statutory age. Second is media and human-rights discourse. Media outlets, social activists, and legal scholars have repeatedly warned that certain provisions of the Law on Population Youth, including Article 12 concerning vehicle allocation and Article 68 concerning marriage loans without an explicit age threshold, may encourage child marriage. Such warnings have gradually contributed to public beliefs and reinforced perceptions of causality.

The Necessity of Establishing a Minimum Age for Eligibility for Marriage-Support Measures

The survey findings indicate that 77% of respondents emphasized the necessity of "establishing a minimum age" for eligibility for marriage-support measures, whereas approximately 22% did not consider such an age condition necessary.

This finding constitutes the culmination and final link in the argumentative chain developed in the article. Despite relative support for marriage incentive policies in general, as demonstrated in the first section of the findings, Iranian society clearly demands the incorporation of protective mechanisms into such policies. In other words, the public does not necessarily demand elimination of the incentives themselves, but rather their "conditionalization" through clearly defined age thresholds. This demand may be interpreted within the framework of "smart regulation" in social policymaking. Rather than relying on complete prohibition or unrestricted permission, smart regulation emphasizes the use of combined instruments, including minimum-age requirements, monitoring, and public awareness, so that the principal policy objective—facilitating marriage—can be pursued while preventing deviant consequences such as child marriage. The 77% of respondents calling for a minimum age are effectively advocating such a regulatory approach.

From the perspective of "procedural justice in the distribution of incentives," establishing a minimum age creates a form of equitable eligibility rule. Government incentives, including loans, land, vehicles, and housing support, should not be structured in a manner that creates a comparative advantage for younger age groups who may lack full legal and psychological preparedness for marriage. In the absence of a minimum age, families who arrange the marriage of their daughters at 14 or 15 years may gain access to incentives earlier than families that postpone marriage until age 25. Such an arrangement is not only inequitable but may also create a distorted incentive for accelerating the marriage of adolescent girls. By contrast, establishing a minimum age, such as 18 years for eligibility for certain forms of support, functions as a normative signal: the government explicitly communicates that "marriage before this age is not considered desirable, and the incentives are intended to support mature marriages."

This signal is consistent with the theory of “law as an expression of public values” in legal philosophy: law does not merely regulate conduct but also defines and reshapes the values underlying that conduct.

At the level of social psychology, insistence on establishing a minimum age may be interpreted through the theory of “developmental boundaries.” According to developmental psychology, marriage before the age of 18, particularly among girls, is associated with substantial risks, including educational dropout, economic vulnerability, domestic violence, early pregnancy, and physical health complications. Respondents calling for a minimum age implicitly recognize this general body of knowledge: “Not every age is appropriate for marriage,” and the government should not encourage families to disregard these risks through the provision of incentives. The findings showing 77% suggests that such awareness has moved beyond a mere individual opinion and developed into a widespread social norm. In contrast, the 22% who did not consider a minimum age necessary may reflect two distinct perspectives. The first includes those who oppose marriage incentive policies altogether and therefore regard the debate over a minimum age as irrelevant. The second includes individuals who, based on traditional values or particular religious interpretations, maintain that “capacity for marriage” should not be assessed solely through chronological age and that other factors, including intellectual and social maturity, should also be considered. Nevertheless, this minority position appears substantially weaker than the dominant 77% support for explicit age boundaries.

Another important point is that establishing a minimum age for eligibility for marriage-support measures is consistent with the principle of the “best interests of the child” reflected in international instruments on children’s rights, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Although Iran has not accepted all international obligations without qualification, establishment of a minimum age may accordingly be regarded as an important legal mechanism for preventing child marriage. From the perspective of the theory of “harm prevention in policymaking,” preventive action through establishment of a minimum age is substantially less costly and more effective than remedial intervention aimed at supporting victims of child marriage after harm has occurred. (5)

In summary, the 77% finding serves as a bridge between the two preceding sets of results. On the one hand, respondents consider policies intended to reduce the age at marriage effective if a minimum age is established, as reflected in the 37% conditional-support group discussed earlier. On the other hand, they are deeply concerned that, in the absence of age boundaries, such policies may contribute to child marriage, as reflected in the 70% who perceived a causal relationship and the 88% who opposed child marriage. Consequently, establishing a minimum age functions as a compensatory mechanism capable of resolving this conflict and rebuilding the social legitimacy of the law. Without such a mechanism, even if marriage incentive policies statistically increase the number of marriages, their social cost—particularly the normalization of child marriage—may substantially outweigh their demographic benefits.

Conclusion

Family policy, as one of the most sensitive domains of public policy, has consistently been characterized by tensions among “demographic necessities,” “cultural values,” and “individual rights.” The 2021 Law on Family Support and Population Youth, representing Iran’s most recent and comprehensive legislative initiative in this field, has introduced a collection of cultural, educational, and economic measures intended to encourage marriage and increase fertility. Nevertheless, any policy seeking to change deeply embedded norms surrounding marriage and childbearing must necessarily anticipate social feedback and respond to public concerns. Using a survey design

and data obtained from 103 questionnaires, the present study assessed such feedback across the principal dimensions of “perceived policy effectiveness,” “social acceptance of child marriage,” “perceived causal relationships between policies and child marriage,” and “the necessity of establishing a minimum age.” The findings demonstrated that Iranian public opinion displays structural ambivalence toward these policies. On the one hand, a total of 87% of respondents regarded policies aimed at reducing the age at marriage as effective either conditionally or unconditionally, while the activities of the Ministry of Education (60%) and the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting Organization (62%) were evaluated as relatively useful or influential. On the other hand, more than 88% of respondents strongly opposed child marriage, approximately 70% perceived a causal relationship between implementation of these policies and increased child marriage, and 77% supported establishing a minimum age for eligibility for incentives. These findings may be interpreted within the theoretical framework of “value conflict in family policy”: the value of “population growth and facilitation of marriage” confronts the value of “protecting children’s rights and preventing early marriage,” and the public seeks a middle-ground solution through “making incentives conditional on clearly defined age thresholds.”

An important theoretical implication of these findings is that perceptions of causality in social policy constitute an influential social reality in their own right, irrespective of whether such causality has been statistically established. The 70% of respondents who believed that marriage incentives contribute to child marriage had not necessarily conducted correlation or regression analyses; rather, they reached this conclusion through practical reasoning: “Any substantial reward attached to childbearing or marriage may encourage economically disadvantaged families to accelerate the marriage of adolescent daughters.” This inference is consistent with the Mertonian concept of the “unintended consequences of rational social action” and indicates that the public intuitively understands the mechanism of “target displacement.” Policymakers therefore cannot eliminate public concern merely by presenting statistics that contradict this perception. Instead, the structure of the incentives themselves must be modified so that the perceived mechanism becomes impossible or substantially more difficult to activate. In other words, the social legitimacy of a policy depends not only on its actual outcomes but also on its perceived and symbolic meaning. The vehicle allocation scheme for mothers younger than 18 years, which encountered 87% opposition, represents the clearest example of this symbolic gap. Even if no marriage involving a person younger than 18 can be shown to have occurred directly because of this scheme, the very existence of such a provision may be interpreted as an “implicit authorization” for the normalization of child marriage.

At a broader theoretical level, the findings of this study support the theory of the “modernization of family values.” Despite retaining certain traditional characteristics, Iranian society has gradually increased its conception of the ideal age at marriage and transformed child marriage from a tolerable traditional practice into a social taboo. This value transformation has resulted from factors such as educational expansion, increases in the actual age at marriage, greater access to information, and the growing discourse of children’s rights. Within such a context, any policy seeking directly to lower the age at marriage without considering these evolving values is likely to encounter intense normative resistance. Consequently, a successful population policy is not necessarily one that offers the greatest number or value of incentives; rather, it is one that is aligned with evolving social norms and promotes the desired behavior through “age-based safeguards” and “awareness-raising” rather than through “direct pressure.”

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our appreciation and gratitude to all those who helped us carrying out this study.

Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

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