

Communication to Commission on the Status of Women

31 July 2023

Joint Stakeholder Submission

Submission Title: International trends in coercive pronatal policies

Submitted by: Population Matters and Population Balance

Population Matters is a UK-based international charity collaborating with partners, friends, and stakeholders globally to achieve a sustainable future for people and planet. We campaign to achieve a sustainable human population to protect the natural world and improve people's lives. We promote positive, practical, ethical, and entirely voluntary solutions – encouraging smaller families, inspiring people to consume sustainably, with the aim of enabling everyone to enjoy a decent quality of life whilst respecting and sustaining the natural ecosystems upon which all life on earth depends. Population Matters believes everyone should have the freedom and ability to choose a smaller family. We are committed to human rights, women's empowerment, and global justice as the framework for all we do.

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Population Balance exist to offer education and solutions to address the impacts of human overpopulation and overconsumption on the planet, people, and animals. It is the first and only organization globally that uses an anti-oppression lens to draw connections among pronatalism, human supremacy, and ecological overshoot, and to offer solutions to address their combined devastating impacts on social, reproductive, ecological, and intergenerational justice. Their work includes academic research and publications in the popular press, a podcast, and educational programs and outreach to high schools, universities, and community groups.

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Population Matters and Population Balance are jointly making three submissions to the CSW 2023 call for evidence:

- Coercive pronatal policies in Iran
- Coercive pronatal policies in China
- International trends in coercive pronatal policies

Population Matters is also independently submitting evidence on two-child policies in states of the Republic of India

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Birth rates are falling in many countries, as people are choosing to have fewer children. The consequent demographic changes are perceived as a threat by some governments, politicians, political actors and other stakeholders. Among the responses to this perceived threat are proposed or actual pronatal policies which compromise sexual and reproductive health and rights directly or indirectly and/or aim to reinforce social norms restricting the role of women. These actions are often closely intertwined with anti-rights movements and agendas which encompass varying degrees of objections to women's bodily autonomy. Population Matters and Population Balance through their work, have been monitoring these global trends.
2. The clearest examples of coercive policies are found in China and Iran, where the opportunities for civil society to resist are severely compromised, and separate communications on those states have been submitted by population Matters and Population Balance, as identified above.
3. States' demographic concerns arise from a range of factors. Running through many of the most egregious are nationalism/self-preservation; fear of losing its native people, customs, and identity, including concerns among their 'native' population in relation to the population growth of other groups such as migrants and becoming a minority in their own country. Concerns about the long term impact on domestic economic interests, such as future age-appropriate workforce to manage greater old-age dependency are common. A perceived loss or threat of loss of global relevance and power in international socio-economic, diplomatic and military affairs are said driving forces. In some countries, it is the patriarchal system that treats women and girls as the property of the male family members and at best second-class citizens and property of the state.

4. These harmful practices are in contradiction to the goals and requirements of many treaties and frameworks intended to achieve gender equality and secure the rights of women and girls, including the human rights; based on their international commitments, governments are required to put in place the laws and policies necessary for protection of human rights and to regulate private and public practices that impact individuals' enjoyment of those rights, therefore national governments ("States") are the guarantors, or violators, of human rights. Including the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women International Treaty CEDAW, and more recently, Goals 3 and 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals.
5. This submission also identifies wider trends and examples of measures which restrict rights or damage gender equality which are associated with pronatal rhetoric and agendas, even where the direct justifications are rarely or not explicitly pronatal.
6. The CSW and other UN agencies must ensure that the rights of women and girls are protected by affirming that such practices and rhetoric must not be mainstreamed under its watch, calling on member states to desist from such practices at once, and monitoring for the risk of states undertaking such activities, taking proactive steps to prevent the adoption of such policies.

BACKGROUND

7. In November 2021 Population Matters released *Welcome to Gilead*, an [original report](#) that highlights the depths of the issue and how politicians across the world are justifying the restriction of women's reproductive rights. (The report was referenced by UNFPA in its 2023 [State of the World Population](#) report).
8. The report highlights in its findings, a toxic mix of nationalism, economic anxiety, sexism, racism, and contempt for human rights which can combine to drive measures such as abortion bans, restrictions on contraception access and political pressure on women to have more children.
9. Since the publication of its report, Population Matters' [Gilead Watch project](#) continues to monitor and report developments in this area. Population Balance also maintains a programme of monitoring developments - notably those practices which are harmful to women and girls, depriving them of their reproductive rights, and are a flagrant abuse of their fundamental human rights, as upheld in the human rights framework, CEDAW, goal three and five of the SDGs, also enshrined in the United Nations gender equality working definition.
10. Population Balance published a peer-reviewed academic paper in January 2023 entitled [Challenging Pronatalism is Key to Advancing Reproductive Rights and a Sustainable Population](#). This paper outlines the full range of pronatalist pressures women experience globally, from patriarchal and familial pressures experienced within the home, to cultural, religious, economic, and political pressures experienced throughout

their lives. This exhaustive review details the grievous harms suffered by women because of longstanding pronatalist pressures exerted at every level of society. In addition, the Population Balance Podcast features expert guests on subjects of pronatalism, population, and the environment, which supports our work to monitor global trends in these areas. Through these discussions, it has spread awareness of egregious expressions of pronatalism and violations of reproductive rights as reported by an OBGYN in the United States, feminist scholars in India and Israel, and a family planning advocate and journalist in Uganda.

11. **Population Matters and Population Balance thereby make a joint petition outlining trends and key selected evidence of these trends and the risks they pose to women.**

INTERNATIONAL TRENDS

12. Population Balance and Population Matters have identified a number of countries of concern, but note that our resources are limited, and that research is limited to English-language secondary sources. Our evidence is therefore far from comprehensive.
13. Governments in the following countries have been identified as linking reproductive rights restrictions to population concerns and/or aggressively promoting a pronatal narrative which threatens freedom of choice for women: China, Hungary, Iran, Poland, Russia and Turkey. Belarus and Italy have been identified as at risk of developing explicitly or implicitly coercive policies due to the political profiles and demographic concerns of their governments. In addition, demographic concerns have been raised in support of restrictions on abortion in the US.
14. Further background and detailed supporting evidence regarding these countries can be found in the Gilead report, Population Balance paper and the Gilead Watch page, as referenced above.
15. Because of the strength of the evidence and the particular power of their governments to implement coercive measures, separate submissions to CSW detailing specific evidence have been made by Population Matters and Population Balance in regard to China and Iran.
16. The examples below regarding Russia, Hungary and the United States of America are intended to illustrate the mechanisms by which pronatal agendas can threaten women's rights and wellbeing in other settings.
17. While similarities in regard to pronatal threats can be identified between some countries (such as Poland and Hungary), different prevailing social, religious and political circumstances act in different ways to generate threats to women's rights and reproductive freedom in different settings.

EXAMPLE ONE: RUSSIA

18. Since Russia's population peaked in 2006, low birth rates and emigration have been of concern to the government who have identified the decrease in its population as a possible national threat. This has several consequences with pressure mounted on Russians and women to have more children. In 2020, President Putin reiterated the message, telling the country that "Russia's fate and its historic prospects depend on how many of us there are... it depends on how many of us are born in Russian families". [Source: [Reuters](#)] In Russia they do not have a significant ageing population problem as historically many people do not live long enough past retirement age. Russia's case of pronatalism, then seems to be rooted in nationalist and religious objectives unlike in other countries where economic objectives are stronger. Little or no surprise that President Putin recently revived the Stalin-era 'Mother Heroine' award in response to low birth rates, an honour that confers a substantial cash payment to women once their tenth child turns one year old. [Source: [CNN](#)] This policy builds upon long standing Soviet and post-Soviet pronatalist policies with a goal of increasing the birth rate to grow the labour force and strengthen the nation. This case highlights how religion may act in concert with nationalistic and economic concerns to amplify pronatalist policies; the Russian Orthodox Church has been heavily influential in proposals to restrict abortion.
19. The background and further details of Russia's actions are provided in the Gilead report. Below are examples of prenatal Russian policy since September 2021.
20. September 2021: 'Russia Announces Plan To Halve Abortion Rates To Spur Population Growth.' Russia's government has approved measures aimed at halving the number of abortions carried out in the country before 2025, according to a document published on its website. The plan is part of the government's latest long-term blueprint for improving the demographic situation in the country through 2025, amid a recently resumed decline in population growth after a decade of sluggish but stable increases. Source: [Radio Free Europe](#)
21. February 2022: 'Why Russia decided to combat childlessness': The government's control over the literature about childlessness has sparked outcry from liberal quarters, with critics arguing that to solve the problem of low birth rate, it is first necessary to provide quality welfare to already-born children. Source: [TRT World](#)
22. September 2022: 'Russian lawmakers introduce bill to ban information about 'childfree' lifestyle among minors.' Russian State Duma deputies have introduced a bill that would ban media that "promotes the voluntary refusal to have children" among minors. The draft legislation's explanatory note claims that "the foreign 'childfree' ideology has become widespread among Russia's youth." But voluntarily refusing to have children, it goes on to say, "goes against traditional family values and the state policy of the

- Russian Federation.” If the trend continues spreading unchecked, the authors conclude, it could lead to Russia’s “depopulation.” Source: [Meduza](#)
23. November 2022: ‘Russia passes law banning ‘LGBT propaganda’ among adults. Bill criminalises promotion of ‘non-traditional sexual relations’ as Moscow pushes conservative values. This law is part of an ongoing homophobic government campaign against LGBTQ rights. This is part of a broader attack on anything the government deems ‘western and progressive. Source: [The Guardian](#)
 24. July 2023: Russia Edges Closer to Abortion Ban in Quest to Preserve ‘Traditional Values.’ Concerns expressed that Russia’s policies are slowly moving towards further restrictions and an ultimate ban on abortion. Source: [The Moscow Times](#)
 25. Russia's Health minister Mikhail Murashko criticising women for prioritising education and careers before having children, describing it as an “improper practice”. Murashko noted that earlier childbirth gives more time for the third and fourth child and had referred to the country’s population as its “biggest challenge.” He also announced restrictions on the availability of abortion-inducing pills in pharmacies, and how “instructions” are being sent to obstetricians “including whole scripts on how they should talk with a woman.” Source: [The Moscow Times](#)

EXAMPLE TWO: HUNGARY

26. Hungary exemplifies one of the most sinister motivations behind pronatalism: the ‘Great Replacement’ conspiracy theory, that accuses shadowy forces of intentionally decimating white Christian populations by encouraging low birth rates and allowing other groups – namely Muslims, migrants, and people of colour – to gain power through immigration and higher birth rates. Propagators of this theory, including Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán who has openly endorsed it, blame women for enabling population decline by choosing careers over motherhood and it is no surprise that Hungary’s government has channelled its nationalist agenda into pronatalist policies. Those include voluntary and positive policies such as loans and tax breaks, but also creeping limitations on reproductive freedoms.
27. In 2018, one Hungarian minister declared that its population would be double if abortion had not been legal [Source: [Balkan Insight](#)] and indeed and the government has attempted to force – rather than encourage – women to have more children by restricting and banning abortion, these efforts failed to materialise into legislation, because of public backlash, instead the government has been inching towards an abortion ban with smaller measures; it amended its constitution to specify that the right to life begins at conception.
28. September 2022, the Hungarian government introduced a policy where women would be made to listen to “foetal vital signs” before having an abortion, a practice which a

far-right politician has described as “the first pro-life move since the regulation of abortion in 1956.” [Source: [France24](#)]

EXAMPLE THREE: UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

29. As part of continued focus on the global trend toward pronatalist state policies, Population Balance has noted the severe impact on women's health and well-being from the United States' Supreme Court's 2022 *Dobbs vs Jackson Women's Health Organization* decision that overturned the right to abortion care established in the 1973 *Roe vs. Wade* decision. Although surveys continually show that a strong majority of United States citizens support women's rights to abortion care, the power and wealth behind organized religion and socially conservative political donors have ensured that their interests are disproportionately represented among elected representatives and the US judiciary. Although the religious right purports a concern for the rights of “unborn children,” the mental and physical health outcomes for women and children in states where abortion is severely restricted suggests this professed concern is hollow. The ban on abortion care in 13 US states represents an urgent threat to the health of women in these states, especially those marginalized by systemic racism and economic insecurity. It also places children born into families with inadequate material and emotional resources to care for them in extreme jeopardy. And it threatens the health of residents of other states that have been forced to provide abortion care to residents of abortion ban states, by placing extraordinary demand on scarce health care resources and personnel.
30. April 2023: Anti-Abortion Judge Attempts to Ban Mifepristone Nationwide, Ignoring Science and More Than Two Decades of the Drug's Safe Use in the United States. Source: [Guttmacher Institute](#)
31. April 2023: Judges' Dueling decisions put access to a key abortion drug in jeopardy nationwide. In Texas, a U.S. District Judge ruled that the Food and Drug Administration improperly approved the abortion pill mifepristone more than 20 years ago, while a Washington judge simultaneously ruled to block the FDA from "altering the status quo and rights as it relates to the availability of Mifepristone." The Dueling decisions have thrown doctors and patients into confusion. Source: [NPR](#)
32. May 2023: Tennessee's abortion ban has put women at risk. The ban “criminalizes performing an abortion, making it a felony. An exception to save the life of the mother or prevent serious and permanent bodily injury only comes into play when a physician is defending themselves in court after they have been charged with the felony. Source: [ABC News](#)
33. May 2023: In the US, "Crisis Pregnancy Centers" set up to bully women seeking abortion care, have started offering STI testing so they can be included in CDC databases. This gives them more opportunity to spread misinformation, like claims that contraception is unsafe. Source: [Rewire News](#)

34. June 2023: In abortion ban states, OBGYN applications are down 10%. When doctors choose not to practice in states with harmful, medically unnecessary restrictions, “Maternity care deserts grow, the struggle to find a PCP for diabetes and hypertension care becomes even more difficult, and overall accessibility to high quality, full scope medical care suffers.” Source: [LA Illuminator](#)
35. June 2023: As a result of Dobbs,” abortions in the second and third trimester of pregnancy is on the rise.... Many patients are experiencing the higher risks of complication, anxiety, and trauma that sometimes come with abortion later in pregnancy.” Source: [Iowa Capital Dispatch](#)
36. June 2023: In the past year since Dobbs in the United States, calls about reproductive coercion have nearly doubled. Because of Dobbs, abusive partners have even more power and control, because survivors have even less options and increased barriers to obtain that care. Source: [PBS](#)
37. July 2023: 2,200 infants died in Texas in 2022, an increase of 11.5%. And for the first time in decades, deaths caused by severe genetic & birth defects increased year-on-year by 21.6%. Source: [Daily Mail](#)
38. July 2023: What Nebraska’s Sentencing of a Teen Who Used Abortion Pills Might Mean in Post-Roe America. A Nebraska teen and her mother have been criminally convicted after the teen used abortion pills to end her pregnancy. Source: [Time](#)
39. July 2023: In Texas, the state’s abortion ban includes medical exceptions that lack clear direction for doctors. Women testifying in a case brought by the Center for Reproductive Rights include several whose lives were endangered by their inability to get an abortion for foetuses that were not viable. Source: [Georgia Public Broadcasting](#)
40. July 2023: To stop abortions, 19 GOP attorneys general want access to women’s medical information. They will not get it from Illinois. 19 Republican state attorneys general are demanding that the Biden administration allow states with abortion bans to obtain the private medical records of patients seeking legal health care in other states. Source: [Chicago Sun-Times](#)

RECOMMENDATIONS

2. While pronatal policies need not by definition be inconsistent with SRHR, CSW should recognise general pronatal rhetoric in political and cultural discourse as a risk factor for SRHR restrictions, and that non-coercive pronatalist policies can be followed by more restrictive efforts if they are perceived to be unsuccessful.
3. Recognise political rhetoric targeting immigrants, ethnic or religious minorities and multiculturalism (including the Great Replacement theory) as a risk factor for pronatal policies that could lead to SRHR restrictions.
4. Seek opportunities to apply intersectional principles in defense of civil and reproductive rights.

5. Publicly condemn the manifestations of pronatalism that are fuelling many reproductive rights violations, and expose the nationalism, xenophobia, and misogyny at their core.
6. Support civil society and other actors resisting these narratives within nations at risk, and internationally.
5. Recognise the “population decline crisis” narrative as a potential contributor to coercive pronatal rhetoric and policies.
6. Recognise the value of the “coercive population control” narrative as a weapon used by opponents of sexual and reproductive health and rights.
7. Acknowledge the existence of a positive, progressive and rights-based case for population stabilisation, and be aware that reflexive vilification of this case or its advocates risks reinforcing potentially abusive pronatal rhetoric and actions.
8. Maintain absolute commitment to gender equality and all sexual and reproductive health and rights. Challenge and condemn justifications for their restriction, including pronatal justifications.
9. In monitoring threats to human rights, recognise the risk factors identified above of pronatal political goals triggering policies which restrict sexual and reproductive health and rights.
10. In reporting on abuses of sexual and reproductive rights, including and specifically identify abuses stemming from pronatal policies by member states.

FURTHER READING

- Population Matters (2021) [Welcome to Gilead](#)
- Gilead Watch campaign [web page](#)
- Population Balance (2023) [Challenging Pronatalism Is Key to Advancing Reproductive Rights and a Sustainable Population | The Journal of Population and Sustainability \(whp-journals.co.uk\)](#)

Signed



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