

Iran's Sexual and Reproductive Rights Roll-Back: An Overview of Iran's New Population Policies

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Abstract : This paper discusses the roll-back of women's sexual and reproductive rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, which has come in the wake of a striking shift in the country's official population policies. Since the late 1980s, Iran has won worldwide praise for its sexual and reproductive health and services, which have contributed to a steady decline in the country's fertility rate—from 7.0 births per women in 1980 to 5.5 in 1988, 2.8 in 1996 and 1.85 in 2014. This is owed to a significant increase in the voluntary use of modern contraception in both rural and urban areas. In 1976, only 37 per cent of women were using at least one method of contraception; by 2014 this figure had reportedly risen to a high of nearly 79 per cent for married girls and women living in urban areas and 73.78 per cent for those living in rural areas. Such progress may soon be halted. In July 2012, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Sayed Ali Khamenei denounced Iran's family planning policies as an imitation of Western lifestyle. He exhorted the authorities to increase Iran's population to 150 to 200 million (from around 78.5 million), including by cutting subsidies for contraceptive methods and dismantling the state's Family and Population Planning Programme. Shortly thereafter, Iran's Minister of Health and Medical Education announced the scrapping of the budget for the state-funded Family and Population Planning Programme. Iran's Parliament subsequently introduced two bills; the Comprehensive Population and Exaltation of Family Bill (Bill 315), and the Bill to Increase Fertility Rates and Prevent Population Decline (Bill 446). Bill 446 outlaws voluntary tubectomies, which are believed to be the second most common method of modern contraception in Iran, and blocks access to information about contraception, denying women the opportunity to make informed decisions about the number and spacing of their children. Coupled with the elimination of state funding for Iran's Family and Population Programme, the move would undoubtedly result in greater numbers of unwanted pregnancies, forcing more women to seek illegal and unsafe abortions. Bill 315 proposes various discriminatory measures in the areas of employment, divorce, and protection from domestic violence in order to promote a culture wherein wifedom and child-bearing is seen as women's primary duty. The Bill, for example, instructs private and public entities to prioritize, in sequence, men with children, married men without children and married women with children when hiring for certain jobs. It also bans the recruitment of single individuals as family law lawyers, public and private school teachers and members of the academic boards of universities and higher education institutes. The paper discusses the consequences of these initiatives which would, if continued, set the human rights of women and girls in Iran back by decades, leaving them with a future shaped by increased inequality, discrimination, poor health, limited choices and restricted freedoms, in breach of Iran's international human rights obligations.

Keywords : family planning and reproductive health, gender equality and empowerment of women, human rights, population growth

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