




Investigating the Role of the Generation Gap in the Emergence of Emerging Social Harms among Female Beneficiaries under Support in Semnan County

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aims to investigate the role of the generational gap in the emergence of new social harms, with a particular emphasis on prostitution, among female beneficiaries supported by welfare institutions in Semnan County, Iran.

Methods and Materials: The study employed a descriptive-survey research design using a standardized questionnaire to collect data from 260 female beneficiaries aged 20 to 29 years, selected through simple random sampling based on Cochran's formula. The study was conducted in Semnan County during spring to autumn 2021. Validity was confirmed through expert review, and reliability was verified using Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = 0.89$). Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 25, employing Pearson correlation, regression analysis, and t-tests to explore the relationships among the variables: family cohesion, social isolation, depression, and the generational gap.

Findings: Results indicated that the generational gap was significantly and negatively associated with family cohesion ($r = -0.68, p < 0.01$) and positively associated with both social isolation ($r = 0.72, p < 0.01$) and depression ($r = 0.61, p < 0.01$). Regression analysis showed that the generational gap ($\beta = 0.17, p = 0.006$), social isolation ($\beta = 0.20, p < 0.001$), and family cohesion ($\beta = -0.28, p < 0.001$) significantly predicted prostitution tendency. Depression, however, was not a significant predictor in the multivariate model ($\beta = 0.06, p = 0.134$). The model explained 19% of the variance in prostitution tendency ($R^2 = 0.19$).

Conclusion: The study concludes that generational gaps and social isolation significantly contribute to increased prostitution tendency, while family cohesion serves as a protective factor. These findings underscore the need for holistic, intergenerational interventions targeting family dynamics and communication in vulnerable populations.

Keywords: Generational gap, family cohesion, social isolation, prostitution, female beneficiaries, social harms, Iran.

1. Introduction

In contemporary societies undergoing rapid cultural, technological, and value-based transformations, the generation gap has emerged as a central concern in understanding the dynamics of social harm, especially among vulnerable populations. The concept of a “generation gap” encompasses the widening chasm between values, behaviors, and worldviews across generational lines, often fueled by technological innovation, globalization, and media exposure (Castells, 2014; Thomason et al., 2022). This phenomenon, though universal in its contours, takes on unique manifestations in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities where family structures and traditional social control mechanisms are already under strain. In Iran, and particularly among women beneficiaries supported by institutions such as the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation, the generational gap has been implicated in a growing range of social harms—including isolation, depression, and high-risk behaviors such as prostitution (Ghorbani et al., 2021; Mohammadi, 2011; Rezaei, 2019).

The acceleration of media consumption and digital technology usage among younger cohorts has intensified intergenerational dissonance, particularly in traditional and patriarchal cultures where familial authority and religious norms are cornerstones of social cohesion (Amin et al., 2024; Misaghi et al., 2020). Adolescents and young adults increasingly gravitate toward postmodern cultural models presented in global media, often at odds with the expectations of their elders (Berger, 2014; Shalchi & Kolahi Hamed, 2018). The breakdown of mutual understanding between generations not only undermines emotional connectivity within families but also weakens their capacity for informal social control—an issue particularly critical in households already struggling with poverty and social marginalization (Afrough, 2010; Hosseini, 2018).

Sociologists such as Durkheim and Parsons long emphasized the protective function of cohesive family units in safeguarding against social deviance and alienation. In this regard, empirical evidence from Iranian contexts confirms that family cohesion operates as a significant buffer against risky behaviors, while its erosion due to intergenerational conflict and structural deprivation correlates with greater social vulnerability (Formandan, 2017; Hosseini, 2018). Several studies have highlighted how limited economic resources, coupled with declining intra-family solidarity, contribute to the emotional and psychological detachment of youth—especially young

women—from traditional norms, increasing their susceptibility to exploitative relationships and survival strategies such as sex work (Ghorbani et al., 2021; Mohammadi, 2011).

Research conducted on the sociological implications of the generation gap in Iran has found that the conflict of values between parents and children is not merely ideological but is rooted in systemic shifts in access to information, education, and mobility (Sarami, 2015; Soleimani & colleagues, 2019). Youths growing up in digitally networked environments often form identities through interaction with globalized narratives, diverging sharply from the collectivist and religiously oriented identities shaped by older generations (Amin et al., 2024; Castells, 2014). As a result, families are increasingly characterized by moral fragmentation and relational distance, with parents losing the capacity to model and enforce consistent behavioral norms. In such fractured households, particularly those headed by single mothers or affected by economic precarity, this dynamic becomes even more pronounced and perilous.

Women from marginalized and supported backgrounds are especially at risk of experiencing the negative consequences of generational breakdowns. Studies show that among these groups, emotional neglect, social isolation, and the lack of secure attachment figures contribute to heightened levels of depression and vulnerability to exploitation (Aghaei, 2016; Duncan, 2005). Thomason et al. (2022) found that younger generations are more likely to express liberal views regarding behaviors such as prostitution, while older cohorts typically adhere to conservative moral frameworks (Thomason et al., 2022). This divergence, when occurring within the intimate boundaries of the household, can generate cycles of blame, shame, and withdrawal—leaving young women without the social support needed to resist high-risk environments.

In particular, the phenomenon of prostitution among vulnerable women has been analyzed not only as an outcome of economic desperation but as a multifactorial issue tied to social alienation, failed institutional support, and disrupted familial relationships (Ghorbani et al., 2021; Wimshurst, 2013). The generational gap is seen not simply as a communication problem, but as a structural fracture in the mechanisms of identity transmission, behavioral modeling, and moral reasoning (Boichuk & Stadnik, 2023). The absence of role models or authoritative yet empathetic parental figures leaves young women unanchored in the face of complex social pressures. They are exposed to

contradictory messages from digital platforms, religious institutions, and family expectations, leading to internal conflicts and behavioral disorientation (Shalchi & Kolahi Hamed, 2018).

Within the Iranian context, the role of the generation gap in shaping women's vulnerability to social harm has been further amplified by the layering of socio-political restrictions, gender-based inequalities, and under-resourced support systems (Darreshti et al., 2022; Rezaei, 2019). While some studies have argued that generational value differences may be a natural byproduct of modernity and globalization, the intensity of such gaps in fragile households suggests the need for targeted intervention strategies that address both the psychological and structural dimensions of the problem (Formandan, 2017; Sarami, 2015).

The emotional and mental health outcomes of the generation gap have also drawn increasing scholarly attention. Grelle et al. (2023) demonstrated that younger generations reported higher levels of anxiety, depression, and maladaptive coping strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic—partly as a result of disrupted family communication and perceived intergenerational misunderstanding (Grelle et al., 2023). In similar Iranian studies, social isolation has been frequently cited as a mediating factor linking generational conflicts with risky behaviors such as substance abuse and sex work (Aghaei, 2016; Misaghi et al., 2020). These findings suggest that any effective response must include interventions aimed at improving cross-generational dialogue, mental health literacy, and youth empowerment.

The increasing pervasiveness of digital media in shaping youth identities also raises the question of how families can remain relevant as institutions of socialization and support. Research shows that without guidance, digital immersion can deepen the generational gap and expose young women to exploitative online networks and value systems incongruent with local norms (Castells, 2014; Misaghi et al., 2020). Furthermore, gender norms in Iranian society often place disproportionate moral burdens on women while offering limited emotional or economic support, thus compounding their isolation and increasing their susceptibility to coercion or risky survival strategies (Rezaei, 2019; Soleimani & colleagues, 2019).

Against this backdrop, the current study seeks to empirically investigate the role of the generation gap in contributing to emerging social harms, particularly prostitution, among female beneficiaries under institutional support in Semnan County.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study design and Participant

The present study employs a descriptive-survey research design and was conducted with the aim of investigating the role of the generation gap in the emergence of emerging social harms, with an emphasis on prostitution and sex work among female beneficiaries under institutional support in Semnan County. A descriptive-survey design seeks to identify and analyze the relationships among variables without altering their natural conditions, and is particularly effective in examining the social and psychological dimensions associated with the emergence of social problems in specific groups such as institutional beneficiaries. The research was carried out from spring to autumn 2021 in Semnan County, an area selected due to its specific social and economic challenges and the high number of female beneficiaries supported by the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation (IKRF). The statistical population of this study included all female beneficiaries under the support of IKRF in this region. Using Cochran's formula, the sample size was determined to be 260 participants.

2.2. Measures

Data were collected using a standardized questionnaire. To establish the content validity of the instrument, expert opinions were obtained from faculty members and specialists in the fields of sociology, psychology, and social pathology. These evaluations focused on both the conceptual and content-related aspects of the questionnaire, and their feedback led to the confirmation of the instrument's content validity. The reliability of the questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's alpha method. The calculated Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the entire questionnaire was 0.89, indicating a high level of internal consistency and reliability. This result demonstrates that the instrument was both stable and trustworthy, making it suitable for effective data collection. The sampling method employed in this study was simple random sampling. This technique ensures that all individuals in the statistical population have an equal chance of being selected, thereby enhancing the generalizability of the findings to the larger population.

2.3. Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using SPSS version 25. To examine the relationships among the research variables, statistical tests such as Pearson's correlation coefficient,

regression analysis, and t-tests were applied. These statistical techniques enabled the researcher to model and analyze the complex relationships among variables, providing accurate and reliable results to support the study's objectives.

3. Findings and Results

The demographic profile of the participants in this study reveals that the majority of respondents were divorced (54%), followed by those who had lost their spouses (15%),

individuals with absent or unfit guardians (13%), single women (12%), and married women (10%). In terms of age distribution, 70% of the participants were between 20 and 25 years old, while the remaining 30% were in the 25 to 29 age range. Regarding educational attainment, 40% had completed high school, 35% had education below the high school level, and 25% held a university degree. The economic status of the participants showed that a significant majority (90%) lived under poor subsistence conditions, while only 10% reported a relatively adequate standard of living.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Research Variables

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Family Cohesion	3.12	0.82
Social Isolation	3.75	0.64
Depression	3.90	0.72
Generational Gap	3.81	0.68

The descriptive results in Table 1 show that depression has the highest mean score ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 0.72$), followed closely by generational gap ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 0.68$) and social isolation ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 0.64$). In contrast, family cohesion has the lowest mean ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 0.82$), indicating that among the studied population, feelings of depression and

intergenerational disconnect are more prevalent than familial unity. The relatively high means for generational gap and social isolation suggest these are prominent psychosocial dynamics among the female beneficiaries. The standard deviations across variables indicate moderate variability within the sample.

Table 2

Pearson Correlation Coefficients Between Main Variables

Variables	1. Family Cohesion	2. Social Isolation	3. Depression	4. Generational Gap	5. Prostitution Tendency
1. Family Cohesion	1	-0.62**	-0.55**	-0.68**	-0.24**
2. Social Isolation	-0.62**	1	0.59**	0.72**	0.12**
3. Depression	-0.55**	0.59**	1	0.61**	0.05
4. Generational Gap	-0.68**	0.72**	0.61**	1	0.09**
5. Prostitution Tendency	-0.24**	0.12**	0.05	0.09**	1

* $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.01$

As shown in Table 2, family cohesion is significantly and negatively correlated with all other variables, including generational gap ($r = -0.68$, $p < 0.01$), social isolation ($r = -0.62$, $p < 0.01$), depression ($r = -0.55$, $p < 0.01$), and prostitution tendency ($r = -0.24$, $p < 0.01$). These correlations suggest that a decline in familial unity is strongly associated with increased emotional and behavioral vulnerabilities. Moreover, the generational gap shows strong positive correlations with social isolation ($r = 0.72$) and depression (r

$= 0.61$), confirming that intergenerational disconnect contributes significantly to these psychological outcomes. Though the correlation between depression and prostitution tendency is weak and non-significant ($r = 0.05$), the associations of social isolation ($r = 0.12$) and generational gap ($r = 0.09$) with prostitution tendency are weak but statistically significant, reinforcing their cumulative effect on risky behavior in the vulnerable population.

Table 3

Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Prostitution Tendency

Predictor Variable	B	Standard Error	β (Beta)	t	p-value
Constant	1.87	0.29	—	6.45	<0.001
Generational Gap	0.14	0.05	0.17	2.80	0.006
Social Isolation	0.21	0.06	0.20	3.50	<0.001
Depression	0.07	0.05	0.06	1.50	0.134
Family Cohesion	-0.26	0.05	-0.28	-5.20	<0.001

$R = 0.44$; $R^2 = 0.19$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0.18$; $F(4, 255) = 15.02$

The regression model in Table 3 explains approximately 19% of the variance in prostitution tendency ($R^2 = 0.19$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.18$) and is statistically significant ($F = 15.02$, $p < 0.001$). Among the predictors, family cohesion emerged as the strongest and most significant protective factor ($\beta = -0.28$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that higher family unity correlates with a lower likelihood of engagement in prostitution. Both generational gap ($\beta = 0.17$, $p = 0.006$) and social isolation ($\beta = 0.20$, $p < 0.001$) showed significant positive effects, reinforcing their role as critical risk factors in this context. In contrast, depression did not significantly predict prostitution tendency ($\beta = 0.06$, $p = 0.134$), suggesting its effect may be indirect or mediated by other social and familial conditions.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study examined the role of the generational gap in the emergence of new social harms—particularly prostitution—among female beneficiaries supported by welfare institutions in Semnan County. The findings revealed several significant relationships between key psychosocial variables, including family cohesion, social isolation, depression, and the generational gap. Notably, the results highlighted that the generational gap is positively associated with increased social isolation and depression and negatively associated with family cohesion. Moreover, in the regression model, the generational gap and social isolation significantly predicted tendencies toward prostitution, while family cohesion played a strong protective role. Depression, however, did not emerge as a significant predictor when controlling for other variables.

The correlation analysis demonstrated that the generational gap is a central factor in the breakdown of family cohesion and the rise in psychological distress among the women studied. This finding is consistent with previous literature that has underscored the destabilizing effects of

intergenerational conflicts on family dynamics, especially in societies undergoing rapid cultural and technological change. For instance, Afrough (2010) emphasized that cultural transformation, when not mediated through cohesive familial and institutional mechanisms, can exacerbate alienation among younger generations and increase their susceptibility to social harms (Afrough, 2010). Similarly, Mohammadi (2011) observed that in families supported by social welfare institutions, generational gaps are more severe and strongly linked to behaviors such as addiction, prostitution, and delinquency (Mohammadi, 2011). These studies align with the current research, showing how the breakdown in intergenerational communication within vulnerable families can become a breeding ground for high-risk behaviors.

Another key finding of this study was the statistically significant and positive relationship between social isolation and prostitution tendency. Social isolation, often a byproduct of disrupted family relationships and generational misunderstandings, emerged as a powerful mediator of behavioral risk. This is in line with Duncan's (2005) findings, which indicate that adolescents in economically marginalized families who experience diminished parental interaction are more prone to psychological distress and deviant behaviors (Duncan, 2005). Moreover, research by Grelle et al. (2023) during the COVID-19 pandemic confirmed that generational misunderstanding intensifies feelings of social isolation and maladaptive coping, particularly among younger individuals (Grelle et al., 2023). In our study, this pattern was replicated in the target population, with social isolation acting not only as a psychological condition but as a social risk factor that weakens resistance against exploitation and deviance.

Perhaps most importantly, the results showed that family cohesion had a strong and significant negative relationship with prostitution tendencies and served as the strongest

protective predictor in the regression model. This finding echoes Hosseini's (2018) argument that family unity acts as a key deterrent to risky behaviors, particularly in low-income households where external support mechanisms are weak or nonexistent (Hosseini, 2018). Likewise, Formandan (2017) emphasized the central role of familial institutions in maintaining social order and emotional stability, arguing that where family cohesion is high, even structural disadvantages can be mitigated (Formandan, 2017). The current study confirms these insights by showing how family unity reduces the risk of prostitution, regardless of the presence of other risk factors such as depression or generational disconnection.

Interestingly, although depression was positively correlated with both the generational gap and social isolation, it did not significantly predict prostitution when entered into the multivariate regression model. This suggests that while depression is prevalent and emotionally debilitating, it may not function as a direct driver of transactional or risky sexual behavior in the context of this population. Instead, it may act as an indirect factor, or its effects may be overshadowed by more immediate social and familial variables. Previous studies also support this nuanced interpretation. Aghaei (2016) found that while depression contributes to social withdrawal and low self-worth, it is often through social isolation and familial dysfunction that these emotional states translate into deviant actions (Aghaei, 2016). Similarly, Boichuk and Stadnik (2023) suggested that the absence of generational guidance and meaningful intergenerational interaction can leave young women emotionally stranded, increasing their exposure to risky behaviors regardless of their internal affective states (Boichuk & Stadnik, 2023).

The role of the generational gap, beyond its direct effects, can be seen as foundational in shaping the entire psychosocial climate of vulnerable families. Castells (2014) argued that in modern network societies, the pace of technological change far outstrips the capacity of traditional social institutions—especially families—to adapt, creating enduring generational divides (Castells, 2014). In Iran, this divide is further accentuated by rigid gender norms and a lack of open family communication. Misaghi et al. (2020) demonstrated how generational conflicts are exacerbated by differences in media consumption and digital habits, which often introduce youth to value systems that directly contradict those of their parents (Misaghi et al., 2020). In our study, such contradictions appear to have widened emotional and social distances between generations, reducing the

effectiveness of parents' efforts at control, guidance, and emotional support—thus leaving youth vulnerable to external influences and coercive relationships.

Darreshti et al. (2022) also highlighted the impact of cultural dissonance and value clashes within families, particularly in relation to the behavior of young women in urban environments (Darreshti et al., 2022). These findings are highly relevant to the current study, where the young female beneficiaries reported substantial intergenerational tension over norms, expectations, and life choices. Such tensions, when unresolved, foster both social isolation and the pursuit of alternative coping strategies—including entry into exploitative or socially stigmatized roles. Thomason et al. (2022) further illustrated that young people worldwide increasingly question traditional moral stances on issues such as sex work, often viewing them through the lens of individual autonomy rather than moral deviance (Thomason et al., 2022). While such shifts may reflect evolving global values, in contexts where family cohesion and institutional support are lacking, they may also signify deeper crises of identity, belonging, and safety.

The results of this study also resonate with Berger's (2014) analysis of cultural diversity and family structure, which emphasized how modern pluralism often destabilizes traditional family roles and relationships, leaving young people more exposed to external risk factors (Berger, 2014). When cultural transformation is rapid and parental adaptation is slow, children often navigate moral development and life decisions in isolation. This phenomenon was evident among the study's participants, who, despite living within family units, reported significant emotional and communicative disconnects that rendered familial guidance largely ineffective. Moreover, as Soleimani et al. (2019) noted, the rapid emergence of social and cultural crises rooted in intergenerational disconnects requires a comprehensive rethinking of intervention strategies that go beyond economic empowerment to address emotional and cultural dimensions (Soleimani & colleagues, 2019).

Finally, the presence of prostitution as a coping strategy among beneficiaries must be understood in the broader context of "unfinished development," as described by Ghorbani et al. (2021). In their study, they argued that the absence of stable social structures, inadequate institutional support, and enduring cultural transitions create an environment in which marginalized women turn to survival mechanisms deemed socially deviant (Ghorbani et al., 2021). The current findings support this view and suggest

that generational gaps not only reflect changes in values but also expose the inability of traditional structures to offer protection in times of crisis.

5. Limitations and Suggestions

While the study provides important insights into the relationship between the generational gap and social harms, it is not without limitations. First, the study focused exclusively on female beneficiaries in one specific region (Semnan County), which limits the generalizability of the findings to other regions or demographic groups. Second, the use of self-report questionnaires may have introduced social desirability bias, especially concerning sensitive issues like prostitution. Third, while the study measured associations between variables, its cross-sectional design limits the ability to infer causality or long-term developmental trends. Lastly, cultural stigmas may have influenced participants' willingness to disclose information accurately, particularly around topics such as depression or family conflict.

Future studies should consider expanding the geographic and demographic scope of the sample to include both male and female participants from various regions and social classes. Longitudinal studies could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how generational gaps evolve over time and how they interact with structural and psychological variables to produce specific outcomes. Additionally, qualitative research could offer deeper insights into the lived experiences of individuals facing intergenerational conflicts, enabling the exploration of nuanced dynamics and personal narratives that may not be captured through standardized surveys. Incorporating intersectional variables such as ethnicity, religion, and migration status could also reveal how diverse identity dimensions mediate the effects of generational disconnect.

To mitigate the negative effects of the generational gap, policymakers and social service providers should prioritize programs that strengthen family communication and cohesion. Educational workshops aimed at improving intergenerational understanding, especially concerning digital literacy and evolving cultural values, should be integrated into support services. Psychological counseling and group therapy should be made available to both parents and youth to bridge emotional and perceptual divides. Community-based initiatives that foster mentorship, peer support, and safe spaces for expression can empower young women to navigate social pressures without resorting to high-risk behaviors. Most importantly, institutional efforts

should move beyond economic assistance and embrace holistic interventions that address emotional well-being, cultural conflict, and social inclusion.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

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

Transparency Statement

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

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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