**Communication to Commission on the Status of Women**

**31 July 2023**

**Joint Stakeholder Submission**

**Submission Title: Pronatalism: Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights Violations in Iran**

**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 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 (but not all) 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. 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 Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women International Treaty CEDAW, the Programme of Action for the international conference on Population and Development, and more recently, Goals 3 and 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals.
3. Iran has an explicitly pronatal agenda, which it links to restrictions on sexual and reproductive health and rights that it has introduced in recent years.
4. In addition to the well-documented crackdown on women’s rights generally, the repressive government of Iran and its religious leaders have also stigmatised women who choose smaller families or to be childfree.
5. The CSW and other UN agencies should ensure that women and girls in Iran must not have their sexual and reproductive health and rights compromised for any reason, including the pursuit of a pro-natal agenda.

**INTRODUCTION**

1. Populations of many countries face are stabilising or declining due to “sub-replacement” fertility rates, arising from people choosing to have smaller families.
2. Growing numbers of governments across the world including Hungary, Poland, US, Iran, and China, are increasingly resorting to de facto coercion to deliberately achieve their aim of reversing these trends and promoting population growth.
3. In November 2021 Population Matters released *Welcome to Gilead*, an [original report](https://populationmatters.org/resources/welcome-to-gilead-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 [eeca.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/swop2023-english-230329-web.pdf](https://eeca.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/swop2023-english-230329-web.pdf) )
4. The report highlights in its findings a toxic mix of nationalism, economic anxiety, sexism, racism, and contempt for human rights which can act individually or combine to drive measures such as abortion bans, restrictions on contraception access and political pressure on women to have more children. The full report and summary of its findings and recommendations can be found [**here**](https://populationmatters.org/news/2021/11/welcome-to-gilead-how-population-fears-drive-womens-rights-abuses/).
5. 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.
6. Population Balance published a peer-reviewed academic paper in January 2023 entitled [Challenging Pronatalism is Key to Advancing Reproductive Rights and a Sustainable Population](https://www.whp-journals.co.uk/JPS/article/view/819). 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.
7. **Population Matters and Population Balance thereby make a joint petition presenting the human rights violations and openly practised restrictions on sexual and reproductive health and rights by the autocratic government of Iran.**

**BACKGROUND**

1. As detailed in the *Welcome to Gilead* report, The Islamic Republic of Iran has a long history of controlling women’s reproductive decisions for its programmes and instead promoted large families. The government especially pushed its pronatalist agenda during the Iran-Iraq war, urging women to make more “soldiers for Islam.” Following the economic devastation of the war, the regime struggled to care for its rapidly growing population and over the years discouraged population growth, driven by religious, economic, and geopolitical concerns. In the past ten years however, the country’s regime has been ardently pro-natalist.
2. Supreme leader Ayatollah Khamenei [**seeks**](https://demographic-challenge.com/files/downloads/b47e54a3ae1b9d423c909dde8ed9e72c/padr708-iran-pop-) to double Iran’s population by 2050, stating that he wants to restore its “dynamism, development and youthful nature”. A series of measures have been introduced to limit women’s capacity to manage their own fertility and choose their family size. These are detailed in the *Welcome to Gilead report*.
3. The Iranian regime has demonstrated its deep hostility to women’s rights over the previous year, as well-documented elsewhere. Pronatalism is clearly not the sole driver of restrictions on women’s freedom, but may not be fully recognised as a contributory factor.
4. The developments listed below have taken place since the beginning of 2022.

**EVIDENCE**

1. June 2023: A paramilitary militia had been ordered to crack down on abortions. “The ‘abortion patrol,’ or ‘Nafs,’ meaning ‘life’ in Persian, was announced by Saber Jabari Faruji, an official from the Ministry of Health, who warned that those involved in illegal abortions will be dealt with ‘severely’ “. Source: [***The Telegraph***](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2023/06/05/iran-launches-militia-patrol-to-crack-down-on-abortions/),
2. May 2023: President orders government clinics to ban access to abortion pills. A government official confirms that laws about illegal abortions ([**almost all**](https://www.iranintl.com/en/202209088084) **abortions in Iran**) were being more strongly enforced “recently” and, according to a report,” that all pregnancies were being documented to prevent illegal abortions so that the population of the country could grow.”  Source: [***Iran International***](https://www.iranintl.com/en/202305096197),
3. April 2023: The state-controlled Fars News agency claims Iran is facing a demographic “black hole” and targets parents having only one child. An article claims that “tendency to isolation, depression, weakness in communicating with peers, paying too much attention to computer and solitary games, fear or hatred of being in social groups are among the characteristics of being an only child.” Source: [***Jerusalem Post***](https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/iran-news/article-743904)
4. December 2022: The latest figures show Iran’s birth and fertility rates continue to reduce, despite the restrictions introduced by the regime in the last few years. In response, according to reports, President Ebrahim Raisi “considered promoting the culture of marriage and reducing divorce and helping to solve the problem of infertility as some of the effective factors in increasing the population, which should be the priority of attention and action of all institutions.” Source: [***Tehran Times***](https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/484848/Family-support-law-a-matter-of-national-willpower),
5. September 2022: Government’s “carrot and stick” approach to boosting birth rate extends to preferential treatment for parents, such as professional advancement in academic institutions, moving up the waiting list to buy a car. Further restrictions on reproductive rights include reported checks on women undergoing gynaecological surgery with the effect of making them infertile, and men requiring to use fake documents to obtain vasectomies. Source: [*Los Angeles Times*](https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2022-09-14/iran-urging-people-have-kids-restricting-abortion-contraception)
6. August 2022: Reports of even more extreme difficulties in obtaining contraceptive supplies for women, illegal abortions due to the state ban, and “morality patrols”. Source: [*Iranwire*](https://iranwire.com/en/women/106494-the-trials-of-buying-contraceptives-in-iran?utm_campaign=Weekly%20Digest&utm_medium)
7. June 2022: contraceptives banned from public display. A government document leaked on social media orders pharmacies to place contraceptives on rear shelves, out of sight of the front window. Source: [*Iranwire*](https://iranwire.com/en/society/105289-contraceptives-banned-from-public-display-in-iran/)
8. June 2022: Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khameini tells a group of students “It is unacceptable that the lifestyle of the upper classes of society has been adopted by different classes, and that flashy weddings and not having children have become common.” Source:  [*Los Angeles Times*](https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2022-09-14/iran-urging-people-have-kids-restricting-abortion-contraception),
9. May 2022: Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei makes renewed call for action to boost population. Source: [*Iran International*](https://www.iranintl.com/en/202205189425),
10. May 2022: Foetal screening tests (which can lead to abortions) restricted. Source: [*France 24*](https://observers.france24.com/en/middle-east/20220511-iran-birth-rate-law-limits-pregnancy-screening-tests-for-women),
11. August 2022: Reports of even more extreme difficulties in obtaining contraceptive supplies for women, illegal abortions due to the state ban, and “morality patrols”. Source [*Iranwire.*](https://iranwire.com/en/women/106494-the-trials-of-buying-contraceptives-in-iran?utm_campaign=Weekly%20Digest&utm_medium)
12. June 2022: contraceptives banned from public display. A government document leaked on social media orders pharmacies to place contraceptives on rear shelves, out of sight of the front window. Source: [*Iranwire.*](https://iranwire.com/en/society/105289-contraceptives-banned-from-public-display-in-iran/)
13. June 2022: Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khameini tells a group of students, “It is unacceptable that the lifestyle of the upper classes of society has been adopted by different classes, and that flashy weddings and not having children have become common.” Source:  [*Los Angeles Times.*](https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2022-09-14/iran-urging-people-have-kids-restricting-abortion-contraception)
14. May 2022: Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei makes a renewed call for action to boost population. Source: [*Iran International.*](https://www.iranintl.com/en/202205189425)
15. May 2022: Foetal screening tests (which can lead to abortions) restricted. Source: [*France 24.*](https://observers.france24.com/en/middle-east/20220511-iran-birth-rate-law-limits-pregnancy-screening-tests-for-women)

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. We urge CSW to:
2. fully investigate the links between Iran’s pronatal policies and restrictions of access to contraception, abortion and other aspects of sexual and reproductive health and rights;
3. call on Iran’s government to fully protect sexual and reproductive rights and health, ensuring no population policies are in contradiction to the principles of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development;
4. call on Iran’s government to stop stigmatizing the choice to have smaller families or be childfree.

**FURTHER READING**

* Population Matters (2021) [*Welcome to Gilead*](https://populationmatters.org/resources/welcome-to-gilead-report/)
* Gilead Watch campaign [web page](https://populationmatters.org/gilead-watch-protect-womens-rights-from-pronatal-politicians/)
* 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)](https://www.whp-journals.co.uk/JPS/article/view/819/527)

Signed

 

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