Review Paper

Investigating Demographic Factors Related to Child-bearing Intention in Iranian Couples: A Scoping Review

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ABSTRACT

Background and Objective: The childbearing rate has decreased significantly in the last decade, especially in developing countries. Considering the importance of demographic factors related to childbearing intention, the present study aims to review demographic factors related to childbearing intention among Iranian couples.

Materials & Methods: This study is a scoping review conducted in five stages: designing the study question, searching electronic databases, extracting studies related to the research, tabulating information, and reporting the results. The search was conducted with keywords in databases, including SID, PubMed, Magiran, Irandoc, ScienceDirect, Scopus, and Google Scholar, from 2013 to 2024. The quality screening of the studies was performed using the AXIS (appraisal tool for cross-sectional studies) checklist.

Results: After reviewing the literature, 380 articles were obtained. Finally, 15 studies were selected after screening. The related factors introduced in this study include gender, age, education, place of residence, religion, culture and religiosity, access to media, and economic issues.

Conclusion: Based on the study results, many demographic factors are related to the childbearing intention in Iranian couples. Considering the importance of childbearing intention, it is possible to increase it by designing interventions to weaken the negative and strengthen the positive factors.

Keywords: Childbearing, Iran, Couples, Demographic factors

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Introduction

Childbearing is one of the crucial social issues. It is considered as an important factor for sustainable development, especially for countries with a low level of succession [1]. Fertility is the primary driver of population size and composition. Fertility decline is the determining factor in population aging, and the fertility rate has crucial consequences for the age structure of the future population [2, 3]. The continuous decrease in fertility drives out the population's age structure from the state of youth and directs it toward old age. Therefore, the age pyramid of Iran's population, which throughout history has always had a broad base and more than 40% of the total population was young and younger than 15 years, has changed in the last two decades due to the decrease in fertility, and a kind of indentation at the base of the pyramid has been created [4, 5]. Iran's population age pyramid moves from youth to old age. If the starting point of the essential and continuous decrease in fertility in Iran is considered to be 1986, the population structure of Iran will be entirely aged by the end of 2046. According to the World Bank, the growth rate of Iran's population will reach below 1% by 2025 [6, 7].

The childbearing intention between married men and women and the factors affecting it created significant recognition in demographic developments. In addition, recognizing practical factors overshadows the development of plans and macropolicies. Therefore, the lack of recognition of this critical issue causes adverse demographic developments that directly affect the political, cultural, and economic sectors, leading to a social imbalance. According to a sociological explanation, the unprecedented decrease in fertility leads to a change in the function of the family and children in urban societies [8, 9]. Industrialization, urbanization, and administrative system expansion have been considered practical factors in transforming Western societies in recent centuries. Urbanization has been associated with a series of labor divisions in all areas of life and a high degree of social and spatial mobility [10].

As mentioned, various factors can be related to childbearing. To date, several studies have been conducted so that researchers, managers, and policymakers can examine various factors related to childbearing and make informed decisions using these studies [11]. Various studies in the field of childbearing either examined related factors in women [6], were at the global level [7, 8], or qualitatively examined this issue [9]. However, examining related factors in Iranian couples as a unit (not men or women separately) can express these factors rather comprehensively and be a practical step toward childbearing management and policies. Therefore, owing to the lack of a review study on couples and the importance of childbearing, the present study was conducted to review the demographic factors related to childbearing intention in Iranian couples. The relative advantage of this research is its unique focus on Iranian couples in a sociocultural context specific to Iran.

Materials and Methods

This study is a scoping review. It was conducted in five stages: Designing the research question, searching and extracting related studies, selecting related studies, tabulating and summarizing information and data, and reporting the results [11].

The research question

What demographic factors relate to childbearing intention in Iranian couples?

Search strategy

The researchers used the following keywords and their Persian equivalents in their search strategy:

Population: Iranian couples,

Exposure: Childbearing intention,

Comparison: Couples who do not want to have children, and

Outcome: Social factors related to the childbearing intention.

Search in existing databases

After selecting the research topic, the research question was defined and formulated, and the considered keywords were extracted using the MeSH. All related studies were extracted using keywords selected during the search. EndNote software, version X8 was used for resource management. Articles were extracted based on the selection criteria of the two research team members. Both reviewed the articles independently. Finally, in case of disagreement, the discussed articles were jointly evaluated. This approach was adopted to increase accuracy and reduce errors in extracting articles. After removing duplicates, unrelated articles were identified based on the title, abstract, and full text. Scientific Information

Database (SID), PubMed, Magiran, Irandoc, Science-Direct, Scopus, and Google Scholar search engine databases were searched to identify all electronic articles published between 2013 and 2024. In addition, the list of sources of the identified articles was manually searched in journals to extract articles with related topics. The final search was conducted on September 30, 2024. The keywords used in the search were as follows: Childbearing, effective factors, related factors, demographic factors, social factors, culture, religion, race, place of residence, job, education, age, sex, social media, economic situation, Iran. Persian equivalents were also searched in Persian databases.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The inclusion criteria included observational studies, both cross-sectional, descriptive, and descriptive-analytical cohorts, which investigated the demographic factors related to childbearing in Iranian couples, and studies in which the sample size and the study results were fully stated. The exclusion criteria included a summary of articles presented in conferences, booklets, and grey text (including research reports, theses, conferences, and booklets) that lacked full text.

Extracting articles based on selection criteria

All studies investigating demographic factors related to childbearing intentions in Iranian couples were extracted during the search. After removing duplicates, unrelated articles were identified via title, abstract, and full text, and the researchers selected the final articles.

Checking the quality of articles based on the checklist

AXIS (appraisal tool for cross-sectional studies) is a tool for critical evaluation in cross-sectional studies. It can be used in systematic reviews of health research groups and physicians, the development of guidelines, journal clubs, and other review studies [12]. AXIS was developed based on evidence, epidemiological processes, and the experience of researchers and Delphi participants. This tool examines five sections: Introduction, methods, results, discussion, and other information. Some titles were divided into other subsets and consisted of 20 paragraphs. Seven of the final questions (1, 4, 10, 11, 12, 16, and 18) were related to the quality of reporting, 7 (2, 3, 5, 8, 17, 19, and 20) related to the quality of the study design, and 6 (6, 7, 9, 13, 14, and 15) to the introduction of possible biases in the study. The answer options to the questions included "yes", "no", "I do not know", or a comment (yes, no, don't know/comment). This study used 16 items to evaluate and check biases critically; this checklist only examines the crucial criteria of a cross-sectional study and has no grading [12] (Table 1).

Data extraction and final report

After studying the abstracts and full texts of eligible articles, data were extracted to write the present study. The data necessary for each study included the author's name(s), year of publication, objectives, sample size, tools, and results. Finally, the data extracted from the articles were classified and reported as the full text of the review article (Table 2).

Collecting and information processing

A total of 372 articles were identified using these keywords. The information resources management Endnote software, version X8 was used to organize the studies. Eight articles were identified in the manual search. In the first step, 160 duplicate articles were removed from the different databases. After reading the titles, summaries, and full texts, some articles were removed, and finally, 15 studies were selected (Figure 1).

Results

The literature review showed a significant relationship between demographic factors, including age, sex, education, residence, economic status, and couples' tendency to have children [10, 11, 13-16, 20-24]. The study participants included both genders. The age range of the participants was 15-52 years of reproductive age. In this study, only those that investigated couples were examined. The total number of participants in the 15 studies evaluated was 26712 couples [10, 11, 13-25]. In addition, studies have indicated that gender can be related to childbearing intention [14, 16, 18]. Also, age is one of the related factors to childbearing [13, 16, 24]. Studies have shown that childbearing intention decreases with age [13, 16]. In another study, old age was considered a motivating factor for childbearing [24]. The place of residence is another demographic characteristic with a significant relationship with childbearing. The evaluated studies stated that urbanization is a crucial inhibiting factor compared to living in the countryside [18, 20]. Various studies have shown that education can affect people in two ways. It can create some jobs, such as employees in people and some women due to running away from the workplace and taking leaves and childbearing benefits. However, in some cases, when people's education is at higher levels due to prominent positions in women,
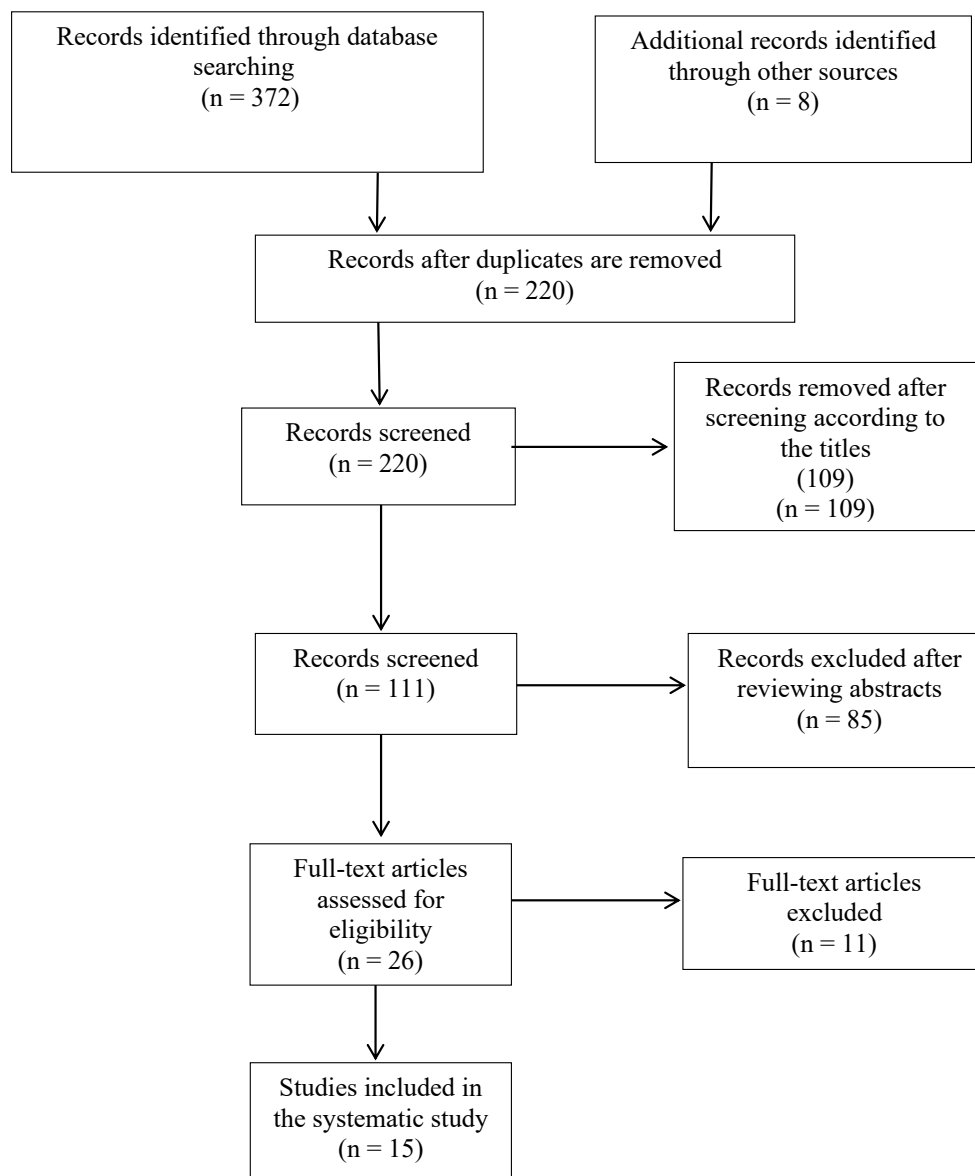
Zamani F, et al. Examining Demographic Factors Affecting Childbearing Intentions in Iranian Couples. CPR.2024; 2(3):153-162.

155

Figure 1. Evaluation process of studies

childbearing is considered a limiting factor for people [16, 20, 23, 24]. These studies have pointed out that some factors, such as culture and religion governing the society, are related to childbearing [17-19].

In the theories of these studies, it has been stated that some traditional societies force women to have more children due to restrictions on people, such as lack of education or employment, or other traditions due to survival, and more generations force people to have more children. In some cultures, children are considered a labor force, and having more children means having more power in the family [17-19]. One study described media as facilitating and hindering factors in childbearing. They considered the media, according to its content, as an encouraging or inhibiting factor; for example, things like modernity or individualism or raising domestic animals instead of childbearing in the media can reduce childbearing intention. On the other hand, large families in cyberspace can also be effective advertisements to increase childbearing intentions [17]. In one study, economic issues were not among the factors that reduced childbearing intentions. This study stated that a decrease in income and low economic status did not affect the decrease in childbearing and vice versa [14].

However, in 6 studies, economic issues are related to childbearing intention. These studies have stated that economic status can be one of the crucial motivations for fertility [20, 13-25]. In another study, it has been stated that

Table 1. Data extraction

No.	Author(s) and Study Year	Objective	Study Design	Sample Size	Tool	Results
1	Rastegarkhaled & Moghadami 2018 [20]	Examining gender differences in attitudes toward children	Descriptive-analytical	300 couples by clustering method	Researcher-made questionnaire	Age, emotional dimensions, education, and economic benefits directly and indirectly relate to childbearing.
2	Nafisi et al. 2013 [14]	Examining the childbearing intention on the eve of marriage and some related factors in Iran	Descriptive-analytical	12858 couples by convenience sampling	Researcher-made questionnaire	Gender has a significant relationship with the childbearing intention and the desired number of children, and these two, especially the childbearing intention, are stronger in men. People with more siblings tend to have more children. Education and Internet use have a significant negative relationship with childbearing intention and the desired number of children. Spouse's income has a significant relationship with both. The variety and complexity of cultural beliefs are related to the childbearing intention and the desired number of children.
3	Khadivzadeh et al. 2015 [15]	The first childbearing experience of fertile couples in the urban population of Mashhad City, Iran		450 couples by convenience sampling	Questionnaires of Miller's fertility preferences and attitude to governmental incentives especially childbearing	Positive and negative fertility motivations, perceived maternal self-efficacy, couples' relationships, the number of sisters, and religious beliefs related to childbearing affect the interval between marriage and childbearing.
4	Mahmoudian & Mahmoudiani-Gilan 2014 [16]	A comparative study of men's and women's attitudes toward the desired number of children (a case study of people about to get married referring to selected health centers in Kermanshah City, Iran)	Descriptive-analytical	400 men and women getting married	Researcher-made questionnaire	Age of marriage, level of education, occupation, and the presence of sexual preference among men have a significant effect on the dependent variable.
5	Kaveh Firooz et al. 2018 [17]	The effect of cultural and social capital on the attitude toward childbearing (case study: Tehrani couples intending to get married)	Descriptive-analytical	400 couples by stratified multistage method	Researcher-made questionnaire	A positive and significant statistical relationship is observed between social participation, social trust, and social support and couples' attitudes toward childbearing. A significant relationship is also observed between virtual social networks, institutional, cultural capital, embodied cultural capital, and couples' attitudes toward childbearing.
6	Torabi et al. 2017 [18]	Comparison of women's and men's attitudes toward childbearing time	Descriptive-analytical	400 men and women getting married by convenience sampling	Researcher-made questionnaire	According to the results, the variable of men's place of residence had an independent and significant effect on their attitude toward the distance between marriage and the birth of the first child. Urban men were more inclined to delay the birth of their first child than rural men.

Zamani F, et al. Examining Demographic Factors Affecting Childbearing Intentions in Iranian Couples. CPR.2024; 2(3):153-162.

157

No.	Author(s) and Study Year	Objective	Study Design	Sample Size	Tool	Results
7	Yavarian Baei et al. 2021 [19]	The effect of parents' religiosity on their attitude towards childbearing	Descriptive-analytical	460 couples by simple randomization	Researcher-made questionnaire	A relationship is observed between parents' religiosity, commitment to and performance of religious duties, and attitude toward childbearing, while no relationship is observed between the factors of parents' religiosity, religious emotions, and attitude toward childbearing. Also, a relationship is observed between parents' religiosity and the number of children.
8	Rastegarkhaled & Moghadami 2018 [20]	Investigating the relationship between secular values and attitudes toward children in couples aged 15-49 in Tehran City, Iran	Descriptive-analytical	384 couples by cluster sampling method	Researcher-made questionnaire	Education, economic interests, place of residence, tradition, and the value of children had a significant relationship with the childbearing intention.
9	Ghazanfarpour et al. 2018 [21]	Motivation of childbearing in engaged Iranian couples: A structural equation model	Descriptive-analytical	450 couples by convenience sampling method	Researcher-made questionnaire	The couple's education, religious beliefs and religiosity, economic status, and marital status were significantly related to the childbearing intention.
10	Bagi, 2021 [22]	Desire to be childless and have only one child among newly married couples in Iran	Descriptive-analytical	8977 couples by clustering method	Researcher-made questionnaire	Economic, ethnic, and personality issues are crucial to childbearing intention.
11	Lotfi et al. 2017 [23]	Desired number of children, fertility preferences, and related factors among couples referring to premarital counseling in Alborz Province, Iran	Descriptive-analytical	300 couples by convenience sampling method	Fertility preferences questionnaire	Increasing the age of marriage and the desire for higher education, the time interval between marriage and the birth of the first child had a direct relationship with the decrease in childbearing intention.
12	Hamidifar et al. 2017 [24]	Risk society and childbearing: A study in Rasht City, Iran	Descriptive-analytical	300 couples by convenience sampling method	Researcher-made questionnaire	Age, marriage age, and level of education had a significant relationship with the childbearing intention.

a favorable economic situation can be considered one of the relevant criteria for the number of children. However, an unfavorable economic situation does not necessarily prevent childbearing [23].

Discussion

This study reviewed factors related to childbearing intentions in Iranian couples. Childbearing is a crucial challenge in population science in today's society. It is one of the vital topics in every society's social and cultural issues [25]. In Iran, owing to the decrease in population growth, even if it has not reached the replacement line of couples, the lack of childbearing has become a problem. The current study investigated demographic factors related to childbearing intentions among Iranian couples. The reviewed studies divided these factors into inhibitors and facilitators [25, 26]. In this review, 11 studies were selected to determine the demographic factors related to childbearing intention in Iranian couples [13-24]. Rastegarkhaled and Moghadami [20] investigated gender differences in attitudes toward childbearing. They showed that age, emotional dimensions, education, and economic benefits directly and significantly related to childbearing [13]. In this study, old age was considered one of the factors inhibiting childbearing intention, and older people felt less of the need to have children

Table 2. Quality assessment based on AXIS

Questions / Author(s), Study-Year	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
Nafisi et al. 2013 [14]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	I do not know	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	I do not know	No	Yes	Yes
Khadivzadeh et al. 2015 [15]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	I do not know	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	I do not know	No	Yes	Yes
Mahmoudian & Mahmoudiani-Gilan 2014 [16]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	I do not know	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	I do not know	No	Yes	Yes
Kaveh Firooz et al. 2018 [17]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	I do not know	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	I do not know	No	Yes	Yes
Torabi et al. 2017 [18]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	I do not know	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	I do not know	No	Yes	Yes
Yavarian Baei et al. 2021 [19]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	I do not know	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	I do not know	No	Yes	Yes
Rastegarkhaled & Moghadami 2018 [20]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	I do not know	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	I do not know	No	Yes	Yes
Ghazanfarpour et al. 2018 [21]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	I do not know	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	I do not know	No	Yes	Yes
Bagi, 2021 [22]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	I do not know	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	I do not know	No	Yes	Yes
Lotfi et al. 2017 [23]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	I do not know	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	I do not know	No	Yes	Yes
Hamidifar et al. 2017 [24]	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	I do not know	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	I do not know	No	Yes	Yes

AXIS: Appraisal tool for cross-sectional studies

Current Psychosomatic Research

1. Were the objectives of the study clear?

2. Was the study design appropriate for the stated objectives?

3. Was the sample size justifiable?

4. Was the target/reference population clearly defined? What the research was about?

5. Is the sample frame drawn from an appropriate population base to represent the target/reference population under investigation closely?

6. Was the selection process to select individuals/participants who were representative of the target/reference population under investigation coincidence?

7. Were measures taken to handle and classify non-respondents?

8. Were the risk factors and outcome variables measured according to the study's objectives?

9. Were the risk factor and outcome variables properly measured using previously piloted or published instrument measures?

10. What was used to determine statistical significance and/or precision assessments? (Ps, CIs)

11. Are the methods (including statistical methods) sufficiently described to enable their replication?

12. Is the underlying data adequately described?

13. Does response rate raise concerns about non-response bias?

14. If applicable, is information about non-responders explained?

15. Were the results internally consistent?

16. Are the results of the analyses explained in the presented work method?

Zamani F, et al. Examining Demographic Factors Affecting Childbearing Intentions in Iranian Couples. CPR.2024; 2(3):153-162.

159

[13]. These results were also obtained by Mahmoudian and Mahmoudiani-Gilan [16]. However, Hamidifar et al. obtained opposite results, stating that old age is one of the motivating factors for childbearing [24]. In the explanation of this study, it is stated that old age, maturity, and experience will encourage people to survive and increase the desire for childbearing [24].

Rad et al. and Danesh et al. showed in their study that a person's gender has a significant relationship with childbearing intention and the desired number of children, so childbearing is more significant for men due to less pressure in the process of childbearing, so they have a greater desire for this issue. For example, the process of pregnancy, breastfeeding, and the majority of childhood education are the responsibilities of mothers, which reduces their desire to have children [10, 11]. Strengthening job and financial security, providing social support for women for childbearing using the insurance system, and creating favorable working conditions during and after pregnancy can motivate childbearing. In today's society, childbearing intentions have been seen as the benefits of childbearing for women and men. In this way, it is not far from expected that high education and a good job are sometimes considered encouraging factors in childbearing [16, 20].

Compared to rural life, urbanization inhibits childbearing [18, 20]. The researchers stated in their studies that the reason for this relationship is the increase in amenities and culture dominating urban areas [18, 20]. Media is considered to be one of the encouraging factors or among the factors inhibiting childbearing. It can encourage or weaken childbearing intentions [17]. One study did not consider economic issues as factors reducing childbearing intentions. In this study, with a statistical population of 12858 couples, the decrease in income and low economic status were unrelated to a decrease in childbearing intentions [14]. However, in 6 studies, economic issues were related to childbearing intention. In these studies, it has been stated that the economic situation can change the priorities in the family [13-24]. The media and unfavorable patterns sometimes influence a favorable economic situation. It reduces childbearing intentions by living comfortably and free from responsibility. On the other hand, couples are sometimes more willing to have children due to a lack of economic problems and comfort in life [14, 20-24].

Other factors, such as the culture and religion governing a society, can be related to childbearing intention [17-19]. Childbearing intention refers to a person's inner interest in and desire to have children. Still, in terms of childbearing, inner desire may not be the dominant one,

and sometimes, a person is forced to choose the number of children due to culture and customs ruling a society [26, 27]. For example, some Baloch or Turkmen tribes who belong to the Sunni religion have a strong desire to have children to continue their religion. In some cases, the rate of childbearing in some tribes is determined by the elders of those tribes, and the couple is not responsible for making decisions [17-19]. Religious orientation is one of the factors influencing the desired and existing number of children among employed women. Therefore, it is recommended that cultural affairs based on religious education in family and population planning and policies be paid attention to [28]. Although differences are observed in the fertility tendencies of religious groups, socioeconomic characteristics also play a decisive role in the fertility tendencies of people, regardless of their religious affiliation. Based on this issue, the sustainable and comprehensive success of planning and policies aimed at family and childbearing, regardless of their religious affiliations, needs to expand the development level and improve socioeconomic conditions among all people at the level of the whole society as much as possible [29-32]. According to research results, religious beliefs, ethnic cultures, social norms, attitudes related to childbearing, and social networks are among the reasons for childbearing [33, 34].

Conclusion

The results of the current study indicate that broad demographic factors, such as sex, age, education, place of residence, religion, culture, religiosity, access to the media, and economic issues, are related to childbearing intentions in couples. In this way, it is possible to seek help from these factors mentioned in various studies as a guide to knowing the related factors of couples, and by planning to manage or strengthen some of them, help increase childbearing intention. Even though the current research results show the factors related to childbearing and consider that recognizing them can help identify the facilitating and inhibiting factors, it can also help strengthen the family foundation. With correct planning and the help of demographic experts, appropriate educational programs should be designed to explain the necessary training for young people, families, teachers, and professors to encourage them to have children.

In addition, this research's results help recognize facilitating and impeding factors. Thus, it can help strengthen the foundation of the family. Childbearing is one of the ways to strengthen the foundation of the family and young society. It is also one of the crucial goals of health in the country. It is hoped that the results of this study

160

Zamani F, et al. Examining Demographic Factors Affecting Childbearing Intentions in Iranian Couples. CPR.2024; 2(3):153-162.

will be used to improve policies necessary to increase the quality of childbearing programs.

Limitations

This study has some limitations. Although the inclusion criteria for the articles were identified and examined, some of the published studies may still need to be included. One of the other limitations of this study is the difference in the tools to investigate childbearing in different studies. Another limitation of this study was the unavailability of the full text of some articles and the non-inclusion of non-English or non-Persian language studies.

Ethical Considerations

Compliance with ethical guidelines

All ethical principles are considered in this article.

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Authors' contributions

All authors equally contributed to preparing this article.

Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

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161

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162

Zamani F, et al. Examining Demographic Factors Affecting Childbearing Intentions in Iranian Couples. CPR.2024; 2(3):153-162.