

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 China**

**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 (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 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.
3. The People's Republic of China has an explicitly pronatal policy agenda. In recent years, it has limited sexual and reproductive health and rights and through political rhetoric has stigmatised women who choose smaller families or to be childfree.
4. The CSW and other UN agencies should ensure that the rights of women and girls in China are protected by affirming that such practices and rhetoric must not be mainstreamed under its watch and calling on China (and other member states) to desist from such practices, and monitoring for the risk of states undertaking such activities, taking proactive steps to prevent the adoption of such policies.

## **INTRODUCTION**

5. Populations of many countries have stabilised or are in decline due to "sub-replacement" fertility rates, arising from people choosing to have smaller families.

6. A growing number 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 increasing their country's population growth.
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 [eeca.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/swop2023-english-230329-web.pdf](https://eca.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/swop2023-english-230329-web.pdf))
8. The report highlights 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.
9. 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, we have 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.
10. Since the publication of its report, Population Matters' Gilead Watch project and, independently, Population Balance continue to monitor and report developments in this area - including practices that are harmful to women and girls, depriving them of their reproductive rights, abuse their fundamental human rights (as upheld in the human rights framework, CEDAW, SDGs 3 and 5, and as enshrined in the United Nations gender equality working definition).
11. Examples of this trend in other UN member states are provided in the separate joint submissions made by Population Balance and Population Matters referred to on page two of this submission.
12. **This is a joint submission of evidence by both organisations to the communication procedure, of the UN Women, presenting the human rights violations and openly practised restrictions by the autocratic government of the people's Republic of China, on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) of women and girls.**

## BACKGROUND

13. China is rightly infamous for use of its authoritarian power to enforce its historic, deplorable 'one-child policy', which may have contributed to economic growth, but unquestionably violated the fundamental human rights of hundreds of millions of people. Now no longer the poster child of 'population control', in recent years, China

has started to reverse the goals of its coercion with the converse aim to boost its birth rate. With its leaders fearing the economic effects of an ageing society, they are urging Chinese people – especially women to have more children, and measures which restrict or complicate access to family planning services are beginning to appear. Those include policies which limit or seek to limit access to family planning, including abortion and vasectomy.

14. President Xi Jinping has emphasised family values, highlighted the reproductive role of women, and warned of instability if birth rates stay low. China's state paper People's Daily told readers that *"the birth of a baby is not only a matter of the family itself, but also a state affair"*. [Source: [New York Times](#)] The Chinese government aggressively perpetuates traditional gender norms and reduces women to their roles as dutiful wives, mothers and baby breeders in the home, to minimize social unrest and give birth to future generations of skilled workers and policymakers, continue to view women primarily as reproductive tools to realize the nation's development goals".
15. Further information on the background and recent abuses in China is provided in the Welcome to Gilead report and Population Balance paper.
16. Below are updates on explicitly or implicitly coercive pronatal activities in China since December 2021.

## EVIDENCE

17. November 2022: China's medicines regulatory authority banned the online sale of two commonly used abortion drugs, even with a doctor's prescription. Source: [CAST Asia-Pacific](#)
18. November 2022: China's New Women's Rights and Protections Law states that *"Women should respect and obey national laws, respect social morals, professional ethics and family values."* Source: [Fortune](#)
19. August 2022: Government policy to reduce the number of abortions is linked with population concerns. Source: [Washington Post](#)
20. April 2022: State media report calls from Communist Party officials to oppose "radical feminism" and to criminalise abortion to boost the birth rate. Source: [Amid Low Birth Rate Worries, China Increases Pressure on Women – The Diplomat](#)
21. February 2022: Campaign launched to deter women and teens from getting an abortion. Source: [South China Morning Post](#)
22. December 2021: Reduced availability of vasectomies. Source [As China Limits Vasectomies, Many Ask What's Next - Bloomberg](#)
23. December 2021: Chinese government website instructs Communist Party members there is "no excuse" for not getting married and having two or more children, however the message was removed following a backlash. Source: [China: editorial says Communist party members must have three children | China | The Guardian](#)

## RECOMMENDATIONS

We urge CSW to:

24. fully investigate the links between China's pronatal policies and restrictions of access to contraception, abortion and other aspects of sexual and reproductive health and rights;
25. call on China's government to fully protect sexual and reproductive rights and health, ensuring no population policies are in violation of the principles of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development;
26. call on China's government to stop stigmatizing the choice to have smaller families or be childfree.

#### **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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Date: 31<sup>st</sup> of July 2023.