

Analyzing the Role of Religion and Religious Institutions in Policymaking on AIDS in Iran

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Abstract

Background and Objective: HIV is a social phenomenon whose investigating needs to take culture, traditions, and religious beliefs of the society into account. Given that, the aim of this study is examining the role of religion in policies made to control AIDS in Iran.

Method: This qualitative study adopted the content analysis technique with inductive approach in which 30 policymakers, key informants, stakeholders and AIDS patients were given semi-structured interviews and also 21 documents on related policies were analyzed considering factors influencing AIDS policymaking. Then, the data were analyzed using framework method and MAXQDA. In this study, the ethical issues were all considered and the authors declared no conflict of interest.

Results: After coding, approximately 300 primary codes were extracted. These codes were checked again and then categorized into three areas: the functions of religion and its preventive and encouraging factors in the related policies; different roles of the clergy as religious authorities, politicians and advisors; and the way religious institutes and organizations play their roles in AIDS policymaking process.

Conclusion: Religion and its corresponding ideology have critical encouraging and preventive functions in implementing plans for control and prevention of AIDS. Neglecting religious aspects of the Iranian society in policymaking has led to less effectiveness of policies and failure in controlling AIDS.

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Summary

Background and Objectives: AIDS is currently one of the most important social and economic health issues of human and is one of the biggest concerns of numerous countries in the world which is unfortunately spreading rapidly both in scope and dimension (1). At the present time, about 90% of HIV-infected people live in developing countries, particularly in Africa and Asia and unfortunately it is increasing at an alarming rate in these regions (2). Iran has been exposed to this

global phenomenon in recent years and is currently faced with a significant number of people infected with HIV/AIDS (3). HIV/AIDS is a decidedly social phenomenon (4); thus, the latent factors in the attitude and beliefs of Iranian society about AIDS, which stem from their culture and tradition, have a huge impact on AIDS policymaking (5). Therefore, this study set out to analyze the role of religion in AIDS control policies in Iran.

Method: An inductive approach was adopted in this qualitative study and via content analysis, health policies related to religion, its functions, and effective religious institutions in AIDS policymaking were

analyzed. Semi-structured interviews with 30 policy makers, key informants, AIDS stakeholders, and patients were conducted; besides, 21 relevant policy documents were investigated. To conduct the interviews, open-ended questions about the factors influencing AIDS policy in Iran, the role of factors related to culture, religion and tradition, the role of stakeholders and those involved in the field of AIDS policy, and their contributions to policymaking were asked. In the related documents, these factors were also examined. The data were analyzed using a framework method (6) by MAXQDA and PolicyMaker software.

Results: In this study, about 300 initial codes were extracted. After going through the investigations for the second time, they were classified into three categories, namely the role of religion, the role of the clergy and the role of religious institutions:

A-The role of religion: Religion in the Iranian society can be discussed in both positive and negative aspects. The positive aspect, which is in fact the most fundamental function of religion, is to emphasize the divine message of religion and to promote the good deeds and the use of wisdom of the Quran and the hadiths of the Prophet and the Imams to prevent sin and evil and immoral deeds. But the negative aspect is related to taking advantage of religion by misusing or misinterpreting religion for personal interests and beliefs.

B- The role of the clergy: In the fight against HIV, the clergy have three particular roles in the Iranian society: religious authorities; politicians; and reliable advisors.

C- The role of religious institutions: A large number of AIDS stakeholders in the country, despite their potential for AIDS controlling policies, have no contributions or active participations in practice as for AIDS policymaking. Unfortunately, most of them are religious institutions with great potential for AIDS control in the country, but they actually play no role in the policymaking process and executive actions.

Conclusion: The study showed that religion and its ideology can result in powerful functions in religious societies. Therefore, AIDS policymakers need to pay careful attention to the powerful functions of religion and its ideology in the Iranian society at all stages of policymaking process as well as the content of policies to combat AIDS. This is because religious institutions have a decisive role in AIDS policymaking. It seems that neglecting religious aspects of the Iranian society in policymaking has led to low effectiveness of policies, thus failing to achieve satisfactory results in controlling AIDS.

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