**Iran Aims to Ban Vasectomies and Cut Access to Contraceptives to Boost Birth Rate**

*Amnesty International says bills to reverse progressive family planning laws would reduce Iranian women to ‘baby-making machines’*

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Iran is seeking to reverse progressive laws on family planning by outlawing voluntary sterilisation and restricting access to contraceptives, in a move human rights groups say would set Iranian women back decades and reduce them to “baby-making machines”.

The Iranian parliament is considering two separate bills aimed at boosting the population. But Amnesty International warned in a report published on Wednesday that the proposals are misguided and, if approved, would “entrench discriminatory practices” and expose women to health risks.

Iran has pursued an effective birth control programme for over two decades. It included subsidised vasectomies, free condoms and affordable contraceptives, as well as countrywide education on sexual health and family planning.

The new legislation would effectively put an end to the country’s famous slogan “two children is enough”. The U-turn has come after the country’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, slammed family planning as an imitation of western lifestyle and asked Iran’s population to be doubled. Given his support, the bills are likely to be approved.

Amnesty’s deputy director for the Middle East and north Africa, Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, said: “The authorities are promoting a dangerous culture in which women are stripped of key rights and viewed as baby-making machines rather than human beings with fundamental rights to make choices about their own bodies and lives..

“The bills reinforce discriminatory stereotypes of women and mark an unprecedented move by the state to interfere in people’s personal lives,” she continued. “In their zealous quest to project an image of military might and geopolitical strength by attempting to increase birth rates, Iran’s authorities are trampling all over the fundamental rights of women – even the marital bed is not out of bounds.”

Last year, Khamenei said that Iran would face an ageing population in the not-too-distant future if couples refuse to have more children. Critics say his concerns are unfounded as about 70% of the country’s 77 million people are under the age of 35.

“Why do some [couples] prefer to have one … or two children? Why do men or women avoid having children through different means?” Khamenei asked in October. “The reasons need to be studied. We are not a country of 75 million, we have [the capacity] to become at least 150 million people, if not more.”

The bill to increase fertility rates and prevent population decline will ban all surgeries intended for permanent contraception, except in cases in which there are threats to physical health. Harsh punishments are designed for doctors involved in such surgeries. The legislation will also slash state funding for birth control programmes which provided subsidies for modern contraceptives.

Amnesty warned this would increase the number of unwanted pregnancies and force women to seek illegal abortions. It would also lead to a spike in sexually transmitted infections, such as HIV, the organisation warned.

The second proposed legislation, the comprehensive population and exaltation of family bill, “instructs all private and public entities to prioritise, in sequence, men with children, married men without children and married women with children when hiring for certain jobs,” Amnesty said. The bill will also tighten the divorce laws, which are already heavily in favour of men.

Hadj Sahraoui said the bill would have “devastating consequences for women trapped in abusive relationships”. She added: “The bills send a message that women are good for nothing more than being obedient housewives and creating babies, and suggests they do not have the right to work or pursue a career until they have fulfilled that primary role and duty.”

Amnesty said the proposals are also in stark contrast with promises by President Hassan Rouhani for gender equality and warned they would add to “the catalogue of discriminations” against women.

Iran has an active female population. Until recently most university graduates were women and many, especially in bigger cities, work alongside men. Although women can vote and drive, discriminatory laws are persistent. Women are required to wear mandatory hijab and, in courts, their testimony is worth only half that of a man. They also face inequality with regard to inheritance rights.

“The age of criminal responsibility for girls is just under nine years old but just under 15 years for a boy,” said Amnesty. “Rape within marriage and domestic violence are not recognised as criminal offences. Engaging in lesbian sex is punishable by 100 lashes with a fourth conviction resulting in the death penalty.”

According to official figures for 2013-2014, 41,226 girls were subject to early or forced marriages while between the ages of 10 and 14. At least 201 girls had married while under the age of 10.