

Issue Brief
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Rejuvenating the Iranian Population: Endangering Women's Rights and Health

The law¹ on the *“Rejuvenation of the Population and Support of the Family”* was rapidly passed by Iran's Guardian Council² in a mere 17 days. The speed at which this law was approved was certainly a record in the history of the Islamic Republic of Iran, where laws on women's rights are slow to be adopted. But then, the law on *“Rejuvenation of the Population and Support of the Family”* can in no way be classified as a law in support of women or their rights, and that is probably why it was easily passed in an open session of the parliament on October 16, approved by the Guardian Council on November 2, and sent by the President of the

Islamic Republic of Iran to the Ministry of Health and Vice Presidency for Women and Family Affairs for implementation on November 15. *The “Rejuvenation of the Population”* law has 73 articles and 81 notes and will be implemented on a trial basis for seven years.

The issue of Iran's declining population has been a source of concern for Iranian authorities for over a decade. The main strategy of Iranian officials for addressing this problem has been to promote population growth policies to ensure that Iran continues to benefit from a young population. Proponents of population

1. In Farsi *Ghanoon Hemayat Az Khanevade va Javani Jamiat*, see the bill: [قانون حمایت از خانواده و جوانی جمعیت](#)

2. The Guardian Council of the Islamic Republic of Iran is a 12 member body, charged with ensuring that all laws passed by the parliament are compatible with the constitution and Islam. All bills passed by the Parliament must be approved by the Guardian Council before implementation.

growth cite the extremely low birth rate to argue that the [population growth rates will be negative by the year 1425](#) (2026), with over 30% of the population over 60 years of age. These proponents fear that the aged population would have to be supported by a declining younger generation of Iranians in the workforce, placing undue economic burden on the country and preventing economic growth. At the same time, proponents of population growth policies believe a larger population will not only aid economic development but will also strengthen the geopolitical situation of the country. They further argue that population control policies which were State implemented and very successful in Iran between 1988 to early 2010s, are a Western conspiracy against the country, while population growth, on the other hand, is in line with religious teachings and piety.

Those opposed to population growth policies argue that given the current economic crisis, high unemployment rates, lack of adequate health and education infrastructures, environmental crises, and lack of natural resources, including water scarcity, increasing the population could spur yet another round of economic, social and environmental crises with detrimental effects. They fear that population growth policies will decrease welfare and prosperity of citizens and be an impetus for mass migration of skilled and educated workers.

The *"Rejuvenation of the Population"* law, which aims to increase the population of Iran, includes both incentives and punitive measures. But as experience has shown, punitive measures are likely to be adopted and implemented swiftly, while incentives may never come to fruition, because they require the allocation of large budgets to implement. Further criminalization and bans on abortions, bans on sterilization procedures such as tubectomies and vasectomies, bans on purchase of over-

the-counter contraceptives, and elimination of health insurance payments for cesarean sections, are just a few examples of how the new law aims to restrict women's access to reproductive health services and deprive them of the right to make decisions about their own bodies. This new bill has provoked much opposition and criticism among rights activists and health practitioners in Iran, but the criticism has fallen on deaf ears.

By involving the Ministry of Intelligence and other security agencies as well as the judiciary the law criminalizes women's rights to control their bodies and prosecutes women in cases when their reproductive choices contradict the arcane measures included in the law. The security agencies are also charged with identifying all those who help women access illegal contraceptives or abortions, for the purpose of prosecuting them, including doctors and pharmacists.

But the government's efforts to increase the population are not limited to the *"Rejuvenation of the Population"* law. Another measure, titled the *"Comprehensive Plan³ for Population and Family Excellence"* which was originally introduced in 2013, but never passed into law, was recently adopted by the Parliament in a hurried manner, to shore up efforts designed to control women's bodies, limit their access to reproductive health services and promote population growth even further.

The "Comprehensive Plan for Population and Family Excellence"

On October 27, the *"Comprehensive Plan for Population and Family Excellence"*, which is a parliamentary initiative, was approved by the Guardian Council and will soon be sent by the parliament to the Executive Branch for

3. In Farsi, *Tarhe Jame Jamiat va Taali Khanevadeh*, see the bill: [طرح جامع جمعیت و تعالی خانواده](#)

implementation. The history of this plan dates back to June 2013 and the term of the eighth parliament. The Plan aimed to increase the fertility rate⁴ of Iranian women to 2.5 children. The 8th parliament had planned to review the “*Comprehensive Plan*” in 2013, but because of serious criticism and opposition, the Plan was never discussed or approved in parliament. Broad based criticism against the Plan came from civil society but also from government planners at the [Parliament's Research Center](#) and the [Center for Strategic Studies](#), associated with the Office of the President who criticized the high price tag for the implementation of the plan, the plan's lack of clarity and its contradiction with existing laws.

Despite being highly contested in 2013, the “*Comprehensive Plan*” was approved in its entirety on October 27, 2021, without any changes by the current parliament. Some of its points are especially alarming and target women's rights. For example, article 9 of the “*Comprehensive Plan*” prioritizes the hiring of men with children and families for governmental and non-governmental jobs over hiring of others, followed by married men without children, and finally women with children.

Article 10 of the “*Comprehensive Plan*” stipulates that five years after the law goes into effect, government and private universities and centers of higher education and research, as well as schools at all levels, will be prohibited from hiring unmarried individuals. In further effort to push Iranians to marry and ultimately reproduce, Article 16 of the “*Comprehensive Plan*” stipulates that parties in family disputes can only be represented by married lawyers who are at least 40 years old.

Law on “Rejuvenation of the Population and Support of the Family”

Several of the articles of the “*Rejuvenation of the Population and Support of the Family*” law not only severely restrict women's access to reproductive health services and contraceptives, but also prohibit women's right to decide about their own bodies and prohibit their access to certain medical procedures, such as C-Sections or sterilizations. In fact, a closer examination of the law on “*Rejuvenation of the Population*” demonstrates the regressive views of lawmakers toward women's rights, especially their right to

4. For the year 2020, the fertility rate of women was at 1.7 children.



bodily integrity. The law limits women's rights and aims to push back their social gains, and through socio-cultural engineering seeks to promote ideologies close to the State, focused on increasing the population. These policies especially target poor women who may be more likely to be enticed by monetary incentives to procreate at higher rates, but who will certainly be more negatively impacted by lack of access to contraceptives and reproductive health services and as such may be forced to go through with unplanned and unwanted pregnancies.

The socio-cultural engineering or ideological components of the law seek to reduce women to wives and mothers, and a tool for reproduction in the service of population growth policies. Along with other similarly aimed policies, this law seeks to limit employment opportunities for women and encourage them to marry early, which for girls often translates into marriage by force.

A more detailed description of the punitive measures, incentives and socio-cultural engineering and ideological elements of the law are described below.

1. Punitive Policies: Criminalizing Women's Right to their Bodies

This law includes a number of punitive measures that seek to limit women's access to reproductive health services and control over their bodies.

In fact, the "*Rejuvenation of the Population*" law not only criminalizes women's decisions about their own bodies, but also provides penalties for medical centers and staff who provide services to women in opposition to the law.

*** Limitations and bans on provision of and access to contraceptives:** For over two decades (1988 to early 2010s) Iran implemented an [extremely successful family planning program](#) which sought to reduce the birth rate without coercion, and provided free reproductive health services and contraceptives through public health clinics and health houses in rural villages. The law on "*Rejuvenation of the Population*" was passed after nearly a decade of policy shifts⁵ and a distinct shift in discourse, designed to remedy the declining birth rate, [and is a major departure from the past](#), as it bans the free distribution of contraceptives (birth control pills and IUDs), and eliminates subsidies related to contraceptives.

Additionally, health houses and other health care centers affiliated with medical universities are now banned from providing contraceptives to their patients. This is especially worrisome as health houses in rural villages are often the only health facilities tending to the needs of rural populations. Even those who are able to pay for contraceptives will not have them available unless they are willing to travel to cities with better equipped health facilities.

Furthermore, economically strapped women, who had come to depend on free contraception from a range of government and university clinics as well as health centers, will no longer be able to access free contraceptives. This ban will impact most negatively poor and underserved women, who generally benefit from fewer choices and opportunities.

*** Limitations and bans on sterilization:** Sterilization procedures, which are permanent and cannot be reversed are now banned. This usually consists of tubectomies, as vasectomies are reversible, though both procedures were

5. Starting in the early 2010s legislative and policy efforts to dismantle the family planning program were initiated in favor of population growth policies. However, vestiges of the family planning program remained in place for several years following these efforts. The population growth policies were supported and advocated at the highest levels, especially by the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, who finally intervened to ensure that government ministries were in fact implementing the approved laws and policies. See for example an article published in Tasnim News Agency, "[Imam Khamenei stresses the importance of the issue of the population and childbirth, over 42 times.](#)"

restricted through previous legislative measures. In cases where pregnancies constitute a threat to the life of the mother or future pregnancies are predicted to inflict undue hardships on the mother, tubectomies will be allowed. The specifics of how this law will be implemented and how exemptions may be provided to women who meet the criteria for undergoing sterilization procedures has not been outlined in the law. Instead, the law stipulates that these specifics are to be worked out by the Ministry of Health in consultation with the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, three months after the law has been passed.

*** Banning prenatal testing:** Article 53 (notes 1, 2, 3 and 4), of the law on "*Rejuvenation of the Population*" addresses prenatal testing for pregnant mothers. While the law does not ban prenatal testing outright, it places such extreme limitations on the procedure that prenatal testing becomes nearly impossible to obtain. In the first instance, the new law eliminates existing mandatory prenatal testing requirements, and ends punitive measures against physicians who fail to recommend prenatal testing for pregnant women in cases where they suspect fetuses may suffer from disease or genetic abnormalities. The law goes further to oblige physicians and health care providers to refrain from recommending, encouraging or referring pregnant women to obtain prenatal testing.

According to the new law, prenatal testing can only be obtained at the request of one of the parents and following a diagnosis by a physician indicating a high probability of serious complications with the fetus, danger to the fetus or serious danger to the life of the mother. But the prenatal testing, even in these mitigating and yet limited cases, can only be obtained if it poses no threat to the fetus.

In other words, the law goes to great lengths to ensure that prenatal testing is almost entirely forbidden without making it illegal outright. Early on, this component of the "*Rejuvenation*

of the Population" law was widely criticized by rights advocates as well as medical professionals. Perhaps anticipation of such a criticism contributed to lawmakers' hesitation in placing an outright ban on prenatal testing within the law. Instead, lawmakers have used indirect language and multiple restrictions to almost entirely ban the procedure. The selective and restrictive nature of receiving prenatal testing greatly limits coverage by insurance companies for the procedure as well, increasing financial burdens for those limited numbers of women who manage to obtain permission for prenatal testing.

*** Criminalization and further restrictions on abortion:** Abortion has long been prohibited in Iran, but the law on the "*Rejuvenation of the Population*" imposes further restrictions and punishments. According to a law passed in 2006 (Iranian year 1384) therapeutic abortions can be obtained by women in cases where the life of the mother is in danger, or the fetus has genetic or other anomalies.

According to the 2006 law, women whose fetuses were found to have anomalies, genetic or otherwise, in prenatal testing, were allowed to obtain permits for abortions with greater ease. This included a list of approximately 300 different conditions for which legal abortions would be permissible. The law on the "*Rejuvenation of the Population*" calls for a review of the diseases eligible for therapeutic abortion intent on reducing the number of eligible diseases. Approval for therapeutic abortions, according to the law adopted in 2006, could be obtained based on the diagnosis and prescription of three physicians and the approval of a medical examiner and within the first four months of pregnancy, with the consent of the mother. The "*Law on the Rejuvenation of the Population*" requires pregnant women seeking legal therapeutic abortions due to health risks to themselves or the fetus to submit their requests first to the medical examiner, who then refers the request to a "commission on

legal abortion", comprised of a special judge, a specialist physician, and a medical examiner who review the case and rule on whether the pregnant woman submitting the request has enough cause to be granted a therapeutic abortion.

Despite serious limitations currently in place, the numbers of legal and illegal abortion in Iran have consistently remained high. It should be noted however that the actual rates for abortion are not clear and the numbers reported by various government entities seem to vary depending on political leanings. According to the Secretary of the [National Institute for Population Research](#) an estimated [400,000 abortions are conducted per year](#). This figure includes both legal and illegal abortions.

Other figures indicate that only [an estimated 9,000-10,000 abortions obtained are legal](#), the rest are illegal. Of course, it is difficult to count the numbers of illegal abortions, some governmental and non-governmental entities report the numbers of illegal abortions to be even higher. Nevertheless, illegal abortions have been readily available to women, but at high monetary and health costs. Some women manage to have illegal abortions with the supervision of a physician or other medical personnel. They are the lucky ones. Most women seeking illegal abortion do so through purchase of illegal abortion inducing drugs, including drugs used for livestock, found on the black market which put their health at great risk. It is anticipated that with the measures put in place through this new bill, illegal abortions will become more costly and pose greater health hazards to women.

*** Limitations on cesarean sections:** Iran has one of the highest [cesarean rates](#) in the world for a myriad of reasons including preference of physicians and hospitals to perform C-sections, hospitals ill equipped to perform natural births, a shortage of midwives, increase in numbers of higher risk pregnancies because of increased use of invitro fertilization, convenience for mothers

and general fear of pain and other factors on the part of mothers.

The new law seeks to limit the number of C-Sections by forbidding insurance payments for the procedure and encouraging hospitals, through financial incentives, to increase their natural childbirth rates. It should be noted that population growth proponents are [opposed to women receiving C-sections](#) because they believe that C-sections, specially for first time mothers, cause physical harm to women, making repeat and multiple pregnancies more difficult. Additionally, women who undergo C-sections are advised to wait 3-5 years before having another child, further limiting their capacities to have large families.

*** Securitizing health care and women's bodies:**

The law on the *"Rejuvenation of the Population"* goes beyond criminalizing women's right to control their bodies and treats women's bodily autonomy as a security threat to the State. Toward this end, the law requires the Ministry of Intelligence and other security agencies, in cooperation with law enforcement agencies, to identify and present to judicial authorities any action related to abortion, including those who violate the law through provision of abortion or abortion inducing drugs. This includes physicians, midwives, nurses, individuals and health centers providing abortions or abortion inducing drugs and online sites and virtual platforms that promote "illegal" abortion. According to Article 61 of the law, if a person is found to perform abortions on a broad scale, they will be charged and tried for "promoting corruption on earth" a charge which may be punishable with the death penalty.

*** Monitoring and controlling women's bodies and health services:**

The *"Rejuvenation of the Population"* law obliges the Ministry of Health to establish a complete system of registration and monitoring of information on all fertility, pregnancy, abortion and deliveries and report it to the [Supreme Council of the](#)



Cultural Revolution. Operational licenses of health Centers that refuse to cooperate will be suspended and/or revoked.

2. Incentive Policies: Women as Reproductive Machines

The new law provides a series of incentives aimed at encouraging women to have more children and marry early. Even though the “*Rejuvenation of the Population*” law does not specify the source of the budget for incentive programs, the incentives are promoted through radio and government agencies, with the aim of encouraging younger Iranians to get married and to bear more children.

The monetary incentives target socio-economically disadvantaged populations, especially poorer women and families, who may find solutions in these incentives for purchase of houses or for reduced rent and utility payments which they otherwise could not afford. For example, the law specifies use of undefined qualifying criteria for identifying and providing incentives to poor, pregnant or breastfeeding mothers with children under the age of five.

* Housing incentives

● **Housing loans:** A married woman needs to give birth to three children as the sole condition for becoming eligible to purchase a house or

piece of land on an installment plan. While the increase in the price of housing has made the purchase or even the rent of a decent home an unattainable dream for many segments of society, this law has made the purchase of a home an accessible dream based on the sole condition of having many children and it may prove especially attractive for families of lower economic status.

● **Higher loans:** Another incentive allows for the increasing by twenty-five percent per child the ceiling of loans provided to families purchasing homes.

● **Social housing:** Allocation of rent free or low-cost social housing to government employees with families of more than three children is another incentive outlined in the law. Also, the law calls for the increased construction of dormitories for married university students at religious institutions as well as national universities.

● **Utility discounts:** A 50-70% discount on the initial utility start up fees (such as electricity, gas, phone service), which can be costly, are provided to families with three children.

* Other monetary incentives

● According to the law on “*Rejuvenation of the Population*” families can become eligible to receive interest-free loans⁶ for the birth of each child.

6. These are interest free loans provided through community funds, known as Sandoq-e Qarzol-Hassaneh تسهیلات صندوق قرض الحسنه

- Mothers can become eligible to purchase an Iranian car at factory prices in their own name, after the birth of their second child.
- Unemployed nomadic and rural women become eligible for full government health insurance with three or more children.
- Further incentives for increased family size include the issuance of new National ID Cards to mothers of three children, making them eligible for an array of incentives and discounts, including a 50% discount on all municipal and governmental recreational and sports services.

* **Incentives for working mothers**

The “*Rejuvenation of the Population*” Law increases maternity leaves for mothers up to nine months with full salary and benefits. This includes women employed in government agencies as well as the private sector. While at first glance this may seem like a positive step, the burden it places on employers, especially the private sector, where women benefit from few legal protections and lack job security, will surely lead to the hiring of fewer women of childbearing age. Coupled with laws and regulations that prioritize the hiring of men over women, this extended maternity leave will likely have a negative effect on women’s employment. This is especially worrisome given the low rate of workforce participation of women, which at [13.9% in 2021](#) has also experienced serious reduction given the current economic crisis and the pandemic.

Working women can also deduct one year per child from the number of years they have to work before becoming eligible for retirement. So, the more children one has the sooner she can retire and be eligible for retirement benefits.

Furthermore, obligatory service requirements for female medical and pharmaceutical professionals (ranging from 2-5 years depending on whether

you are a doctor or a nurse, etc) is reduced by six months for each child.

3. Ideological Propaganda

In addition to the punitive and incentive policies in the “*Rejuvenation of the Population*” law, there are other measures which aim to promote certain State preferred ideological beliefs and lifestyles, while eliminating other lifestyles from the public space and view. For example, advertisements in the media will no longer be allowed to depict single people or even families with two or less children. This includes ads in radio and television programs. Additionally, educational, cultural and research programs are required to refrain from using images of single persons or families with two or less children in their materials. Only the general policy of population growth is to be broadcast in the messages of entertainment productions such as films, TV series or animations. The images or symbols used in the packaging of consumer products must emphasize large families and motherhood. The same approach is also required for all services provided, books published, and press and cultural products produced.

* **Allocation of a special budget to reduce the age of marriage:** While increasing the legal age of marriage, currently 13 for girls and 15 for boys, has been a long-standing and unmet demand of rights activists, lawyers, and even progressive female MPs, the government is working to encourage an increase in early and even child marriages. [The current average age of marriage for women is 24.8 and for men is 29.7](#) and this has long been a source of concern for conservative policymakers within the Iranian State, who believe that Iranians should be getting married much younger. In recent years however, due to government policy and economic hardships, the number of young girls marrying has been on the increase. The rate of child marriage is of

particular concern given that in 2021, according to the Statistical Center of Iran [31,000 girls between the age of 10 and 14 were married](#).

According to the “*Rejuvenation of the Population*” law, at least 30 percent of the budget currently allocated to support ultra conservative and religious State affiliated institutions must be reallocated to support the programs of nongovernmental organizations, cultural institutions and cultural centers within mosque, whose ideology is close to ultra conservatives within the State, so they can carry out activities to promote early and youth marriages, encourage childbearing, and strengthen the family in line with the State’s religious ideology.

* On the other hand, the Ministry of Education, in cooperation with [the Center for the Management of Religious Seminaries](#) and [the Islamic Development Organization](#), is obliged to teach values related to the “Islamic-Iranian” way of life at all levels, intent on promoting family values, culture of marriage and procreation. This part of the law, which aims to promote the State’s understanding of what constitutes Islamic-Iranian identity, will impact the education and curriculum of

children from elementary through high school. Yet another incentive is directed toward encouraging marriage among younger Iranians. Toward this end, the new law requires the Central Bank to increase the ceiling of matrimonial loans for couples under the age of twenty-five. Women getting married under the age of 23 are eligible for even higher loans in the amount of one billion rials. Advocates fear that this law will increase the number of forced marriages of girls who come from families in financial need.

Additionally, the new law calls on the State to provide interest free loans covering half of the rent of theology and university students upon marriage. Otherwise these young married couples can benefit from living in a marital dormitory at university, which is usually free of charge.

* **Islamic education of children in nurseries and orphanages:** The “*Rejuvenation of the Population*” law also obliges the State Welfare Organization to ensure that orphanages, nurseries and day care centers for abandoned and homeless children and orphans benefit from religious education that promotes the family, early marriage and child bearing.



Conclusion and Recommendations

For advocates of women's rights it is clear that the new laws and policies limiting women's control over their bodies, and reproductive health and choices will impact most severely vulnerable, underserved and poor women who already have limited choices when it comes to their reproductive health and control of their bodies. Instead of supporting vulnerable families with monetary incentives to ensure that the children they have are raised healthy and without economic need, the law exploits the already difficult situation of these families, promising incentives, in order to push them to have more children and become even more reliant on State handouts.

Iranian Government:

- We urge the Iranian government to seriously reconsider its policies designed to control women's bodies and to promote population growth. These policies seem especially ill advised given the ongoing economic crisis as well as projected environmental crises that will make sustaining the population even more difficult.
- Instead of a population growth policy that undermines women's bodily autonomy and their health, the Iranian government should invest in sustainable development projects, environmental protection efforts and work to improve the economy, ensuring higher rates of employment and prosperity of Iranians. Increased economic participation and greater prosperity of citizens is surely a more direct route to improved geopolitical stability and strength.

Professional Groups and Associations in Iran:

- We urge physicians groups and medical associations, public policy experts, economists, environmentalists and other professional groups inside Iran to actively take a stand against population growth policies put forth in the "*Rejuvenation of the Population*" law as well as the "*Comprehensive Plan*" and warn State officials of the ill results of such policies, not only on the

health of women and children, but also on the economic well-being of Iranians.

United Nations:

- United Nations offices inside Iran, in particular UNFPA, UNICEF and UNHCR, should engage in serious discussions with Iranian lawmakers and policymakers with the aim of rescinding or at least reforming pronatalist laws that undermine women and girl's bodily autonomy and their health.
- We urge United Nations offices inside Iran to develop programs and services in cooperation with independent civil society and professional medical associations to counter the devastating impact of the law on "*Rejuvenation of the Population*" and the "*Comprehensive Plan*."
- We call on the United Nations Human Rights Council and its mechanisms to include a review of this law and the negative impact it has on the health and bodily autonomy of Iranian women and girls and urge Iran to rethink these measures.
- We urge the UN Working Group on Discrimination Against Women and Girls and the Special Rapporteurs on Health, Iran, Violence Against Women, and Cultural Rights, among

others, to study Iran's population promotion policies with a view toward better understanding the devastating impact these policies may have on the rights, health and bodily autonomy of women and girls. We strongly urge these UN mandates to take appropriate and decisive measures to persuade Iranian authorities to end population promotion practices as well as other policies that severely undermine the rights and health of women and girls.

International NGOs:

- We urge International NGOs working to ensure the reproductive rights, health and bodily autonomy of women and girls to take note of new population promotion policies in Iran. We urge these INGOs to be vigilant in their analysis and criticism of the laws and any negative impact on the rights and health of girls and women. We further encourage these INGOs to engage and challenge Iranian authorities wherever and whenever they can with a view toward overturning measures that undermine the rights and health of women and girls.
- We urge the very limited and few international NGOs operating in Iran (mostly working on refugee rights and resettlement), to resist

implementing regressive measures included in the law on "*Rejuvenation of the Population*" and other similar measures, and to continue providing appropriate family planning and health services to their target populations.

International and Regional Women's Movements:

- We urge international women's movements to reach out to and actively engage Iranian women's rights advocates inside the country with a view toward ensuring that they are part of a larger regional and global feminist sisterhood. The severe rollback on women's rights and gains is taking place on the backdrop of decades long repression and pressure on Iranian civil society and especially the Iranian women's movement. As a result of repression, worsening economic situation and sanctions, the Iranian women's movement is now more isolated than it has ever been and is in need of solidarity from its feminist sisters worldwide and especially in the region. Iranian feminists and rights advocates need to learn from similar experiences around the world and have much to share about their own experiences and strategies in countering regressive measures against women's rights.



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FEMENA's country and regional briefs provide analysis about trends in the region, especially those that pushback on women's rights and movements.