

CULTURALLY SPEAKING

The pyramid of power: Understanding Iranian family dynamics

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Family dynamics in Iranian culture are deeply rooted in traditional values, hierarchical structures, and societal expectations that govern behavior within the household and the broader community. This article explores the nuanced roles, responsibilities, and expectations that define the pyramid-shaped family life among Iranians. The discussion sheds light on the complexities of family hierarchies, the impact of cultural norms on divorce, and the role of culture in premarital and marital agreements among family members.

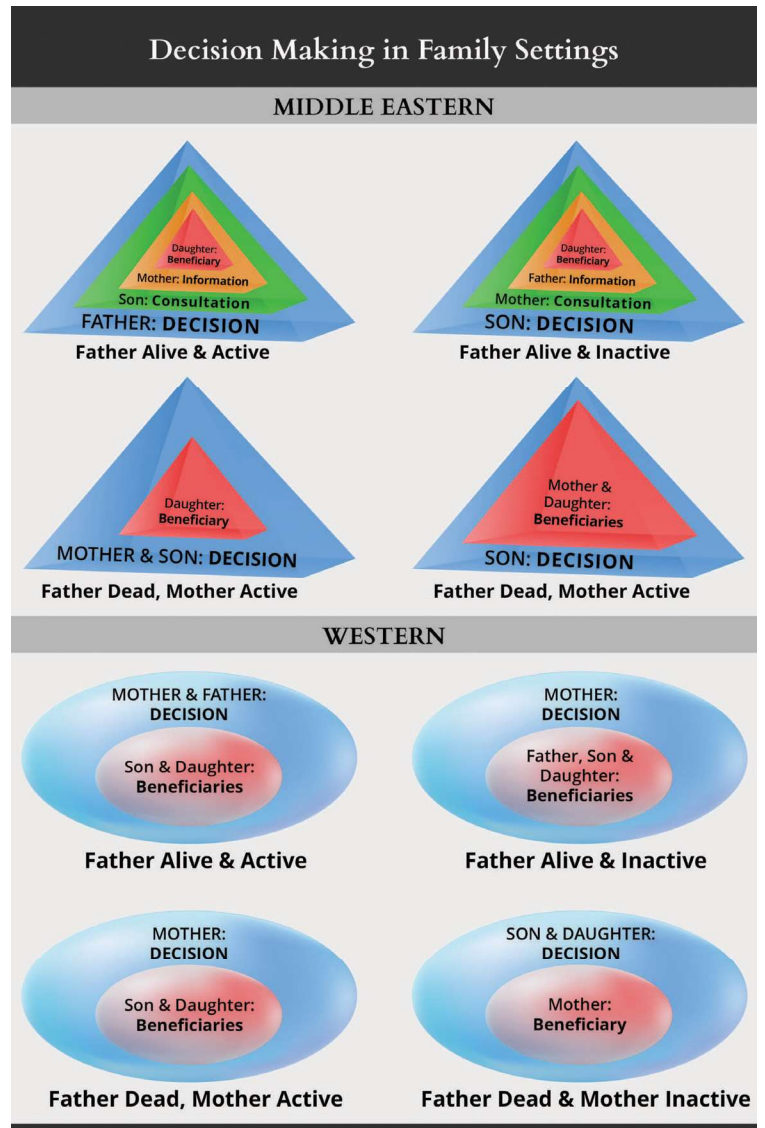
The hierarchical structure of Iranian families

In Iranian culture, families operate within a well-defined hierarchical framework that influences decision-making, roles, and responsibilities. At the top of this hierarchy is the father, who is often considered the head or “boss” of the family. The family structure is described metaphorically as a “diamond” or pyramid, with authority flowing downward from the father to the eldest son and then to other children. This model is not just a matter of familial organization but also reflects deep cultural values about authority, respect,

and the preservation of family honor.

The eldest son, in particular, holds a significant role within this structure. Upon the father’s death or incapacitation, the eldest son is expected to step into his shoes, taking on the mantle of leadership and becoming the “trustee” of the family’s interests. This role involves overseeing family affairs, managing the family business, and making crucial decisions regarding property and other assets. The eldest son’s authority is often unquestioned, and his position is seen as both a duty and a privilege. In this context, any deviation from this norm—such as a younger sibling or a female family member assuming the leadership role—is considered “unusual” and even “unethical” by traditional standards.

The roles of younger sons are more specialized and less authoritative. If a younger son is more educated or possesses specific skills, he may serve as a consultant, accountant, or advisor within the family business. However, his influence is typically limited to his area of expertise, and he is expected to defer to the eldest son’s authority on broader family matters. This delineation of roles helps maintain a balance of power within the family, ensuring that the hierarchy is respected, and the family’s interests are preserved.



The role of women

Women in Iranian families traditionally have more limited roles compared to their male counterparts. The wife or mother is generally expected to manage the household and provide support to her husband, who handles external affairs and financial responsibilities. While this division of labor aligns with traditional Iranian values, it also reflects broader societal norms that prioritize male authority and leadership.

However, the role of women can become more prominent in certain circumstances. For example, if the father passes away, the mother may assume a more active role in managing the family and mediating disputes among siblings. In such cases, she becomes an important figure who helps maintain family unity and continuity, ensuring that cultural values and traditions are upheld. Despite these occasional shifts in roles, the overall structure of Iranian families remains largely patriarchal, with men holding most of the decision-making power.

Premarital agreements

The hierarchical nature of Iranian families can sometimes lead to tensions and conflicts reflected in the premarital agreements, particularly when individual desires clash with collective expectations. Marrying children, for instance, may find themselves caught between their personal aspirations and the directives of their father or elder brothers. This conflict is often exacerbated by the expectation that younger siblings and female members should conform to the decisions made by their male elders. *In Iranian culture premarital agreements are not sought to protect the interests of the married couple but normally to shield the pyramid of family's property, honor, and reputation against the negative impact of the fighting spouses in case of death or dissolution.*

Trust

The concept of trust plays a crucial role in Iranian family dynamics. Trust is not only a personal virtue but also a social currency that binds family members together. When a breach of trust occurs—such as a younger family member acting independently without the approval

of an elder—it can result in serious consequences, including isolation from the family or other forms of internal penalties. Families typically prefer to handle such issues privately, avoiding external legal or social interventions to preserve their honor and integrity.

Divorce and family honor

Divorce in Iranian culture is not merely a personal matter; it is a significant family affair that can impact the family's reputation and standing within the community. Divorce, especially when initiated by a wife against the husband's will, can be perceived as an affront to the family's honor. This is particularly true in close-knit families where loyalty and conformity to the family's pyramid of power are paramount.

The concept of "*Khianat*" or betrayal, is central to understanding how divorce is viewed within Iranian families. While "*Khianat*" is more commonly associated with infidelity, a wife's decision to file for divorce can also be seen as a form of betrayal or disloyalty to the family's structure of power. This perception of divorce as a breach of family loyalty underscores the cultural importance of marriage as a binding social contract that involves serving the couple but also strengthens maintaining the larger family's pyramid of interest.

Under Iranian law, there are specific conditions under which a wife can file for divorce. These include cases of substantial domestic violence that cannot be prevented, lack of financial support confirmed by the court, or if the wife buys her freedom from the marriage with the husband's consent. These legal stipulations reflect the broader cultural constraints on a woman's autonomy within the cultural pyramid of marriage, emphasizing the role of the family and community in such personal decisions.

Documentation of agreements

In Iranian culture, particularly within the pyramid of family-run businesses, oral agreements are often preferred over written ones. This preference is rooted in the belief that agreements should be built on mutual trust and honor rather than formal documentation.

Asking for a written agreement in a family context could be perceived as offensive, implying a lack of trust. This cultural norm is particularly prevalent in business transactions involving family members, where personal relationships are prioritized over legal formalities.

However, there are exceptions to this cultural preference for oral agreements. Certain transactions, such as real estate deals, must be documented and recorded under Iranian law. This legal requirement reflects a blend of cultural practice and legal necessity, ensuring that even in a culture that values trust and oral agreements, formal documentation is sometimes necessary to comply with the law. Minority communities in Iran, such as Jewish and Christian groups, are allowed to follow their own procedures for marriage, divorce, and probate, provided these do not conflict with Iranian law. This flexibility highlights the diversity within Iranian society and the ways in which different cultural and religious practices are accommodated within the legal framework.

The interplay of culture and law

The intricate interplay between a culturally based pyramid of power and law in Iranian society is evident in how family dynamics, divorce, and agreements are managed. While cultural norms emphasize trust, honor, and hierarchical roles, the legal framework provides guide lines that sometimes align with and at other times challenge these norms. Understanding Iranian family dynamics requires an appreciation of both the cultural and legal contexts that shape behavior and decision-making.

For instance, in the context of divorce, while cultural expectations might discourage a woman from seeking a divorce, the legal system provides specific avenues for her to do so. Similarly, while oral agreements are culturally favored, the law mandates written documentation for certain transactions, ensuring legal clarity and protection for all parties involved. This duality reflects the complexity of Iranian society, where cultural practices and legal requirements coexist and occasionally collide.

Conclusion

Iranian family dynamics are characterized by a complex web of roles, hierarchies, and cultural expectations that influence behavior and decision-making. The pyramid-shaped hierarchical structure places the father and eldest son in positions of authority, while younger sons and women play more supportive or specialized roles. Marriage of children is expected to support the larger hierarchical structure of the family's interest. In Iranian culture, premarital agreements are not sought to protect the interests of the married couple in case of death or dissolution, but normally to shield the pyramid of family's property, honor, and reputation against the negative impact of the fighting spouses. Similarly, the preference for oral agreements over written documentation reflects a cultural emphasis on trust and personal relationships within the circle of trusted persons.

Understanding these dynamics is crucial for anyone seeking to engage with or comprehend Iranian society. It highlights the need to consider both cultural norms and legal frameworks when navigating family and social interactions in Iran. Iranian culture is deeply rooted in tradition, yet it is also shaped by the evolving realities of modern life and legal structures.

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GENERAL CREDIT

1. In Iranian culture, the father is considered the head of the family.
 True False

6. Divorce initiated by a wife is often seen as a betrayal of the family in Iranian culture.
 True False

11. The preference for oral agreements in Iranian culture applies universally, even in legal transactions.
 True False

16. The eldest son's authority in the family can be challenged by younger siblings in Iranian families.
 True False

2. The eldest son's role is less significant than the younger sons in the family hierarchy.
 True False

7. Oral agreements are generally preferred over written agreements in Iranian family-run businesses.
 True False

12. In Iranian culture, divorce is seen solely as a personal issue between the husband and wife.
 True False

17. Family-run businesses in Iranian culture tend to rely on legal contracts rather than personal trust.
 True False

3. Women in Iranian families traditionally hold leadership roles within the household.
 True False

8. In cases of divorce, Iranian law always sides with the husband's wishes.
 True False

13. Trust is a crucial value in Iranian family dynamics, especially in matters of family leadership and decision-making.
 True False

18. The hierarchical nature of Iranian families means that the father's authority is absolute and uncontested.
 True False

4. The hierarchical structure of Iranian families is sometimes described as a "diamond" or pyramid.
 True False

9. The mother's role may become more prominent in the family after the father's death.
 True False

14. It is considered normal for a younger sibling or female family member to take on leadership roles in Iranian families.
 True False

19. Iranian families avoid involving external legal or social interventions in family disputes to preserve their honor.
 True False

5. Premarital agreements in Iranian culture aim to protect the married couple's interests in case of dissolution.
 True False

10. A younger son may serve as an advisor or consultant in the family business if he has specialized skills.
 True False

15. In Iranian family culture, the preservation of family honor is more important than individual desires in premarital agreements.
 True False

20. Women in Iranian families have equal decision-making power in family matters as men.
 True False

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