

## Original Article

# The decision to have an only child among Iranian mothers: Reasons and Conditions

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## Abstract

**Background:** The global decline in fertility and demographic changes have made having an only child a strategy to balance societal needs, accelerating Iran's aging society. This study explores Iranian mothers' experiences to understand the factors behind only-child families and inform policies addressing this trend.

**Methods:** The study, conducted in 2019, employed a qualitative design based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 11 married women who have an only child. Data analysis was performed using the grounded theory approach with MAXQDA-10 software, following open, axial, and selective coding processes.

**Results:** This study employed the grounded theory method to explore the factors influencing Iranian mothers' decisions to have an only child. A total of 571 initial concepts, 55 subcategories, and 23 main categories were identified through coding the interviews. The findings are categorized into five groups, forming the final theoretical model. The results indicate that individuals can be classified into two groups based on their attitudes toward having an only child: "forced only-child" and "voluntary only-child."

**Conclusion:** Participants' decision to have an only child is shaped by external factors such as societal economy, politics, and culture, as well as internal personal circumstances. Furthermore, maintaining the decision is shaped by factors that directly reinforce the underlying causal conditions, ultimately leading to the choice of having an only child.

**Keywords:** Family Planning; Fertility; Grounded Theory; Only Child; Aging.

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## Introduction

The size and characteristics of a population are crucial for planning and policymaking. In Iran, significant demographic changes, such as fertility reduction and population aging, have emerged over recent decades (1, 2, 3, 4). Since the 1990s, population control policies (5, 6, 7) and societal shifts—like urbanization, delayed marriage, and the rise of nuclear families—have led to declining

birth rates, signaling a transition from a youthful to an aging population (8, 9, 10). Iran's population is currently at 84,439,388 (4), with a more than 25% decrease in births, indicating an early shift from youth to old age (1, 4, 11, 12, 13).

The family plays a key role in childbearing and child-rearing (7). Studies in Iran show a high prevalence of only-child families and

women's reluctance to have children (14, 15, 16). Some research suggests that parents who do not want children tend to avoid childbearing (12, 17, 18). Despite cultural norms condemning childlessness and only-child families, the reason behind the rise of one-child households remains unclear. The growth rate of only-child families is approximately 7% in developing countries and over 15% in developed countries (19). In Iran, having an only child is seen as a strategy to balance individual, marital, family, and environmental conditions, partly due to the lack of societal support and the absence of extended family (7, 8, 9, 20).

Given the high birth rates in the 1980s, the only-child trend may pose future challenges such as population aging, shifts in social structures, and reduced productivity in old age (1). Research on only children has mainly focused on social, economic, and psychological issues, along with cultural stereotypes (20, 21, 22, 23). However, little research has addressed the causes behind the decision to have one child and how families sustain this choice. This study investigates the lived experiences of Iranian mothers with an only child to understand the factors driving this trend and inform policies to address demographic challenges.

The research on only children can generally be categorized into three areas: policymaking related to only children, psychological studies of families with an only child, and factors that influence the intention and decision to have an only child. The following section explains each category.

### ***Research on One-Child Policymaking***

The first research category pertains to China's One-Child Policy (OCP) from 1979 to 2015. Studies on the OCP have attributed the factors affecting the delay in marriage and childbearing in China to the increase in women's educational attainment in the late twentieth century (24).

Research has shown that the OCP was ineffective due to the failure of the planned behavior strategy for fertility decision-making. If China had pursued a standard development policy and implemented less restrictive policies after 1973, the path of fertility transition and overall population growth would have been statistically similar to the observed trend over the last three decades (25, 26). Another study confirms that this strategy made people less trusting, less trustworthy, risk-averse, less competitive, pessimistic, and less conscientious. China's OCP is also considered one of the most radical approaches to limiting population growth (27).

To summarize, the One-Child Policy in China is a top-down macro policy that the Government applies, and society members must obey. However, this study does not seek to explore the Government's policies in the field of childbearing, but rather, how people have chosen to have only one child by themselves. Therefore, the first research category on only children is irrelevant to this study.

### ***Research on Reproductive Intentions and Only Child Families***

The second type of research focuses on the reproductive intentions at the beginning of a marriage and the impact of having an only child on those intentions. Some studies have examined the impact of having an only child on families, while others have compared one-child families to those with multiple children, examining factors such as fertility motivations, family dynamics, and child-rearing issues.

One study conducted on 401 couples over two years in response to the question of "how childbearing affects fertility motivations and desires" indicates that childbearing stimulates greater positive motivation for having another child (28). In line with previous research, the results of Muhsam and Kiser (29) show that having a child increases the number of desired

family sizes. The findings indicate that attitudes towards family size are likely to change according to the spouses' desires, economic and social factors, and experience with their children.

Fiori et al. (30) point to the motivations of only-child mothers who do not intend to have a second child to understand the reasons behind fertility intentions. The results of their research in Italy indicate that many mothers of only children consider economic constraints as their main reason for not having another child rather than personal preferences. Townes, Beach, Campbell, and Wood's research in 1980 concluded that highly educated and middle-class couples plan their childbearing decisions to maximize their benefits. This data was confirmed in another study analyzing the underlying conditions of the decision to have only one child by Khalajabadi and Saraei (9) in Iran.

Khadaroo and MacCallum's (2) study focuses on child-parent issues. It indicates that mothers are more dominant in critical parenting traits, resulting in lower levels of authoritative and authoritarian parenting. However, having an only child has not significantly affected parenting between families with one child and those with multiple children. Another study in China investigated the personality traits affecting the quality of life of families with one child, whether forced or voluntary, and found that the general development of the social environment is the most influential factor in the personality differences in these families (31).

Studies on only children have shown that social and emotional isolation, lack of attention and care from the family, and difficulty forming close friendships can shape the characteristics of an only child during childhood, adolescence, and adulthood (32). In Iran, research on girls aged 18 and above investigated the lived experience of only children and found that they often possess distinctive life skills and personal capabilities that manifest in

extreme behaviors (33). Additionally, the number of siblings has a relationship with adult divorce, marriage, closeness to parents and partner, number of close friends, being disliked by others, and satisfaction with handling problems (35). The number of siblings also affects mentalizing performance, with those having multiple older siblings performing better (34).

In summary, the second group of reviewed research is valuable as it investigates fertility motives at the beginning of marriage and the effects of having an only child on children and their families. However, the aim of the present study is not to explore the consequences of the only-child phenomenon and its psychological effects.

### ***Research on Factors Affecting Childbearing Attitudes and Decisions***

The third research category reviewed includes the most relevant studies investigating the factors affecting the intention and decision to have an only child. A study conducted in Iran by Vatanparast et al. (36) on 90 women indicated that social, cultural, religious, and economic aspects of society effectively affect childbearing attitudes. The research used the theory of planned behavior, which consisted of three stages: pre-intervention, intervention, and control groups. Another quantitative study by Lukšík et al. (37) used survey data from a sample of parents with an only child from Slovakia to perform regression analysis assessing the effects of attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived control on the intention to have a second child. The results revealed that gender, attitudes toward reproduction, and environmental and social pressure affect parents' reproductive preferences for having a second child.

A qualitative study in Iran investigated 17 married women with children regarding low and delayed childbearing. The results indicated that the essential areas leading to the decision to have few children include

the valorization of bearing few children, the restrictive nature of childbearing for parents, and the economic and educational concerns of childbearing (38). Zeman et al. (22) also investigated the shift of childbearing to advanced reproductive ages. They indicated that a gradual trend toward delayed motherhood had been reported due to postponing first marriage and first birth and the reduction in adolescent childbearing in the last two decades. They believe this trend has occurred in many middle-income countries with relatively low fertility rates, such as China, Iran, Northern Africa, and Latin America.

Based on the findings, the primary cause of the increase in delayed motherhood is the substantial rise in the number of individuals pursuing higher education, accompanied by an unpredictable job market and a decline in the financial stability of young adults. Furthermore, rapid changes in partnership behavior and the availability of efficient contraception have also played a significant role. The findings from a survey conducted by Raymo (40) in Japan corroborate these results, supporting the second demographic transition theory proposed by Lesthaeghe (39). Both of these studies are important for the present study as they investigate the factors affecting the delay in childbearing and mainly focus on countries with low fertility rates, such as Iran.

Regarding the decision-making process to have a second child, Cassé et al. (41) studied the factors involved. They suggest that considering first-time motherhood experiences as relevant predictors of subsequent childbearing can be stimulating for researchers from sociological, psychological, and demographical fields. However, their data suggests that motherhood experiences appeared to be a very subtle and limited factor in deciding to have additional children. This study also deviates from the present research since it uses psychological, demographic, and

social factors to test its hypothesis using a nested comparing model.

The findings of the third category of reviewed research suggest that the education variable is not only related to the implementation of childbearing policies but also affects parents' decision-making processes. Social, cultural, religious, and economic factors have become the primary reasons for the shift towards delayed childbearing and motherhood. The gender of the decision-maker in fertility planning also plays a crucial role, with women's experiences and beliefs having a more significant impact on the decision to have children. Additionally, factors such as childbirth, the first experience of motherhood, postpartum physical and mental health, and the child's temperament can influence this decision.

As previously mentioned, this study's third category of research focuses on the factors that contribute to families' decisions, particularly mothers, to have only one child. This research category is the most relevant to the present study's objectives.

Most previous studies have used psychological tests on children and parents to account for differences, neglecting the sociological dimension's influence on the decision to have an only child. These studies mostly employ quantitative approaches and control and experimental methods, providing only a superficial understanding of the only-child phenomenon. In contrast, qualitative approaches allow for in-depth investigations. Comparing the only-child phenomenon with its opposite state of having multiple children and examining the psychological and social dimensions as causes and effects are other differences between previous studies and the present research's goals. Therefore, it is crucial to conduct research that can investigate the only-child phenomenon in the family context and examine the lived experiences of mothers with an only child's impact on maintaining this decision.



## Methods

### *Study Design*

The current research methodology was designed based on the interpretative paradigm and conducted using qualitative methods, specifically through face-to-face, in-depth interviews in 2018.

### *Participants and Setting*

Ethical considerations were prioritized throughout the research process. Potential participants were identified through community networks and referrals, ensuring they met the inclusion criteria. The purpose of the study, along with the nature of their participation, was explained in detail to each individual. This included providing information about the study's objectives, the voluntary nature of participation, and the confidentiality measures in place. Participants were assured that their names and addresses would remain confidential, with pseudonyms assigned to protect their identities.

Written consent was obtained from all participants before the start of the face-to-face interviews. Participants were informed of their right to skip any questions they found uncomfortable and to withdraw from the study at any time. The researcher alone had access to the audio recordings and interview transcripts.

Interviews were scheduled at times convenient for participants, ensuring they were free from work and other commitments. Interview locations were selected based on participants' preferences, including their homes, workplaces, or neutral public settings such as parks or coffee shops. Two audio recorders were used to ensure no information was lost, and the interviews lasted between one hour and half to three hours.

### *Data Collection*

The semi-structured interview technique was used as a data collection instrument, allowing flexibility and providing a more

accurate interpretation and understanding of participants' lived experiences and decision-making processes regarding having an only child.

### *Sample Size*

This study focused exclusively on voluntary only-child families, excluding cases where having an only child resulted from involuntary circumstances such as the death of a parent or child or parental divorce. To achieve theoretical saturation—a point where no new themes or concepts emerged—and to ensure a diverse representation of participants, a theoretical sampling method was employed.

The sampling criteria were designed to include a wide range of participants with respect to childbearing age, educational background, socioeconomic status, and the gender of the only child. The final sample comprised 11 married women residing in Mashhad city, each of whom had one child aged 12 years or older at the time of the study. These characteristics ensured that participants had significant lived experiences to reflect on their decision-making processes regarding family size. The demographic details of the participants are presented in Table 1.

### *Data Analysis*

Based on the research questions and objectives, a qualitative approach using the grounded theory method was employed to design the research methodology. The aim was to obtain a final theoretical model by exploring the decision-making process of having an only child and its continuation in each participant, focusing on describing their mental processes and comparing data across cases. The interview process was moderated to remove irrelevant questions and paths, and the most important questions were asked at each stage based on the data and its analysis. The data collected was analyzed using Strauss and Corbin's approach (42), with the coding process conducted using MAXQDA-10 software.

Table 1. The Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Participant	Age of Wife	Age of Husband	Marriage Duration (years)	Time Between Marriage and Childbearing (years)	Wife's Age at Childbearing	Husband's Age at Childbearing	Child's Age	Child's Gender
Participant 1	37	45	22	1	18	26	18	Boy
Participant 2	50	53	28	3	25	28	25	Girl
Participant 3	49	53	23	6	28	32	21	Girl
Participant 4	39	45	15	5	29	35	12	Boy
Participant 5	46	47	20	4	30	31	16	Girl
Participant 6	45	50	25	5	25	30	20	Girl
Participant 7	44	50	25	5	25	29	21	Girl
Participant 8	43	53	27	5	21	31	22	Boy
Participant 9	38	43	17	7	27	33	12	Girl
Participant 10	45	50	26	5	24	29	21	Girl
Participant 11	72	82	54	7	25	35	47	Girl

This involved three stages of analysis, from open coding to axial coding and selective coding, conducted regularly after each interview to identify and resolve unclear and unknown points for the following interviews. In total, 571 initial concepts were obtained, which were re-conceptualized and categorized into 55 subcategories and then merged into 23 main categories. Based on the grounded theory method, the causes and reasons for the decision to have only one child are presented in a paradigm model, which includes conditions, strategies, and consequences forming the core category consisting of two groups.

## Results

This section presents the findings from the analysis of interviews conducted to investigate the causes and reasons for each participant's decision to have an only child. The demographic characteristics of all 11 participants are shown in Table 1, and this stage of the research examines the decision-making process of each participant. The final theoretical model was drawn by

identifying the critical factors in each person's decision-making process, using Strauss and Corbin's approach (42). The causes and reasons extracted from the interview transcriptions were categorized into five categories: causal conditions, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences. To provide a comprehensive understanding of the data, all codes are presented in Table 2.

Each of the extracted categories will be described below.

### *Causal Conditions:*

The codes extracted in this section have an individualistic nature referring to the reasons people state in response to questions about why they have an only child and are determined by this decision.

One of the reasons people claim that not having more children is causing personal and family problems. The code refers to the economic and social restrictions parents face in the family domain if they have more children.

Table 2- Coding Framework of Reasons and Conditions Influencing the Decision to Have an Only Child Among Iranian Mothers

Category	Sub-Category	Code
Causal Conditions	Perceived personal/family problems with having more children	Causing Economic Restrictions
		Causing family interaction restrictions
		Causing obstacles in the quality education and care for children
		Increasing restrictions on individual life
	Having the least changes in life, before and after having a child	Facilitating leisure planning
		Increasing the level of welfare
		Facing fewer financial limitations
		Make more time for him/herself
	Parents' individual dominance in decisions about childbearing	Trying to maintain and improve the job position
		Personal preferences
		The adaptability of the attitudes of the couple toward having children
		Religious beliefs
		No preference for the child's gender
		Body management
	Fear of the future	Parents' view on the ideal number of children
		Mother's employment
	Gaining social status	Lack of guarantee that children will be helpful for parents in the future
		Setting the upper classes of society as a model
	Parents' lived experiences from their own childhood	Having the interest to be unique
		Having favorable conditions in the parents' family
	First parenting experience	Having unfavorable conditions in the parents' family
		The effect of child-rearing process and its related issues on parents' decision
	Failure in marital life	Emotional Divorce
		Incompatibility with spouse and spouse's family
Contextual Conditions	Government's weakness in implementing population policies	Lack of family support in the child-raising process
		The importance of child-raising quality compared to its quantity
		Weakness in the economic and social welfare infrastructure
		Weakness in cultural infrastructure
		The ineffectiveness of government incentives on people's attitudes toward having more children
	Unbalanced economic conditions	The attractiveness of developed countries in childbearing for parents
		Negative attitude toward a large number of births in the 80s
Intervening Conditions	Inability to plan for the future	Financial crisis in the family
		Presence of acceleration factors for a second pregnancy
	Lack of need for a second child	Lack of supportive cultural and social atmosphere in the current society
		Unpredictable economic situation in the society
		Having a good relationship with the child
	No social pressure from significant others	Having a good relationship with the husband
		Excessive sensitivity and OCD about child-raising in the parents
Alternative Strategies	Second-child replacement	Lack of insistence for childbearing from others due to the unstable and inappropriate social condition
		The satisfaction of the child from being an only child
		Substitution the parents' need for a second child with spending more time with the spouse and doing self-development activities
		Satisfying the only child's need for siblings through relatives' children, friends and entertainment facilities
		Adoption

Category	Sub-Category	Code
Consequences	The only-child status advantages for the child	More care
		Having more amenities
		Being the center of attention
	The only-child status disadvantages for the child	Loneliness
		Weakness in interacting with others
		Parents' extreme sensitivity and dependence on child
		The possibility of the only child being labeled as adopted
	The only-child status disadvantages for the parents	Extreme dependence of family members on each other
		Loneliness
		child-centered family
	Characteristics of only children from the parents' perspective	Positive characteristics
		Negative characteristics
	The effect of only-child status on morals and behavior of the only-child	The negative outcomes of being an only child on the behavior of him/her
		The positive outcomes of being an only child on the behavior of him/her
	Consequences of having only child in the family context	Negative aspects of single-child families
		Positive aspects of single-child families
		The negative impact of having an only child on parents
		The positive impact of having an only child on parents
	Social Distinction	Feeling special compared to others
		Losing the only child
	Fear of the future	The absence of the only child when parents need him/her
		Trauma for the only child in case of parents' death or separation

Participant 9 said, *"My husband and I earn a certain salary. If we have more children, the salary will be divided among more family members while expenses will increase. Besides, having more children hinders quality parenting and care for the last children."* Having the least change in life, before and after having a child, is another concept that focuses on parents' individuality. Participant 2 said, *"People have one chance to live. I prefer that if I spend an hour caring for my child, I would also be able to spend an hour of free time for myself."*

The next main category is the dominance of parents' individuality in the decision about childbearing, which refers to the causes and reasons for this decision, with the individual's emphasis on themselves first and then on the family. For example, Participant 4 and Participant 3 cited their laziness, OCD, and depression as reasons for deciding to have an only child. Participant 4 added, *"my husband's support*

*of this decision made me even more confident."* Other related characteristics include religious beliefs, no preference for the child's gender, and body management, considered important by half of the participants and influenced by their field of study, family background, or personal beliefs. Participant 9 and Participant 4 said, *"It's important to me to maintain fitness to the point that I can still wear clothes from ten years ago."*

After analyzing the data obtained from parents' view on the ideal number of children, it was found that participants who decided to have an only child at the beginning of their marriage considered one child as the ideal number with certainty. On the other hand, those who had an only child procedurally considered two, three, or even four children appropriate. Additionally, mothers' employment has been identified as an essential factor that has increased in recent decades. Participant 2 stated that *"postmodernism has taught people to pay*



*attention to themselves. In the past, women were burdened with family responsibilities regardless of how much they enjoyed life."*

The future and its events are unpredictable and will naturally affect people's decisions in life. The fear of the future category uses having an only child as an appropriate response to this unpredictability. Participant 6 said, *"Each child brings their concerns of upbringing, education, job, and marriage for the parents."* The most crucial reason for the uncertainty about the future was "the lack of guarantee of the usefulness of children for parents in the future." Participant 8 asked, *"Let's assume that I give birth to more children who should be helpful and useful for my husband and me. If the assumption of helpfulness does not materialize, then what? Furthermore, there are four children in my paternal family, and our way of life is not as my parents expected. Would this reality change if my parents had one or two more children?"*

According to the data obtained in the study, some participants believe that those in high social status areas tend to have fewer children, while those in suburban areas with fewer resources tend to have unplanned childbearing. This implies a correlation between social class and family size. Participants viewed having an only child as a characteristic of a low social class, in contrast to gaining social status. Therefore, having an only child is an influential factor that satisfies this aspiration of being recognized as a high-status individual. Participant 11 said, *"Rich and high-level families mostly have one child, and their relations with each other are also excellent."*

The study also investigates the effect of parents' lived experiences from their childhood on their decision to have an only child. Some participants who had good relationships with their siblings in their parental family believe that these relationships and their siblings' children can be a good substitute for their only child's need for siblings. In this case, the only child

will not feel alone and will not experience the tensions of sibling relationships. Participant 8 said, *"I always think that it might be my perfect relationship with my siblings and their children's relationship with my only child that made me never think about having a second child."* On the other hand, having a tense relationship with the parents' family is also a factor that pushes mothers to have an only child. A large family, unsupportive parents, lack of comfort amenities, failure to fulfill the children's needs, and discrimination between children are some factors that have made people feel that having many children is a kind of repetition of their parent's mistakes. Participant 6 said, *"I always wanted to have one child because I was not loved in my family. I had to use my other siblings' stuff and had no privacy."*

The participants in the study gave another reason for deciding to have an only child, which falls under the category effect of child-rearing experience on parents' decisions. This refers to the period of pregnancy and afterward when parents experienced raising their first child. Participant 3 stated, *"I didn't live in the same city as my family, so I had no support during pregnancy and childbirth."* Participant 1 also said, *"I cannot think about having another kid after my first experience. He was always crying and sick when he was just born, and my husband did not help me at all."* In contrast to others, Participant 9 had a positive experience with pregnancy and child-rearing, stating, *"In fact, since I had a good motherhood experience, I didn't want to have a second child because I was afraid that it might not be as pleasant and comfortable as my first experience."*

One of the most important reasons mentioned by the participants falls under the main category of failure in marital life experience. Participant 11 explained, *"My marriage was not based on personal desire, and my family did not support me. So, I decided to have one child from the*

*beginning."* Regarding the quality of the raising process, participants believed it is better to have one well-developed child than many with poor growth and development in various aspects. Participant 5 emphasized this point: *"I think it doesn't matter how many children you add to society. What matters is that what you add is excellent. As a parent, one should allocate enough time and resources for the child to deliver high-quality parenting."* This group of parents considers their resources limited and insists on spending them only on one child, avoiding dividing their resources among multiple children.

### **Contextual Conditions:**

All subcategories in this section relate to macro and structural basics. This section explains the external conditions that affect the decision-making process as well as the continuation of the participants' decisions.

The main category, government's weakness in implementing population policies, refers to the responsibility that every Government has in ensuring the welfare of families and their children. Naturally, defects in fulfilling these responsibilities lead to disruptions in the process of childbearing and child-rearing. Participant 1 said, *"The government does not organize psychology and educational classes for parents."* This claim is the result of high fertility in the 1980s in Iran, which led to many problems in society for the generation of the 1980s and even two generations later.

The financial crisis is one of the reasons all the participants talked about. Participant 2 said, *"When I was pregnant, we faced a financial crisis and had to live on a minimum salary. It was really challenging for us to purchase clothing, diapers, and other essential items for the kid."* The role of significant others is influential in people's decisions in social life, and the participants of this study are no exception to this rule. Only-child families are often questioned due to their deviation from the typical family structure and childbearing

norms. When they receive approval from their significant others, it reinforces their decision and makes them more determined. In fact, they achieve a sense of relative satisfaction about their decision. The code of no social pressure from significant others also refers to the role of this social group, but with this difference: the accelerated factors regarding the second pregnancy existed; however, they did not affect the parents' decisions.

### **Intervening Conditions:**

The participants in this research have decided to have only one child, and several intervening factors have influenced this decision. One of the fundamental reasons is that the child is satisfied with being an only child and does not insist on having siblings. Participant 1 stated that her son is happy and repeatedly says he does not want to share his time and belongings with another child. The second reason is the inability to plan for the future of the child and the family, which is a significant concern for the participants. The unstable societal conditions and limited opportunities make them apprehensive about their children's future. Participant 2 expressed guilt for having one child in a third-world country, let alone having another.

Regarding the continuation of the participants' decision to have an only-child family, there are intervening conditions that have led them not to consider having a second child. The child's satisfaction with being an only child, or, on the other hand, the child's lack of insistence on having siblings, is one of the fundamental reasons given by the participants for not considering changing their family size. Participant 1 said, *"My son is happy being an only child. He repeatedly says he does not want to share his time and stuff with another child."*

The participants' second fundamental reason and biggest concern is the inability to plan for the future of the child and the family. The unpredictable structural

conditions and limited opportunities in society make them worry about the future their children will face. Participant 2 said, *"I feel guilty for having even this only child in the society we live in as a third-world country, let alone having another child."* Furthermore, there was no pressure from the parents' families, friends, and relatives due to the unstable societal situation. Therefore, no positive signals have been received regarding second childbearing.

The participants in this research believed several factors prevented them from considering having a second child. Participant 6 expressed her thoughts on the matter by saying, *"My husband and I are a team. We do not feel the need for a third person to share our time and energy with. We have the same interests and enjoy spending time together. Having more children would ruin our perfect relationship."* Participant 10 and Participant 8 shared a similar perspective on their relationship with their child, stating that spending time with their child is enjoyable for them. They also added that they do not know how to manage and adapt to the needs and personalities of multiple children, especially of different genders.

The last inhibiting factor is related to parents' habits and upbringing methods. Participant 5 shared her experience: *"My husband is very sensitive about our child's behavior and puts a lot of pressure on me to be a perfect mom. This has made motherhood tough and challenging for me."* Participant 4 also confirmed the difficulty of motherhood, saying, *"I have OCD and depression. I take care of my child extremely and always ensure he is neat and clean. It makes me panic to think about having a second child."* However, the intervening conditions alone cannot be considered necessary and sufficient for the decision to have an only child.

### **Alternative Strategies:**

The categories presented in this section pertain to the solutions that the participants

have adopted to address the shortcomings of having an only child in the family, whether directed at the only child or the parents.

The main category in the strategy section is Second-child replacement, which refers to the parent's behavior after deciding to have an only child in order to compensate for the lack of a second child and the issues arising from having an only child. One such strategy is satisfying parents' needs by using replacements such as pets, hiring a nurse, or employing a maid. Participant 10 copes with her loneliness by reading books, watching movies, and spending time with her husband and pet. Hiring nurses and maids to fill the void left by the absence of children has also been reported. For instance, Participant 11 stated, *"As I have only one child, I can save money, and now I can hire a nurse for myself. If I had more children, I could not afford it."*

Another important repeated claim to compensate for the need for a second child is adoption. Participant 3 said, *"I think having an adopted child is good. This way, you do not have to deal with childbirth and pregnancy troubles. Of course, my husband is against this idea to some extent. Honestly, he cannot accept that we raise a child not of our blood and genes."* Moreover, among participants who were thinking about adoption as a strategy, there was a fear of treating the children (the biological child and the adopted one) with discrimination. Some have also said that caring for orphaned children who are related to their relatives and friends can be a solution. Following this context, Participant 1 said: *"We have indirectly taken care of 2-3 orphaned children, one of whom is my nephew."*

Another crucial category related to this section is the need for an only child to have siblings. Parents attempt to fulfill this need by implementing alternative strategies. The most important methods of meeting this need are relatives' children and making friends. For instance, Participant 5 believes

that "my nieces are like siblings to my only child. Additionally, the current generation does not necessarily require siblings who are related by blood. They have a broad social circle of friends, and their social connections enable them to have no shortage in this regard. They go on trips, parties, coffee shops, and hang out with their friends, something they could seldom experience with their siblings."

### **Consequences:**

The main and subcategories extracted in this section pertain to the consequences of having an only child in the family and its effect on the members and their relationships. According to the participants' responses, this decision's effects have positive and negative elements, outlined below.

Having an only child has consequences for the participants, their marital life, and the only children themselves, which can be generally classified into two categories: advantages and disadvantages. Subcategories mentioned as "advantages of the only-child status for the child" from the mothers' perspective include more care, access to more amenities, and being the center of attention. Participant 8 stated: "We are saving money for his future. Currently, he has access to all suitable amenities and entertainment for his age. Since he is an only child, he is special among others and his peers. He receives enough attention and affection from the people around."

The opposite viewpoint of the previous main category is the disadvantages of being an only child for the child. Participant 4 said this about her son: "He refuses to attend parties and travel with us because he doesn't have someone to play with." Weakness in interacting with others and parents' extreme sensitivity and dependence on children are also among the factors that the participants mentioned as a result of growing up as an only child in a mature environment consisting of only parents. Participant 8 said: "My child grew up in an

environment where only two adults were present, and there were no other siblings to comprehensively experience the stages of growth and socialization in the family. So, he has not learned behaviors such as competition, interaction, and problem-solving in crisis situations well. We are afraid that he may have problems in his future life when he gets married," said Participant 7, highlighting one dimension of these disadvantages: "The fact that our family is different from the majority of society leads to doubts from those around us that our only child may not be our biological child and may have been adopted. Others have told us many times to keep the photos of the baby's birth in the hospital so we can document it in the future."

Similar to what was mentioned in the disadvantages of being an only child for the child, it can also happen for parents. Participant 7 said, "If our child emigrates, it will have an adverse emotional effect on my husband and me." Participant 2 also describes the loneliness of only-child parents: "Our parents became lonely at the age of 70-80, but we, who have an only child, will become lonely at the age of 45-50." As there are only three members in only-child families, the departure of each member is noticeable to the other members. A form of child-centered family can also occur as children impose their opinions and have significant power and influence over family decisions. Participant 1 said, "My son expects us to save our money for him and financially support him in starting his business and marriage. He has a plan for these stages and said we should continue supporting him financially for even five years after his marriage."

The consequences of the decision to have an only child for the only children themselves are effective in the emergence of positive and negative characteristics in them. The participants in this research believe that raising only children with two adults and seeing mature behavior during



the period of growth, education, and socialization in the family leads to the formation of positive characteristics. Participant 7 said, *"My child has learned to wait well. He knows that, while he is different, he should not have a false sense of superiority over other members of society."* Participant 10 said, *"My child is independent and can handle her work alone. She can stay at home alone and manage her problems."* Participant 1 also believes that her son has excellent social relations with people who are older than him, and this has helped him a lot in his career development. However, characteristics such as being spoiled, fragile, irresponsible, selfish, high expectations, and isolated are some things the participating mothers in this research thought their only children would suffer in the future. Participant 6 said, *"However when parents spend all their attention, love, and money on the only child if one gives so many amenities and attention to a grown man, he will eventually become spoiled too, let alone a kid."*

Another consequence that mothers have noticed is related to the family sphere. Participant 7 said, *"My husband and I will be lonely in middle age, and when you have an only child, there isn't much excitement in the house."* On the other hand, some mothers also expressed the positive aspects of having an only child in their family. *"All three of us have common interests,"* said Participant 2. *"Trips, movies, picnics, and gatherings for three people are enjoyable for us,"* she added. *"Husband's dissatisfaction with the wife paying more attention to the child than to him" and "dividing the wife's attention between the child and the husband,"* as Participant 7 and Participant 5 mentioned, are some negative impacts having an only child on parents.

However, Participant 11 and Participant 10 have different views regarding the effects of having an only child: *"A house with one child is calmer and quieter. Also, having an only child means spending more time with*

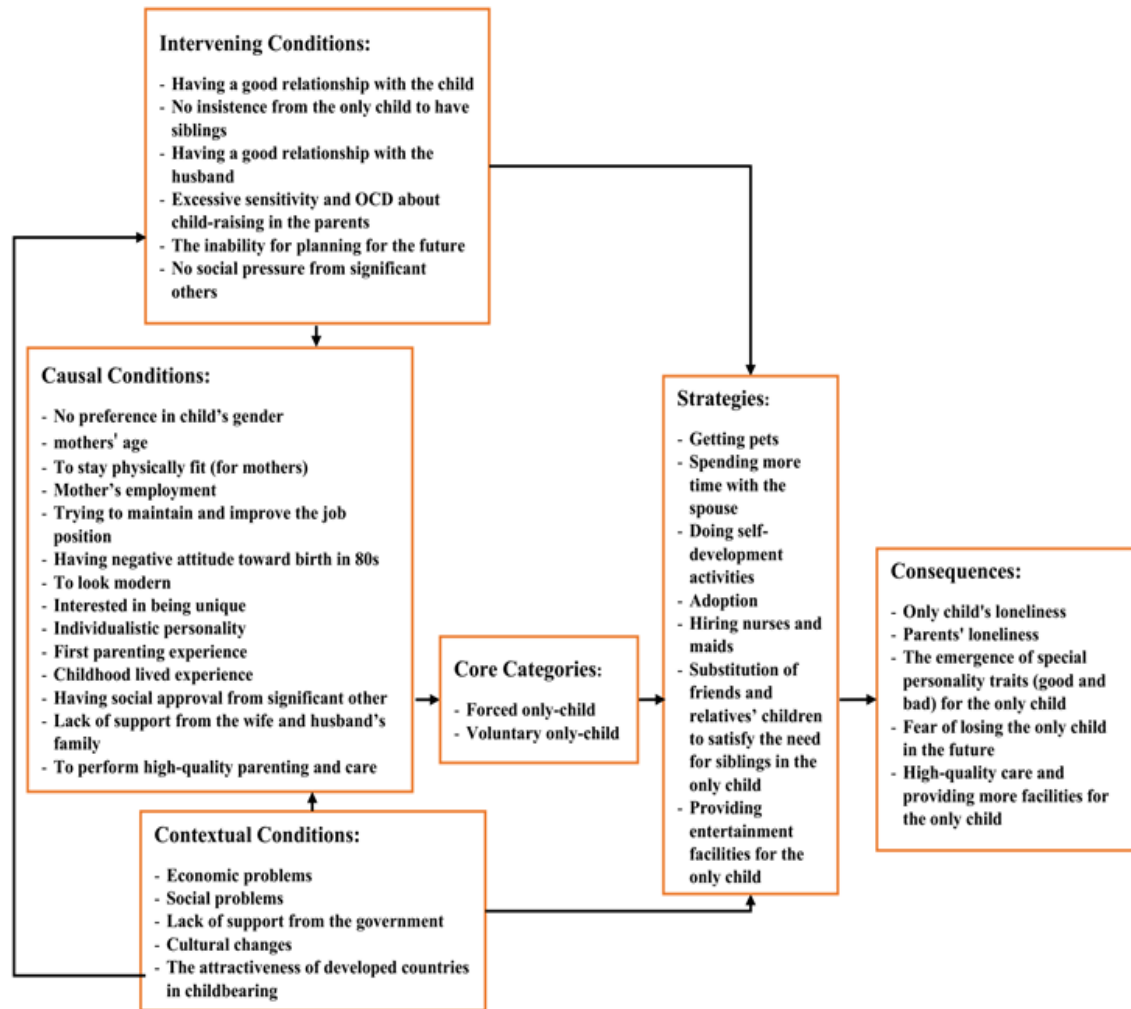
*the spouse, and the couple will have a warmer relationship."* The social distinction is another consequence of the one-child phenomenon for parents. Looking modern, feeling young, looking high class, having high prestige in family gatherings, etc., are some things they mentioned as social distinctions.

The main category of fear of the future is derived from subcategories representing the characteristics of an unknown future. Hesitation in the decision to continue being an only-child family or having more children, being worried about the future of the child's life and career, and worrying about the possibility or impossibility of financing more children in Iran in the future are all things that participants mentioned as mental concerns about the unknown future. Many of them did not want to take risks to have more children due to the unpredictability of the future. Some others have concerns about the future due to having an only child, the most important of which is the removal of one or both parents and the trauma inflicted on the child.

## Discussion

This study examined the factors influencing fertile Iranian women's decision to have only one child, identifying two groups: voluntary only-child families, driven by modern societal shifts prioritizing education, careers, and individuality, and forced only-child families, constrained by external challenges such as economic instability and inadequate support. Intervening factors, including family dynamics and uncertainties about the future, reinforced these decisions. The findings reveal both advantages, such as improved care for the only child and a harmonious family environment, and challenges, including loneliness and dependency. Using grounded theory, this study developed a theoretical model that captures the complex interplay between individual preferences, socio-economic conditions, and cultural dynamics in





**Figure 1 - The Final Theoretical Model of the Decision to Have an Only Child among Mothers**

shaping reproductive decisions. Figure 1 is presenting these concepts.

After discovering the decision-making process to have an only child and maintain it in the studied families, it was concluded that people fall into two groups. The first group, called "voluntary only-child," planned to have an only child from the beginning of their marriage due to their preference for individuality. This group's decision was influenced by the emergence of modernity in Iran's traditional society, where women's employment has become an important issue (43). Aghayari et al. (44) confirm that women's value system has shifted towards thoughts such as gender equality and social activities for women. Therefore, couples prefer to have fewer children due to the increase in women's

education and employment levels as well as delayed childbearing (22). The majority of participants in the study are employed and consider their job and career advancement as essential factors for having an only child. (fig. 1)

Participants also mentioned that an increase in the age of mothers is a factor that prevents them from considering a second child. This trend is linked to the postponement of marriage, as noted in studies by Zeman et al. (22) and Raymo (40). People's desire to be unique and different in the modern era has also contributed to a preference for delayed motherhood. In countries with low fertility rates, such as China and Iran, there is an increasing desire for delayed motherhood due to the postponement of marriage and

first birth and a reduction in adolescent births (22, 40). In Iranian society, where the dominant pattern of childbearing is multiple children, having an only-child family can fulfill people's desire to be different.

According to Razavizadeh, Ghaffarian, and Akhlaghi (38), supporting Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction (45), objectives such as the importance of fitness, travel, and social activities indicate new elements of identity. This new identity creates new expectations for women in their home and community environments. In addition, concerns about parenting and the desire to provide an ideal environment for the existing child are important reasons for participants to maintain their decision to have an only child. The belief that having a second child might limit the opportunities of the existing child is another factor contributing to this decision.

The second group, called "forced only-child," consists of those who would like to have more children, but factors beyond their control affect this desire and, ultimately, their fertility. Economic problems were frequently mentioned in interviews, aligning with Becker's economics and fertility theory (46).

The research data also supports the exchange theory, which suggests that people's behaviors change according to the rewards they receive and the costs they bring (22, 36, 38). The lack of government support and inadequate facilities for families with children, combined with Iran's unstable economic conditions, make it unfavorable to have more children. The social, cultural, and religious aspects of society and the unstable labor market also affect childbearing attitudes (22, 36, 38, 40). As a result of these factors, parents are pushed towards having only one child during a process in their life. Therefore, this category is called the "forced only-child." According to the findings of the current research and in confirmation of the Lukšík et al. (37) study, comparing the first group (forced only-child) to the second group

(voluntary only-child), people's individualism is considerably more effective in the second group's decision to have an only child.

Meanwhile, some factors aggravate the maintenance of the decision to be an only-child family. The intervening conditions cannot be a necessary and sufficient condition for this decision. Based on rational choice theory (47), having a good relationship with the spouse and child is an important factor in stabilizing the family size. Satisfaction and positive interactions between couples and their child help them feel content with their decision (38, 48). Additionally, unfavorable cultural, social, and economic conditions in Iranian society contribute to the formation of mental norms that reduce the value and function of childbearing, leading to a lack of social pressure from significant others (36, 37, 38, 41, 49, 50, 51). Therefore, women's perception of motherhood significantly determines whether they need a second child.

Both groups ultimately decided to have an only child due to contextual and causal conditions, resulting in positive and negative consequences for parents and the only child. Parents face negative effects such as loneliness, fear of losing their child, and extreme dependence (27). Meanwhile, the only child may experience negative consequences such as being spoiled, severe dependency, and loneliness (32, 33). Regarding the positive aspects of this decision, personality traits such as independence, self-confidence, maturity, and good communication skills with adults are observed in only children (41). Parents may also experience a more peaceful family environment and can provide better quality care and parenting for their children (2).

Parents employ various strategies to address negative consequences (52). These include getting a pet, seeking companionship from friends and relatives, and hiring maids or nurses to cope with loneliness.

## Conclusion

This study found that Iranian mothers' decision to have only one child stems from an interplay of personal preferences, socio-economic constraints, and cultural norms. Two groups emerged: *voluntary only-child families*, prioritizing individuality, career advancement, and modern lifestyle choices, and *forced only-child families*, constrained by economic hardship, inadequate governmental support, and unstable societal conditions.

The results indicate that financial stability and a supportive caregiving and educational environment are primary factors influencing the decision to have more children. Notably, half of the participants stated they would have expanded their families if they had financial support and relief from household responsibilities.

While the choice offers benefits such as greater attention and resources for the child, it also brings challenges, including potential loneliness and dependency for both parents and children. Addressing economic and structural barriers through targeted policies could encourage larger family sizes, while respecting evolving family values in modern Iranian society.

## Authors' contribution

Hossein Akbari and Majid Fouladian prepared the study design, supervised the execution of the interviews, and contributed to the extraction and validation of concepts and categories. Haniyeh Sedaghat conducted the interviews, coded them according to the research design, and prepared the initial draft. All authors contributed to the intellectual content, manuscript editing, and read and approved the final manuscript.

## Ethical considerations

In conducting interviews, ethical principles were upheld by obtaining informed consent from participants and ensuring the confidentiality of their information, thereby respecting their autonomy and privacy.

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## Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

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